Changing the tacks: exploring new directions towards an interdisciplinary study of the lifeworlds of believers. 
A dialogue between cultural anthropology and systematic theology.

Date: Thursday 8 February, 2018
Venue: VU/Protestant Theological University, De Boelelaan 1105, Room 1E24

Program Seminar

10.30-11.00  Coffee/thee in the meeting space of the Protestant Theological University (1E)
11.00-11.10  Welcome and opening by Prof. Heleen Zorgdrager
11.10-11.40  Jon Bialecki PhD on the dialogue with (systematic) theology from an anthropological point of view
11.40-12.00  Short responses from Klaas Bom PhD and from a junior member of NOSTER
12.00-12.10  Coffee/thee
12.10-13.30  Discussion
13.30-14.10  Lunch
14.10-14.40  Prof. Maaike de Haardt on the dialogue with (cultural) anthropology from a systematic theological point of view
14.40-15.00  Short responses from Annette Jansen PhD and a junior member of NOSTER
15.00-16.30  Discussion (moderator: Miranda Klaver PhD)
16:30  Final words and ‘borrel’

Background

After the publication of the latest KNAW report on the future of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands, Klaar om te wenden, a special issue of NTT (Spring 2016) was dedicated to the reaction of four systematic theologians of the PThU. In these articles, the relationship between social sciences, more particularly anthropology, and systematic theology was explored, but differently as proposed in the KNAW report. Rather than sacrificing theology to a study of movement, practice and matter, the articles proposed to strengthen a particular theological research approach, albeit supported and challenged by ethnographic methods and insights. As a follow up, study sessions of anthropologists and theologians were organized in order to continue the exploration of the challenges of further cooperation between both disciplines.

During five inspiring study sessions, the involved anthropologists and theologians encountered similar methodological problems while aiming to study ‘lived religion’ (theologians) or the ‘life worlds’
(anthropologists) of believers. Although theologians are often reproached for being unable to conduct ‘value free’ research on religion, anthropologists just as much struggle with the secularist disciplinary credo of ‘scientific objectivity’ and ‘rationality’. Although anthropologists are the supposed experts on inter-subjectivity, they nonetheless confront the fear of ‘going mad’ when being engaged in ritual practices (Van de Port 2015; Knibbe and Versteeg 2008). Both anthropologists and theologians feel the need to confront their respective disciplinary taboos.

Based on the promising exchanges in the study group, the participants believe that concentrated interdisciplinary exchange will help them pick the fruits of the other discipline and may in addition generate new concepts and methods. The seminar will bring together systematic theologians and anthropologists of religion from various Dutch universities and will actively include the younger generation of scholars (PhD candidates and Research MA students). The Spring issue of NTT in 2017 (special issue by Meyer and Molendijk) gives reasons to believe that there is still interest among Dutch anthropologists and theologians in bringing forward the issues of the seminary. If successful, the Noster seminar will be followed up by a wider (inter)national conference and a joint research project.

Aims of the thematic seminar

A thematic seminar could be of great help in order to clarify the central theoretical and methodological issues of our discussions and to make the first step in the direction of a joint research program. It will help to structure our search for an interdisciplinary debate that would stretch the disciplinary limited understandings of religious experience and challenge dominant theoretical frameworks.

More specifically, the seminar would help us

a. Clarifying the theoretical and methodological debates;

b. Advancing in the quest for central (research) questions for shared research;

c. Debating our intuitions and proposals with some experts from the field who are familiar with interdisciplinary research of anthropology and systematic theology.

d. Explore the wider interest for this debate among students and colleagues in the Netherlands;

Theme of the seminar

The interests of the systematic theologians of this group is methodological as well as theoretical. The increasing interest in social scientific approaches in theology is inspired by the growing awareness of the need of a more experienced-based and embodied form of doing theology (Scharen and Vigen, 2011; Coakley, 2013; Banner 2014, Tolstaya 2014 etc.). Ethnographic research seems to offer an interesting method to access the diverse faith experiences that are overlooked in systematic theologies of the last centuries. The importance of the contextual approach, with its background in modern thought, and the related correlation theory that dominated twentieth century theology and made ‘context’ the program of theology, is more and more discussed (Boeve 2007). Although new approaches, like the recently launched ‘lived theology’ are welcomed, for example when they question the modern distinction between Practical Theology and Systematic Theology, they possibly could lead to the loss of the depth of the systematic approach that concentrates on truth and meaning (Marsh, Slade and Azaransky 2017).
The central concern of the cultural anthropologists in this research group is the question how we can take into account the specific religious nature of religion, going beyond the ‘second hand’ data of our informants. This immediately relates to the anthropological method of participating research, which should be explored to its fullest potential of being part of another lifeworld. Methodological ludism (Droogers) has been an important step forward through the notion of being temporarily participating in an ‘as-if’ reality, although it essentially sees participation as a rational process in which one can switch on and off from a religious attitude. Instead, we propose to see ethnographic research as a reflexive process of transformation, in which the researcher is changed by the encounter with the other. Several approaches inspire us to take up this transformative perspective. Firstly, cultural phenomenology, with its emphasis on a bodily understanding of reality (Jackson; Csordas); secondly, Lacanian perspectives on culture and religion, which point to the researcher as someone who has to process his being overwhelmed by the Real (Van de Port); thirdly, ontological oriented anthropology, which discards ‘worldview’ for ‘world’ in an attempt to really understand ‘from within’, composing a ‘third language’ that is neither reductionist nor ‘nativist’ (cf. Viveiros de Castro, Kohn). The exchange with systematic theology is important in this respect, because it is in this discipline that anthropologists studying religions and worldview expect to find tools and language to describe the transforming encounter with the other.

Guest speakers

Two esteemed scholars, an anthropologist and a systematic theologian, will deliver the keynotes:

**Jon Bialecki, Ph.D.**

Jon Bialecki is an honorary fellow at the School of Social and Political Science, at the University of Edinburgh. His academic interests include the anthropology of religion, anthropology of the subject, ontology and temporality, and religious language ideology. He received his BA, MA, and PhD from the University of California, San Diego, and his JD from the University of San Diego. He writes on North American neocharismatic Christianity, on global Christianities, and on the anthropology of Christianity. For his book *A Diagram for Fire: Miracles and Variation in an American Charismatic Movement* (University of California Press, 2017) he received the Sharon Stephens Prize.

In this book, he analyzes the implicit logic of self in the charismatic practices of Southern Californian members of the Vineyard church-planting movement and the effects that these constructions of personhood have had on these believers’ political and economic practices.

**Prof. Maaike de Haardt**

Maaike de Haardt is Professor of Religion and Gender at the Radboud University Nijmegen. As a systematic theologian, she studies the interaction between religion, culture and gender in the broadest sense of the word. She is interested in “everyday theology” as a form of public theology. She investigates to what extent religious or spiritual motives, questions and dimensions can be recognized in human activities and forms of expression (from cooking to art) and if and how these can be related to religion, notably to central images and concepts from the Christian tradition, such as immanence-transcendence, God, presence, incarnation, Mary.
The VU/PThU study group:

Dr. Klaas Bom (PThU)

Dr. Annette Jansen (VU, Dept. of Social and Cultural Anthropology)

Dr. Miranda Klaver (VU, Faculty of Theology)

Dr. Petruschka Schaafsma (PThU)

Dr. Peter Versteeg (VU, Dept. of Social and Cultural Anthropology)

Prof. Dr. Heleen Zorgdrager (PThU)

Miranda van Holland, MA (VU, Religious studies)