

Henk de Roest
Protestant Theological University, The Netherlands

Questioning generational labels and their usefulness for church policy (A response to Leslie van Rooi)

First, you quote Hestorff, Kruger and others in order to find ‘defining characteristics’ of Generation Y. You state that Generation Y members have a common philosophy of life, are very busy and at times, stressed out and can often feel lonely, the two last points also being confirmed by the Stellenbosch University inquiry. Often they participate in and develop their identity in a particular peer cluster. It is a generation that is highly ambitious and wants to be successful. They are critical with regard to absolutism. What counts is being genuine, original and authentic. Generation Y members are socially concerned and internet savvy. Despite the diversity, which is a feature of this generation too, the commonality is striking: it allows you, Leslie, to speak of an ‘apparent gap’ with former generations.

Second, you assert that Generation Y members are ‘keenly interested in finding a safe place to belong’. The experience with divorces among the previous, baby boomer and X generations may have had, as you suggest, a formative effect upon the core values of the members of the Y generation. You quote Reggie Nel who found that young people highly value their home as a place of care, love and safety. You add that if the family structure does not function or is torn apart young people will have serious difficulties in developing their identity.

Third, for the Stellenbosch students, being representative of generation Y, the church and spirituality play an important role. You question the URCSA focus on ethical and doctrinal education and specifically, you raise criticism as to whether this education responds to the needs of the Generation Y-members. Implicitly you seem to suggest that the church can and should play a more formative role. I think this implicit proposal deserves to become more explicit and developed more fully.

With regard to your first point, there is indeed an overwhelming amount of texts, both in books and articles and on the internet, that support the use of the Generation Y-label. Not only for demographic reasons by the way, but also for marketing purposes. The Gen Y, ‘Internet-generation’, ‘Nintendo-generation’ or ‘Cut-and-paste generation’, has a focus on brands, friends, fun and digital culture; they are educated, achieving, confident, team-oriented, pressured, multitaskers. There is a simultaneous alignment of this generation with The Information Age. It’s members are digital natives. They have also been called the ‘helicopter kids’ because they hover about the family home. So it seems that your observations are corroborated.

Last Thursday however, when I told my daughters of 17 and 13 about one of the few Dutch marketing books on Generation Y, they immediately said, oh that must have been written by two old men. They questioned the generation label, told me about ‘gothics’, *alto’s* (‘alternatives’) and skaters, emphasized the diversity, and they thought that behaviour and lifestyle (including values and tastes, preferences) form more precise classification factors than calendar. They also questioned the boundaries. What, they asked, does a 1982, 28 year old man, working in the business area have in common with a 10-year old girl at seventh grade? They also mentioned class, cultural diversity and regional differences. What do young people in the eastern part of The Netherlands coming together in their booze sheds and young Antilleans in Rotterdam have

in common, they asked and again, can they be lumped together with the young creative class in Amsterdam? I explained to them what the concept of a generation means and told them, with Karl Mannheim, that the members of a generation share the same historical facts and changes and need not be homogeneous. But have we been confronted by the same music, television programs, norms and values, formative historical events and economic situation, they asked? And the answer came immediately. No, they said. They were also indignant at being lumped. They sensed that ascriptions are not neutral, they tend to be judgmental.

Making further inquiries, I found that discussions like these with my daughters are taking place on the internet too, mainly due to marketers who come up with ever new classifications and labels. Critics assert for example, that the decisive defining feature of Gen Y, its use of the *digital media*, is not as marking as it seems. After filling in an internet test in order to establish one's generation, a 57 year old woman remarked: "Funny! I'm 57 and retired, but I scored 14 points, which puts me in GenY! Funnier still, I can think of a number of friends my age or older who would score similarly on this quiz. Common factors: all of us are use Macs pretty intensively, and all of us have satellite internet setups that give us broadband access wherever we go. Gee, it's fun to break stereotypes!" Others point out that the UK the last ten years has seen the rise of 'Silver Surfers'. Retired people in their 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s and even into their 100s who are seeing their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren use all this technology and are taking lessons to keep up. Not only are they keeping up but many of them are getting hooked and overtaking their descendants. Are they filling the Gen Y boxes in demographics?

In The Netherlands, the concept of Generation Y is hardly used. On the other hand, although the Gen Y label may be America-centric, and as you put it, in South Africa predominantly adequate for young people who grow up in families with higher income and literacy levels, when the label is applied in research in The Netherlands it is confined to the years 1980-1994, this generation being labelled by research organization Motivaction as the 'boundless generation'.¹ According to Motivaction, young people of this period can be characterized by a focus on looks, brands, networks and kicks. They are not thrifty, not patient, not environment-minded and hardly involved. Critics even use the words 'cynical and indifferent'. Their parents have not given them boundaries and they have not had much time for them, being busy with their own work and leisure. According to marketing experts Boschma and Groen² due to the 24/7 commercialized information and communication society the generation that is born in 1988 or later shares typical values. They call this generation the Einstein generation, a positive label, emphasizing the abilities of the members of this generation to adapt to a flexible society. They have a clear insight into how things work, not only technically, but also economically, psychologically and socially. They are the ultimate consumers. They also emphasize authenticity and they value family life and friendship ties. Being happy is the most important value. Other researchers have labelled the 1980-1994 generation as the 'confetti generation', always in whirl, without inner convictions or anchors. "Screenagers we are, the Millenniumgeneration, the Wikipedia-generation, educated by and in front of the screens of computer and television. (...) We have no restrictions, also not in the moral domain."³

Now, Leslie, the question is, are these generational labels useful? Marketers love them, but should we use them in church and theology? Or do these characteristics and the positive or negative judgements connected to them say more about the researchers than about the individuals that are lumped together? And, even more critical, don't they lead to or confirm embedded stereotypes, that blur a clear view on each individual? The young people in the Motivaction report for example are portrayed in both pictures and text as a superficial mass, without decency and morals. Yet, statistics about political involvement and membership of organizations indicate: the confetti-generation, that is supposed to be politically un-involved

and not-committed to social values, does not exist. Third, is a label like 'boundless generation' not applicable to any new generation? And every generation has more options than previous generations ... "What do exist are the clichés about our generation."

With regard to your second point, firstly, when it comes to valuing family life, does not every new generation long for a family as a safe haven? In Dutch, does not everyone want a 'huisje, boompje, beestje'? In fact social psychology underlines that the only effective remedy to both criminal and terrorist activities seems to be a 'huisje, boompje' and a 'beestje' or, in other words, a wife, work and a home. People have been longing for a safe and comfortable dwelling place since the first days of creation, the very first generation.

Secondly, in The Netherlands, the Motivaction report underlined that the parents of the 'boundless generation' are not strict and they have little time for their children. In fact it suggests that living without restrictions is *caused* by the parents or, even more generalizing in a one-liner, that Dutch society neglects its youth. My question is whether such generalizations are helpful? Or are they useful only in a performative sense, in that they spark off debate, both in the public and the private domain?

Finally, as to the relationship of the church and Generation Y, Leslie, you take a promising closer look to what the church in this respect means in an empirical sense by focusing on the Youth Brigade and the CYM, on what they offer and on how they address the needs of young individuals. The church, you suggest, could play a more formative role; I like to hear more about that in the South African context. If young people are seeking to shape their identity primarily in relationships with family and friends then I suggest precisely in that domain the performative and catalytic content of the biblical narratives, models and metaphors should be explored and connected to the biographies of young individuals by applying creative methods.

Research on Generation Y in the UK demonstrates that young people do not find religion relevant to their daily lives, but they are likely, however, to turn to "a faded, inherited cultural memory of Christianity" during difficult times and they might be more open than their parents' generation to hearing the Christian story.⁴ On the other hand, they are happy to get by on what little they know about the Christian faith. Researchers state that the Gen Y crowd lives in a milieu, a popular culture, that is oozing with spirituality, while churches are practically empty of Gen Y. Again, also according to this research, the central goal in life is happiness and there is a shared belief that happiness is eminently achievable. What counts are relationships with family and close friends, and the creative consumption of the resources of popular culture. 'Consequently, to fail in this goal is to be personally culpable. There is little space to discuss disappointments, sadness and loneliness in the Happy midi-narrative'.⁵ Midi-narrative is a collective framework of meaning that is communal on a small scale (me, my friends, and my family). According to the happy narrative, 'there is no need to posit ultimate significance elsewhere beyond the immediate experience of everyday life'. According to the researchers, the only thing a church can do is to engage young people's imagination through a creative retelling of the Christian story. It is about familiarizing people with biblical stories.

In The Netherlands, for most of the young people, the church is simply out of sight. It is not within their horizon. If it means anything at all, the word church is associated with dullness, moralization, hypocrisy and being old-fashioned. In addition, adolescents continue in the direction their parents took, when they became hesitant towards church and Christian faith.⁶ Where parents do not chat about the Bible, faith or the church and are not engaged in church related practices, church commitment of their children is very rare. Recent research demonstrates

that a deeply rooted anti-religious attitude' is common.⁷ Being free and independent are the highest values. To this generalizing picture I add, that a number of young people is active in a congregation of which they say it offers them a dwelling place. Sociologists speak about enclaves of roman catholic, orthodox-protestant, evangelical, post-evangelical and spiritual young people, that are seriously engaged.⁸ In addition, young people show *pick 'n choose* behaviour, but they have done that in the forties, fifties, sixties and seventies too.⁹

So, I do get along with some generalizations, although only to underline the need for a differentiated narrative approach. In Western Europe, for many young people, the contents and significance of the Christian tradition have become strange and unknown. The preferences in our culture for the musical and the visual, as Tom Beaudoin has shown in *Virtual Faith*,¹⁰ reflecting upon the spiritual quest of, not Generation Y, but of Generation X, call for an imaginative retelling of biblical stories about families, about parents and children, brothers and sisters, about conflict and peace, honour and shame, fear and courage, guilt, poverty and charity, happiness and sorrow, culpability and redemption, illnesses and healing, loneliness and companionship, and about life and death and resurrection.

Yet again, as our daughters convinced me, also for the church, behaviour and lifestyle, taste and values, may be more useful classification factors than calendar. Recently embryonic congregations emerged of young Antilleans in Rotterdam, the Thugzchurch¹¹, of de-churched accountants and bank employees in the Amsterdam business area, of young Surinamese mothers and their children and of low income families in economically deprived areas, and of post-evangelical Jesus freaks. These congregations demonstrate that the basic question, as you rightly put it, is not how churches can make a generation more involved, or how they can socialize them in their doctrinal and ethical convictions, but how they can be meaningful for identity formation of young individuals in their respective families and peer groups. Especially if they experience a culture of being both neglected and spoiled and if parents and peers exercise a strong pressure on them to achieve or you will be a loser.

Finally, taking a hesitant attitude towards binding commitments as a rule among Gen Y, Gen X, the Lost Generation and the Baby-boomers, churches may allocate means (that is: money and professionals) to create short-term preference activities and projects, together with non-church organizations. Research demonstrates that young, not yet de-churched church members are willing to participate.¹²

Contact details:

Prof Henk de Roest,
Professor and Chair of Practical Theology,
Protestant Theological University,
The Netherlands
hpderoest@pthu.nl

(Endnotes)

1 Frits Spangenberg & Martijn Lempert, *De grenzeloze generatie. En de eeuwige jeugd van hun opvoeders*. Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam 2009.

2 Jeroen Boschma & Inez Groen, *Generatie Einstein: Slimmer, sneller en socialer. Communiceren met jongeren van de 21e eeuw*. Amsterdam: Pearson Education 2006.

3 Daan Heerma van Voss & Daniël van der Meer, 'Tussen Einstein en confetti', *De Groene Amsterdammer* 23-06-2010.

4 Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo, Sally Nash & Christopher Cockworths, *The Faith of Generation Y*. London: Church House Publishing 2010. The findings from this study suggest that for most young people faith is located primarily in family, friends and their selves as individuals - defined as 'immanent faith'.

Among the unchurched some evidence of lingering affiliation and belief was found and also for what Grace Davie has called 'vicarious religion'. The empirical findings are especially based upon qualitative data.

5 See <http://www.prrg.org>.

6 J.J.M. de Hart, *Levensbeschouwelijke en politieke praktijken van Nederlandse middelbare scholieren*. Kampen: Kok 1990, 247v.

7 Ruard Ganzevoort, 'Is heil te meten? Ietsisme op de PABO. Voorlopig verslag van onderzoek naar religieuze duiding en coping bij jongeren', in: *Religie & Samenleving* 3/2 (2008), 106-128, m.n. 123.

8 Hijme Stoffels, 'Nieuwkomers en nazaten. Vijf generaties en hun religieuze kansen', in: *Religie & Samenleving* 1/3, (2006), 5-23.

9 Stoffels mentions research by Van Doornik and Van Saal. As early as 1948 (!), they found elements of religious pick 'n choose behaviour among non-churched youth. Stoffels calls it a constant factor in empirical research concerning the relationship between youth and religion. In: 'Nieuwkomers en nazaten',

10 Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith. The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1998.

11 See: Daniël de Wolf, *Jezus in de Millinix. Woorden én daden in een Rotterdamse achterstandswijk*. Kampen 2006.

12 See for example: Elpine de Boer, *Je bent jong en je wilt anders. 245 jongeren over wat hen bezig houdt en inspireert*. Kampen: Kok 2006.