

## When Coldplay meets Christ

### *the secular-sacred synthesis in Dutch Evangelical youth events*

This essay will analyse the nexus between secular media and sacred message in video footage of the 40<sup>th</sup> Dutch Evangelical Broadcasting Company's (EO) Youth Day through a culturalist approach, which emphasises that: 'The intersection of media and religion must be studied through the process and patterns of culture.'<sup>1</sup> In 'Setting the stage' this essay introduces the case-study and conceptual framework of culturalism by addressing their historical and cultural contextualisation. This will then function as the setting for 'Coldplay and Christ', which provides a hermeneutical analysis of the intertextuality between John 17:21 and Coldplay's 'Sky full of stars'. Finally this will lead, in 'Sacriligious and "the dispersed sacred"', to a discussion of the compromised nature of the sacred inherent to this synthesis.

#### **Setting the stage**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2014, 27.000 young-adolescent Christians from different denominational backgrounds gathered in an enclosed football stadium.<sup>2</sup> What brought them together was the 40<sup>th</sup> edition of the EO Youth Day (*EO Jongerendag*), organised for the first time in 1975 under the title: *Youngsters open the Bible*,<sup>3</sup> by the Dutch Evangelical Broadcasting Company, which had been founded eight years prior to this as an reaction to the secularisation and liberalisation of the Dutch broadcasting system.<sup>4</sup> The first Youth Day marked the start of the synthesis between a traditional, Bible centred, Calvinism and popular, secular culture that characterises contemporary Dutch evangelicalism. This synthesis is an import product originating from the counter-cultural Jesus Movement in America,<sup>5</sup> where the movement quickly expanded to the middle-class youth, for whom it was a way of combining their religious views with the appeal of

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<sup>1</sup> S., Hoover, K. Lundby, *Rethinking media, religion and culture* (London: SAGE, 1997), 5.

<sup>2</sup> For the 27.000 estimate, see news article on the Parool, source ANP, 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2014, 21:20. Accessible at: <http://www.parool.nl/binnenland/ruim-27-000-feestvierders-op-eo-jongerendag~a3672494/> [Accessed 29-10-2016].

<sup>3</sup> See 'Jongeren slaan de Bijbel open', video coverage by BA produktie as found on the NPO, EO website, posted 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2013. Accessable at: [http://www.npo.nl/1e-eo-jongerendag-1975/17-04-2013/POMS\\_EO\\_491136](http://www.npo.nl/1e-eo-jongerendag-1975/17-04-2013/POMS_EO_491136) [Accessed 29-10-2016].

<sup>4</sup> J., Roeland, M., Klaver, M., v.d Meulen, R., Mulligen., H., Stoffels, P., Versteeg, "Can we dance in this place?": Body Practices and Forms of Embodiment in Four Decades of Dutch Evangelical Youth Events" in *Journal of Contemporary Religion Vol 27, No. 2* (London: Routledge, 2012) 244.

<sup>5</sup> J., Roeland 'God is a DJ – evangelisme en popular culture' in *Praktische Theologie, vol. 34, no. 2* (Utrecht: Kok ten Have, 2007) 194-206. Translated.

popular culture.<sup>6</sup> The centrality of, audience engagement with, and didactic approach to the Bible as Gods Word as found in the 1975 footage shows that both medium and message, as well as form and content, were still firmly rooted in orthodox Protestantism. Nevertheless, this first EO Youth Day can be seen as the starting point of an evangelical secular-sacred synthesis which, despite the changing face of the “secular”, still characterises the EO Youth Day till today.

In the same year, but in a completely different context, James W. Carey published an essay titled *A Cultural Approach to Communication*, which led to a new way of thinking about the relationship between communication and religion in the academic context.<sup>7</sup> In the paper Carey urged scholars to take on his “ritual model” as the “cultural approach to communication” in which the role of media is regarded as the “practices and forms of meaning making in the construction of a meaningful world”.<sup>8</sup> Rather than being a passive transmitter, media (understood here in the broad sense) is perceived as being embedded within meaning and the practices of constructing meaning. This culturalist approach therefore allows for a more nuanced understanding of how media and meaning interact.

The reason this culturalist approach has come up in the last four decades of scholarship is closely connected to the increasing emphasis on aisthetis within contemporary culture and academia. This term derives from Aristotle’s *De Anima* and refers “to our total sensorial experience of the world and to our sensuous knowledge of it”<sup>9</sup> The postmodern critique of disembodied rationality has, within the culturalist approach, led to an increased awareness of “knowing through the body”.<sup>10</sup> The same postmodern critique has also, within the “massive subjective turn of modern culture”,<sup>11</sup> led to an increased emphasis on the senses, aesthetics and embodiment within popular culture itself.<sup>12</sup> From capitalist commercialism to the holistic milieu: the emphasis is on our embodied experiences and therefore on the (materialised) media which evoke these. Not only is this culturalist approach one of the most recent developments within the field of media and religion, but it is therefore also particularly apt for an analysis of experience-orientated evangelicalism. For the appeal of evangelicalism among adolescents lies in the fact that it shares the fascination of sensuality, physicality and experience “subjective”

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<sup>6</sup> L., Eskridge, “One Way”: Billy Graham, the Jesus Generation, and the Idea of an Evangelical Youth Culture, In *Church History* 67:1, 1998, 92-93.

<sup>7</sup> D., Morgan, *Key words in Religion, Media and Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 2.

<sup>8</sup> J., Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: MA Unwin Hyman, 1989), 18-19.

<sup>9</sup> B., Meyer, J., Verrips “Aesthetics” in ed, D., Morgan, *Keys words in Religion, Media and Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> C., Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge press, 1989), 26.

<sup>12</sup> Roeland, *God is a DJ*, 3.

secular society.<sup>13</sup> Evangelicalism, through its appeal to popular culture, thus finds its relevance in its coherence to the understanding of meaning-making which popular, aesthetic, culture has embedded in us.

## **Coldplay and Christ**

The discussed cultural trajectory has led to a new context in which the young evangelical audience understand and interpret the Biblically inspired message which, although seemingly overshadowed by the secular media, still functions as its authorisation. This intertextuality between secular media and sacred message in a sensorial-evocative cultural context is illustrated by the opening scene of the 40<sup>th</sup> EO Youth Day.<sup>14</sup> In the dimly lit arena the recently released song 'Sky full of Stars' is played as its lyrics can be read simultaneously from massive screens:

*"Cause you're a sky, a sky full of stars (...) I'm gonna give you my heart (...) Cause you light up the path. (...) Cause in a sky full of stars, I think I saw you."*<sup>15</sup>

The song, Coldplay's first ever dance track, produced by Avicii, is not religious in any overt way. However, it is not hard to see how it could be interpreted as praise music. The lover-exalting-the-beloved relationship, so central to popular music is also the language of worship, to the extent that the difference between the two sometimes seems to be the mere (de)capitalising of the Y in "you". This specific song, however, holds even stronger religious ties. The phrase "to give your heart" is a central theme in many of the most well-known praise songs.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the clear allusion to Psalms 119:105 leaves one wondering if Chris Martin is not purposefully creating an ambiguity, especially since he stated in an interview that he definitely believes in God, for: "How can you look at anything and not be overwhelmed by the miraculousness of it?"<sup>17</sup> The veracity of it aside, this quote clearly illustrates how the song would be interpreted by the evangelical audience present. The lyrical hook "Cause you're a sky full of stars" articulates a sense of the presence of the transcendence brought on by an external stimulus, be it watching

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<sup>13</sup> Roeland, *God is a DJ*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> As presented by live coverage on NPO 2. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4q0eTzQSFCs> (3:00-5:00) [Accessed 29-10-2016].

<sup>15</sup> Coldplay, 'Sky full of stars' on *Ghost Stories*. Produced by Avicii, Epworth., P. Green., D. Simpson., Rik. (Parlophone: 2014).

<sup>16</sup> See: "Surrender - I Give you my heart"; "My Heart is Yours"; "I give You my heart" for examples.

<sup>17</sup> R., Strataki '20 fun facts about Chris Martin! (List)' on *Useless Daily*, 19<sup>th</sup> of November 2015, Accessible at: <http://www.uselessdaily.com/news/20-fun-facts-about-chris-martin-list/#ixzz40E1RqKrw> [Accessed 29-10-2016].

the millions of stars in the sky or listening to praise music itself. The theological message is clear: God is found in our experience of, and our sense of love and awe for Him.

Even though one could argue that the language barrier would stop the young Dutch audience cognitively engaging with this theological concept, the euphoric nature of the music itself is enough to evoke it on a visceral level. The emphasis on finding God by looking up is further illustrated by the choreography of the dancers; raising their arms up, closing their hands and drawing them back in as if into an intimate embrace, as an illuminating cross simultaneously descends from the ceiling, on which the word “One”, the theme of this year’s event, appears. Then the dance break kicks in. The bass, the lights, the screens, the dancers, the DJ encouraging physical audience participation, the confetti, the screaming; it all functions as the audio-visual stage of experience onto which an adapted version of John 17:21 makes its big entrée:

*“Father, let them all be one. Just like You are in me, and I am in You, let them also be in us. This way they will be perfectly one and then the world will now that You sent me.”<sup>18</sup>*

Hermeneutically, it is interesting to note the injection of a phrase found in John 17:23 (that they may be become perfectly one).<sup>19</sup> This shows the thematic emphasis on the perfection in unity, which is then linked to the evangelical motivation of sharing the “message of Christ”.

Furthermore, functionally it fits with the general paraphrasing of the Bible verse to a short-and-snappy soundbite. This way the audio fits comfortably within the existing soundscape, adding to the sense of a call-response dynamic between the secular and sacred, the worshiping audience member and God. “If you find God in the aesthetic-sensorial which will translate into an embodied visceral experience”, so this intertextuality seems to say, “God (through Jesus) is in fact there and answers.” All audience members, unified in the experience, are told about the importance of experiencing unity with God through Jesus. This experience is tacitly presented as the proof of God’s existence and the justification of the sacred message, and both can only be responded to with praise: *“Such a heavenly view. You’re such a heavenly view”*.

Coldplay’s ‘Sky full of Stars’ is thus used as the vocalisation of the audience’s call to God, which is followed by a response from Jesus, through a modified, yet direct Biblical quotation, after which, through Coldplay, the audience responds again with worship. Although at first glance the sacred (Biblical) message seems almost lost in the excessive use of secular media, this shows a secular-sacred dynamic which fits within the traditional evangelical model. In this evangelical model God can (or even should) be approached and praised through one’s own “cultural language”,

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<sup>18</sup> Translated transcript.

<sup>19</sup> John 17:23, *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, by Crossway Bibles, 2001. Accessible at: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+17%3A23&version=ESVUK> [Accessed 23-11-2016].

while at the same time upholding the traditional sanctity of the Biblical language of God is still upheld. Furthermore, this is a God who is embedded within the embodied experience of (transcendental) awe, so grippingly illustrated by our visceral reaction when stargazing: "Cause in a sky full of stars, I think I saw *You*."

### ***Sacrilegious and "the dispersed sacred"***

This analysis of the intertextuality between Coldplay and the Bible has affirmed what our overview of the cultural context had already established: the shifting of the locus of the self and of God into (emotive-sensorial) experience. This emphasis on experiencing and feeling God, and the grounding of the belief in God on this experience, has been around for centuries. Yet it is only recently with the evangelical movement, however, that this experience, and thus increasingly "God himself", has been placed in the hands of secular media. Within the evangelical context these media are assumed to be neutral tools that can be implemented for the good, which more often than not involves eventually turning away from the very secular culture that these "neutral" media originate from.<sup>20</sup>

However, just as there is no unmediated message, there is also no ideologically neutral medium. This is due to both the ideological and cultural context in which a choice for a certain medium arises and the ideological and cultural connotations that are embedded within this medium due to its previous use. And both these notions render the "sacred" within this secular-sacred synthesis in a vulnerable disposition. This vulnerability is grounded in the emphasis on sensorial-experience as the basis of belief in relationship to the nature of popular media. In *The Dispersed Sacred*, Bar-Haim argues that it is the perception of a vulnerable social order that underlines the structure of contemporary culture with its 'mega-spectacle drive'.<sup>21</sup>

*"The grand spectacle (...) with its large-scale technical wizardry and stunning effects, logistical complexity and vast publicity, attempts to compensate for the loss of mythology and the absence of a metaphysical presence."*<sup>22</sup>

Although this quote might seem out of place in a discussion of evangelicalism, which has at its centre not only the belief in, but even more the experienced presence of God as a metaphysical entity, it illustrates a structural problem within the evangelical secular-sacred synthesis. For, within the consumeristic-hype-model of popular culture, the sensational nature of an experience is known to quickly diminish in the process of routinisation, which in the evangelical

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<sup>20</sup> Hoover, Lundby, *Rethinking*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> B., Bar-Haim, "The Dispersed Sacred – anomie and the Crisis of Ritual" in eds. Hoover & Lundby, *Rethinking media, religion and culture* (London: SAGE, 1997), 137.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*,

context results in the increasing incapacity of religious media to evoke the transcendental.<sup>23</sup> This leads to the need of increased sensorial stimulus and, in the evangelical Youth Day context, to an even stronger appeal to the secular spectacle. Not only has evangelical youth culture thus internalised the consumeristic-hype-model of popular culture,<sup>24</sup> but in doing so it has increasingly left the experience of God, and thus the existence of God, dependent on emotive-evocative techniques employed to evoke “transcendental” awe within secular contexts.<sup>25</sup>

Although this on the one hand affirms the sacred, it also jeopardises it even further since it raises the question: Is it actually God who is being experienced? This sentiment is echoed by critique of the 40<sup>th</sup> Youth Day from both the orthodox Protestant and the antireligious secular end of Dutch media. The Reformed Newspaper (*Reformatorisch Dagblad*) cited the German theologian Huntemann as stating that any attempt to communicate the Word through secular media is an unnecessary strain, since only the pure Word of God should be left to touch people.<sup>26</sup> Equally, the secular satirical site No-Style (*Geenstijl*) ridiculed the EO’s use of secular media, with one comment referring to the event as ‘an indoctrination based little party which aims at further brainwashing the youth with flashing lights and “hip” music.’<sup>27</sup> The implicit criticism on both sides seems to be that an appeal to, and the appeal of the secular is camouflaging a lack of belief in, or lack of existence of, God. It therefore seems that, due to these structural problems inherent within the secular-sacred synthesis, the EO Youth Day is stuck in a vicious circle of increasing secularisation to maintain its sense of the sacred.

One a final note, this process, almost ironically, focuses the attention away from the fact that their increasingly younger audience might signify that their approach no longer addresses the key needs of our contemporary cultural context.<sup>28</sup> Back when evangelical youth culture emerged as the Jesus Movement, it embodied and reflected the (counter-)cultural zeitgeist of a new generation. Now, as the statistics show, it might have transgressed to merely resonating with a teenage-mentality which is eventually out-grown or opposed, as is illustrated by the post-evangelical movement emerging among older generations, and the increasing amount of ex-

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<sup>23</sup> J., Roeland, “Tussen verveling en sensatie -Neo-evangelicale revitalisering” in: *In de Marge, Jaargang 16 (2007) nr. 3*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>25</sup> Roeland, *God is a DJ*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Reformatorisch Dagblad, “Commentaar: Op EO-jongeredag weinig plaats meer voor verkondiging”, 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2014. Accessible at: <http://www.rd.nl/opinie/commentaar/commentaar-op-eo-jongeredag-weinig-plaats-meer-voor-verkondiging-1.397897> [Accessed 29-10-2016].

<sup>27</sup> “XaleX\_2” in a comment to J., Quid, “Jack van Gelder enthousiast over EO-jongeredag”, 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2014. Accessible at: [http://www.geenstijl.nl/mt/archieven/2014/06/jack\\_van\\_gelder\\_enthousiast\\_ov.html](http://www.geenstijl.nl/mt/archieven/2014/06/jack_van_gelder_enthousiast_ov.html) [Accessed 29-10-2016].

<sup>28</sup> Received BEAM (EO youth’s department) statistics show how 21% of their members is 18 or under, whereas 66% of the people present at the 40<sup>th</sup> EO Youth Day were 19 or under.

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evangelicals within the Dutch context. To conclude, the opening of the EO Youth Day is an example of a secular-sacred synthesis that is embedded within Dutch evangelical youth culture, and as such illustrates some of the problems inherent in this synthesis. For as the spotlights and stars multiply we are increasingly left wondering who the You/you is we think we are seeing.

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