

## **YOUTH AND CHARISMATIC MOVEMENTS: THE STRUGGLE FOR SPIRITUALITY**

Willem Nicol  
Students' Pastor  
University of Pretoria

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### **Abstract**

*53 first years and 53 senior students who grew up in an urban environment were questioned concerning their spirituality, and the results statistically processed. Their interest in charismatic churches is low, but they strongly prefer less traditional services with some charismatic characteristics as are general Dutch Reformed Churches in their environment. Their main reason is that they want to feel at home in worship. They want their church to be centrist in the sense of neither too traditional nor too charismatic or informal and they want to feel that their church is free to develop with the times. In their environment the Dutch Reformed Church is mainly such a church and therefore it seems likely that they will stay in their church. Concerning their spirituality in general, one thing stood out, namely their strong need to see that Christians live out their faith in daily life.*

### **Theme of the article**

The aim of this article is to give insight in the spirituality of undergraduate urban students of the University of Pretoria belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church. If the term "charismatic" is broadly defined, nearly all of them are exposed to charismatic influences. These function like a catalyst so that the varieties of spirituality among them become clear.

### **1. The enquiry**

#### **1.1 The group**

The group who filled out the questionnaire were "day students" (i.e. students not planning to stay in the university's residences) attending a camp for first year students organized by the Dutch Reformed Church Universiteitsoord. Universiteitsoord is regarded as the campus church as it serves all the boarding houses of the university and also draws a few hundred day students into active participation. 300 first years and 60 seniors who were acting as group leaders were questioned. They filled out a short questionnaire anonymously. Papers were received from 53 seniors and for the sake of the statistics they were all processed and compared with 53 randomly selected papers filled in by first years.

On a scale of 1 to 10, I would say that the average level of commitment to the Dutch Reformed Church may be 8 for the seniors and 7 for the first years. (I think that the first years and probably also the seniors have a lower commitment to their church than the group of Pretoria students researched in October 2002 by Matthias Gensicke.) The majority of these first years are more serious about their religion than I expected. These camps of Universiteitsoord have a very good name as effective preparation for one's first year and some who are not serious about religion attend them for the sake of the preparation. Although it is not quantifiable, the observation of the camp and of the forms leave me with the impression that something like three quarters of the first years, by way of speaking, are serious about their relation with God.

A large majority of them grew up in the province Gauteng where there are strong charismatic churches and many Dutch Reformed Churches who have been influenced by the charismatic movement, especially in their evening services. Therefore one can accept that the majority of these students have been exposed to traditional as well as semi-charismatic (“informal”) Dutch Reformed worship styles.

The other three student wards of Universiteitsoord consist of students staying in residences. They include a higher percentage of students from small towns and rural areas, so that the group questioned here has a more urban character and probably a slightly higher exposure to charismatic influences than the average of Universiteitsoord.

Although blacks and English speaking students would have been welcome at the camp, there were none. The spirituality of Dutch Reformed Church in the north is strongly ethnic in the sense of a white Afrikaner style.

### 1.2 Attractiveness of different kinds of worship

The students were asked to give a figure out of 10 to indicate how much they like the following three kinds of worship, and they rated them as follows:

|  | first years | seniors |
|--|-------------|---------|
| charismatic services                                 | 4,5         | 4,9     |
| informal Dutch Reformed services (e.g. with guitars) | 8,5         | 8,4     |
| more traditional Dutch Reformed services             | 5,3         | 6,2     |

After reading the motivations, it became clear that the term “traditional” has for many of them a negative sound. If another term like “peaceful” or “stylish” had been used, the figures for traditional services would probably have been a little higher, but not much as the most find the word and the experience “informal” very attractive.

The largest difference between first years and seniors is the 0,9 higher mark that seniors give for traditional services. The only explanation I can think of is that some of them have the fairly traditional and popular evening services of Universiteitsoord in mind.

When first preference is counted:

- *informal services* are given the highest mark by 78% of seniors and 77% of first years;
- *traditional services* are first preference for 11% of seniors and 13% of first years;
- *charismatic services* are first preference for 2% seniors and 10% first years while 14% of seniors and 4% of first years put them on the same level as informal services. The best interpretation for the latter difference seems to me to be that seniors preferring charismatic services do not come to Universiteitsoord camps as leaders - in other words these 10% first years will either leave Universiteitsoord or grow into more appreciation of Dutch Reformed styles before they decide whether they want to apply to attend next year’s camp as leaders.

### 1.3 Motivations given for preferences concerning worship

The students were thereafter asked to write a short motivation why they prefer certain kinds of worship above others. A wide variety of motivations were given, but it was possible to identify seven themes that stood out and put them in an order of strength.

- I want to feel comfortable in church, relaxed, want to be myself, don't want to feel pressure on me. This is mostly said against traditional services where they feel a stiffness that they find uncomfortable. But some also stress comfort against charismatic services because they feel strange or even pressurized there. Derogative terms used for charismatic services are ones like "weird" and "way out".
  - *I like informal worship because it gives the feeling that religion is pleasant (lekker).*
  - *My personality fits the informal Dutch Reformed style.*
  - *Traditional people have no concern for what we like.*
  - *I like informal services because I feel I am in the target group.*
  - *I just want to worship my way.*
  - *Guitars create a relaxed atmosphere.*
  - *Informal services are "cool".*
  - *Be yourself – it is not necessary to be like grandpa and grandma.*
  - *Dutch Reformed people must become more comfortable with their religion.*
  - *Charismatic is too overpowering.*
  
- Church must not be boring or morbid but lively, dynamic, happy and with some fun in it. We youngsters are active and don't want to be lulled to sleep by slow music.
  - *I am young, lively and desire joyful and fun Christianity.*
  - *Traditional services are sad (droewig) and boring.*
  
- I want to feel it that I praise the Lord; I want to give all; I want to show it; I want to feel an active part of it.
  - *Informal music helps me to praise the Lord with my whole heart.*
  - *Guitars help me to feel that I praise the Lord.*
  
- I want to enjoy the singing.
  - *I like praise and worship A LOT.*
  - *I want to enjoy praising the Lord.*
  
- I want to feel that my church moves with the times and adapt to modern styles; my church must not remain behind.
  - *I like it that my church keeps up with my changing life.*
  - *The Dutch Reformed Church is open for anything.*
  - *I like the Dutch Reformed "open-for-change-and-growth" mentality.*
  - *I don't like the rigid ideas, inflexibility and stagnation of many Dutch Reformed churches.*
  - *I hate being smothered by conservatism and tradition.*
  - *Worship style should "stay with the play".*
  - *I cannot identify with psalms and traditional hymns (gesange).*
  
- Sometimes I like the peacefulness of a traditional service.
  - *I like the restful atmosphere and the peaceful calmness.*
  - *Sometimes it is boring, but I like the atmosphere and the tradition.*
  - *I like organs.*

- I like variety.
- *My worship preference depends on what I feel like that day.*
- *Sometimes I like it informal; sometimes traditional.*
- *Sometimes you have to talk to God more formally and sometimes you have to experience his love.*

#### 1.4 Preferences concerning spirituality in general

In a final question the students were asked to write a few words on the following question: "If we talk about the way in which Dutch Reformed people generally experience and live out their religion ('beleef en uitleef') – what do you like and what not?"

Again a wide variety of answers were given, but again it was possible to identify a few that stood out.

- Remarkable was the very high frequency of complaints against people who pretend to be Christians but do not live it out. Hypocrisy ('skynheiligheid') is strongly rejected. Christians must not be too lazy or timid to show by their lives and words that they are Christians.
  - *Dutch Reformed people are only Sunday-Christians: hypocrites!!!*
  - *Many Dutch Reformed people pretend to be what they are not.*
  - *Sermons must motivate us to action. Discipleship.*
  - *More Christians must show it that they believe in Jesus.*
  - *I like it when singing and faith is relayed into deeds.*
  - *Christians must be more helpful and generous people!*
- Freedom for variation is also frequently asked for. Each one must feel free to express his/her own style. Other churches and religious styles must be accepted. The church must not be judging concerning morals. There is criticism against Dutch Reformed people who are "stuck-up" or "uptight". In comparison to this there is a much smaller need for strictness and steadfastness to adhere to Biblical precepts.
  - *Accept your church and other churches and enjoy your own relation with God.*
  - *I hate it when traditional Dutch Reformed people disapprove of other worship styles.*
  - *I don't like it when conservative ministers condemn the youth.*
- A significant number express the need for a feeling of belonging to the church, an experience of unity; the church people must become friends and support one another. Some say that they find it in the Dutch Reformed Church and others that they miss it.
  - *I want the service informal, because then it is easier to get to know people.*

## 2. Interpretation

### 2.1 On worship preferences

I read the free formulations, conducted discussions with groups at the camp and discussed the information with my five colleagues at Universiteitsoord who, like myself, work with these students every day.

*Relation to charismatic movement*

How is the relation to the charismatic movement to be understood?

The appreciation of charismatic churches is relatively low. However, if one should take a closer look at the content of the services to which they refer as “informal Dutch Reformed”, one would find a lot of charismatic influence: the melodies and words of many of the songs, the instruments and style of the accompaniment, the atmosphere and even the preaching style. The atmosphere of Dutch Reformed worship, especially in evening services, have changed a lot during the last few decades.

What were the forces of change? In the first place the basic reformed character of the Dutch Reformed Church is fairly broad. It went through a time of narrowing from about the twenties to the eighties of the twentieth century (influences like A. Kuyper, the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, the strict reformed church in South Africa - “verdoppering”), but the broader roots stayed. It was this character that was flexible enough to combine with various “evangelical” influences in the nineteenth century (revivalism, evangelical mission drive, pietism, Andrew Murray, etc).

Since the latter third or so of the twentieth century charismatic influences are combining with the “evangelical” roots and developing a worship style that is popular especially amongst youngsters. Whatever the church find attractive and helpful in the charismatic movement is tested and cautiously drawn in, so that church members need not go to charismatic churches to fulfil these needs.

The local churches where these tendencies can be clearest seen are those serving young upcoming professionals in for instance the eastern suburbs of Pretoria. The most of these churches are dynamic and strong. A majority of the students questioned here come from such churches and to a large extent this explains their positive attitude towards informal Dutch Reformed worship and their low need to attend charismatic churches.

*Subjective needs*

How do they explain their subjective needs concerning worship?

Many of the older generation in the church are irritated by the liberal styles that the youngsters prefer, but I want to suggest that if the preferred styles are interpreted on a functional level, we shall see that the older and younger generation desire the same. *They all want an atmosphere in which they feel at home and comfortable and which at the same time is conducive to worship.* Both the informality that the youngsters want and the order and peace that the older ones desire have the same function – it creates such an atmosphere of comfort and worship.

The main reason why the worship style has to shift so much to convey the same, is that styles of music and speech and attention and order have moved so much. For instance, when I was young, the older generation could still withhold many of us from listening pop music, but that is no longer possible. Young Afrikaners no longer live on an island. What the older generation experience as disorder and lack of attention, they experience as comfortable order and an atmosphere in which one can experience and be enriched. The order which the older ones experience as divine, is stiff, cold and dead for the youngsters. The free style, relaxed atmosphere and loud instruments which the older ones experience as disrespectful, is the necessary setting for wholehearted worship for many youngsters.

After preliminary discussions with Matthias Gensicke I expected to find *revolt* as a theme. I mean I expected to find that the students feel that the older generation have been wrong with their paternalistic, authoritarian, apartheid-minded view of life, so that the old religious style has to be rejected as well. But I nowhere find this motive explicitly stated in

the answers. Unconsciously it may of course play a role in weakening the holding power of the old. The parents, teachers and ministers of these youngsters are on the subjective level experiencing suffering as a result of the failure of apartheid, so that the youngsters probably do not find themselves in a situation in which they feel like revolt. Along with this I expected to find the theme of *democracy* in the sense that the students might say that they want to determine, plan, organize their own worship. This theme is also absent. They appear more like consumers who are happy whenever that which is offered to them is according to their taste. They appear to be fairly adaptable in their tastes. I, for instance, expected a lot of criticism on the organ as symbol of the old, but it is nearly totally absent.

In point 2 of the selected comments made by Matthias Gensicke in his article, it is suggested that students want their church to take a clear stand on moral and social issues. I found the theme, but only in a low percentage and overshadowed by the wish that the Dutch Reformed Church should become more liberal concerning varieties among people and should not criticize the ways of the youth (which for this group differs from the ways of their parents, see 2.4). A possible explanation for this difference between his and my findings is that my group is more urban and already used to a pluralistic environment while his group to a larger extent feel uncomfortable with the pluralism on campus and desire safety from their church.

In congruence with this I do not find that they long for insight into the Bible and theology in the broad sense of the word. It seems as if the sermon does not play a large role in their evaluation of a service. Where something is said about it, it is frequently simply that it should be clear, short and practical. It is clear that the rational dimension of worship has become much less important than it used to be. The desire for experience and participation dominate. This puts strain on reformed pastors as our tradition put the rational monological, non-participatory sermon in the centre. In the past it apparently conveyed experience to the listeners, but nowadays it is weak in creating experience.

- *I hate hard benches and long sermons.*
- *I don't want to just sit and listen, but want interaction.*
- *I like pleasant singing and a short, powerful sermon.*

It is also noteworthy that there is hardly any reference to any need for a more "sacramental" type of worship with symbols, silence and the like. This style is still very scarce in the relevant parts of the Dutch Reformed Church and so far my experience is that those of its members who do awaken to this dimension, mostly do not get there before they are at least a little older than students.

The other remarkable low level is that of enthusiasm for mission. For a time it seemed to solve a problem in some of the student congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church and therefore I was looking out for it. If one takes into account that it was not specifically asked for and that some of the answers do refer to confessing one's faith, one should probably say that it is present but not on a high level.

#### *Are these people going to stay in the Dutch Reformed Church?*

Matthias Gensicke found that the majority of his researched groups are willing to trust the Dutch Reformed Church and think that they will stay in it (selected comment no 4). The impression that I get from my enquiry point in the same direction.

The students apparently want a church that is positioned somewhere in the centre of the religious spectrum which they experience: it should neither be formal nor wild. As they like

freedom and variety, they need a broad centre. As this centre is moving, they need an adaptable church.

- *I like an informal, relaxed service which does not become “happy clappy”.*
- *Many Christians overdo it and walk with the Bible under the arm.*

If one has the field of Afrikaner religious experience in mind, I think one can say that the Dutch Reformed Church is the largest church because its character is centrist and also flexible enough to keep moving with the centre. It is somewhat willing to change, but also somewhat slow in it, so that the most of its congregations give new fashions enough time to be tried and tested before they decide what to incorporate. Because of the slowness a number of members will in future probably be lost to the informal side, but in the long run it will remain to be seen whether the churches where they go outgrow the Dutch Reformed Church as the latter may be affected by instability.

If the recent history of some of the bigger student congregations of this church is compared, this impression seems to be supported. If students are congregationally disconnected from residential members, the resulting congregation is very flexible. Some of these congregations have moved fast in incorporating charismatic and world mission enthusiasm, but after some years they seem to have swung too fast, participation and funds diminished and some back swing was necessary. On the contrary Universiteitsoord in Pretoria could for financial reasons not disconnect the students and soon realized that they did not want to. The result was the somewhat slow movement which is so typical of the Dutch Reformed Church and the fruit was that participation and funds stayed stable.

The Universiteitsoord song struggle is a good example. The building is an architectonic masterpiece especially suitable for its large organ, so that the congregation could draw the best organists in the country. Up to the end of the eighties of the previous century the singing with the organ was a feast. After that many had the impression that the singing was slowly waning and many students asked that the organ be replaced by a band in the evenings. The ministers lead the student leaders to give careful consideration in deliberation with some of the other leaders and each time the decision was not to make the change. A large midweek praise and worship with a band catered for the informal need. But many had the impression that it became increasingly difficult to keep the organ accompanied singing a feast. The organist sometimes brought in other classical instruments, especially trumpets to play with him and that helped. Since the beginning of 2002 this has been extended to a mini orchestra with violins, cello's, flutes, trumpets and the like. This does not change the music style, but gives a flair to the accompaniment and is probably also experienced by many students as a symbol of willingness to move. It seems as if the singing has regained most of the popularity it previously had. On 23 February 2003, for instance, a fairly classical collection of songs were sung, all from the official hymnal of the church, and the mark given for the singing by the evaluation group was 85%.

A comparison with the findings of Matthias Gensicke shows that the group questioned here has a very low interest in the Dutch Reformed Church as a whole. They don't complain about the political mistakes of the past and hardly demand anything from the official denomination in future. They are individualistic consumers who will be happy if they can on congregational level experience what they want to experience.

## 2.2 On spirituality in general

The fact that the living out of the faith received the strongest emphasis in the commentaries, may be significant. The question left room for writing about the experience of religion in

the narrower sense of the word, but they place the emphasis on religion as a way of life. This is in harmony with the reformed understanding of religion in which the religion of daily life is seen as at least as important as the church service and other religious practices. Grace is understood as freely given by God, simply received by faith and not dependent on experiencing it in the church service. This tendency probably counteracts the attractiveness of the charismatic churches in town, as the long and intensely experienced church service is for them of higher importance. With this typically reformed emphasis on living out faith, one can hope that the Dutch Reformed Church is of great value for this wide and suffering land.

Their emphasis on living the faith is for these students mostly limited to the individual sphere. Political and social responsibility is very low and the connection between it and religion even lower. My impression is that the shift in a charismatic direction may improve this situation. Traditional Afrikaner religion had a higher level of political and social responsibility in it, but it was mostly limited to the Afrikaner way, it was being called to help other Afrikaners and to help the rest of South Africa to develop according to Afrikaner plans. Missionary service was rendered, but the idea in the background was that the country should be christianised and developed according to Afrikaner ideals. Now that these ideals have fallen away, young Afrikaners tend to withdraw in an individualistic, cosmopolitan attitude of life. Some of them are, however, nowadays awakened by a somewhat charismatic world mission enthusiasm. At first, the idea of mission is usually very spiritual, but it does happen in smaller groups that it is widened to include a more comprehensive social responsibility.

The fact that only a minority ask for moral strictness and the majority for freedom probably also diminishes the popularity of charismatic churches where there is more strictness than in the Dutch Reformed Church. Those who move there, desire freedom but find new forms of bondage.

- *Rules are fixed* (student with charismatic inclination).

One element which becomes fairly visible in the commentaries and which is a strong experience in Universiteitsoord is the need for a church where friendship is fostered. Students always came to church to make friends, but nowadays it is more openly expressed. There may be at least two interpretations. On the one hand modern individualism and loneliness are increasing and on the other the religious vibes of the Dutch Reformed Church are becoming more humane so that it no longer feels unspiritual to stress friendship.

A final remark on the spirituality of the Dutch Reformed Church. Its leaders often feel threatened by less traditional inclinations amongst its young members. I would like to suggest that my interpretation concerning worship and spirituality show that the large number of urban students drawn by this church form a fairly representative reflection of the true character of this church for the present situation. This group may tend slightly to the informal side in comparison with the whole body of Pretoria Dutch Reformed students, but that is because they are urban. They want the centre as they see it. They actually fit well into their church, because this is a church with a broad reformed basis and a willingness to move with the times.

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