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"CHAT"-ting up Anatheism in Search of Authentic and Credible Religious Memories

Abstract

This paper explores Anatheism as a pedagogically justifiable theory for teaching our learners how to acquire new memories about life- and worldview diversity, as well as religious diversity, and also how to accompany each other so that whosoever wants to, may return home to a more credible God after they might have started to doubt the credibility of their original faith. It demonstrates how Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) can be used to teach the tenets of Anatheism in order to help learners transform such religious doubts and memories.

Keywords: Anatheism, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), hospitality education, tolerance education

> *At the deepest level, every human being remains an enigma to his/her fellow human being. In a foreign language, you can learn how to sing their nursery rhymes and learn to understand the origins of a people's national holidays. Yet, exactly in this learning process, lies the difference between the stranger that you are and the representative of "mineness"*[i] *that you can never be.*
>
> Den Doolaard, A. (1958): *Het Leven van een Landloper* (Eng. *The Life of a Tramp*). Amsterdam: Em. Querido Uitgeverij. (Translation: FJP)

Introduction: Strangers versus representatives of "mineness"

The international community reflects growing social trends such as increasing dogmatic and confessional fusion between followers of different religious denominations (Pew Research Center, 2017, pp. 4-5), religious ***de***-traditionalization, secularization (specifically as it relates to "***de***-churching"), increasing diversity and, in the case of, for example, the Netherlands and Belgium, also religious depillarization (Huyse, 1987; Akkermans, 1997; Miedema et al., 2013; Vermeer, 2013; Bernts & Berghuijs, 2016; Franken & Vermeer, 2017). These trends are increasingly challenging the educational aims and supporting pedagogies of current life- and worldview, ethics and philosophy of education programs worldwide (Loobuyck & Franken, 2011; Loobuyck, 2014; Franken & Vermeer, 2017, p. 1). As a result, religious tolerance and ritualized hospitality – despite a chequered history of good intentions – are forfeiting their credibility, because it is increasingly believed that both exhibit essentially passive-barring and exclusively inward-reflecting behavior, instead of active, embracing and inclusive, outward-engaging behavior (i.e. "*away-from-the-self-towards-the-other-as-stranger*").

Recent research suggests that the "traditional" memories about life- and worldview diversity, as well as religious diversity which had been regulating and organizing multicultural, intercultural and trans-human behavior across the globe for

centuries, are fast reaching the end of their credibility shelf-lives and *convince-by* dates (De Jong 2017; Doerga, De Ruiter & Ter Avest, 2017; Franken, 2017; Garlock, 2017; Lähnemann, 2017; Niemandt, 2010; Rautionmaa & Kallioniemi, 2017; Sahin, 2017; Spangenberg & Oosthuizen, 2017; Wielzen & Ter Avest, 2017; Van der Meij, 2017).

I argue that this should be a *Kairos*-moment for all educators and educationists: the time has come for us to explore pedagogically justifiable ways of teaching our learners and students (a) how to acquire new memories about life- and worldview diversity, as well as religious diversity, and also (b) how to accompany each other so that whosoever wants to, may return home to a more credible God after they might have started to doubt their original faith[ii]. In this regard, Anatheism seems to be offering ground-breaking opportunities, amongst others because it works back from the experience of God-loss towards a genuine renewal of the sacred in order to recover forward a second, more mature faith. It finds footing in the space between theism and atheism with a gesture of genuine **non**-knowing[iii] (take note: ***not*** ignorance; instead: 'absence of knowledge'), but willing to seek, question and learn, aligning itself with the venerable traditions of Socrates, Nicholas of Cusa, Kierkegaard, Husserl or even that moment of perplexity which typically impels seeking and questioning in the first place.

The anatheist alternative

As long ago as 1883, Nietzsche (1883, pp. 400-401) wrote[iv]:

> *Der Gott, der Alles sah, auch den Menschen, dieser Gott musste sterben! Der Mensch erträgt es nicht, dass solch ein Zeuge lebt.*

Anatheism (Kearney, 2008, 2011) offers an alternative by investigating the possibility of a "God after God" (Gr. *ana-theos*): "ana" – seeking 'after' (i.e. towards/relentlessly in the direction of) God 'after' (i.e. subsequent to) the death of God (Samuel, 2013, n.p.). It searches for modern meaning in ancient religious ideas by jettisoning the inherent tribalism that continues to characterize the mythical reinforcement of all major religions worldwide. It deliberately forges new meanings, new contexts and new justifications from them (Friedman, 2014, n.p.). It bids *adieu* to the God of metaphysics and traditional religion whose surname has (for too) long been "Almighty". Having declared the antiquated religious and metaphysically oriented epoch over, it would seem that humanity is finally poised to focus its efforts on searching for a return to faith after the loss of faith (Burkey, 2010, pp. 160-161; Khwan, 2013, n.p.).

Applying Ricoeur's hermeneutics, Kearney explains how it might be possible – after Nietzsche's argument to pronounce God dead – to return home to a more authentic and credible idea of God. The death of the old, established God(s) has paved the way for a new religious-educational methodology (i.e. a more responsible way of engaging with, exploring, ascribing meaning to, understanding, teaching and learning how to adopt those phenomena that we might regard as belonging to the realm of the "divine"). This methodology does not, however, represent a portal to a new religion. It is also not a methodological modification of secularism (Burkey, 2010, p. 160). As a mode of "inter-confessional[v] hospitality" (Kearney, 2008, p. 9), Anatheism offers a kind of roadmap for agnostics who might be doubting the

relevance, credibility and feasibility of the God behind their own, personal faith (Khwan, 2013, n.p.). Returning to God ("God after God") with the use of this roadmap does not, however, constitute a religious homecoming. Instead, it suggests a hermeneutical homecoming, because it has the potential to transform the wanderer's initial religious doubts, disbeliefs, uncertainties and ensuing disillusionment gradually into a trustworthy, reasonable, contemplative, practical and considered conceptualization of God (Samuel, 2013, n.p.).

Anatheism does not promise any salvation or religious certainties, either. Instead, it demonstrates a particular means through which ordinary people can engage themselves in more significantly hospitable ways in the world (Samuel, 2013, ibid). Having analyzed the Abrahamic tradition(s), as well as the literary tradition of the West, Kearney's thesis (2011) is that the ontological and epistemological gravitas of human kind's home-coming to God ("God after God") is mostly located in the kind of vulnerable[vi], yet authentic hospitality that gets offered to the *Stranger*. Anatheism therefore refers, essentially, to a primordial, original, preparatory, liminal, shared and ineffable genesis point that is located at the center of every great religion, namely a silent, speechless openness to a message that transcends all of us: a surplus of meaning that exceeds all our different beliefs, and a mystical ground of what is most fundamental in each religion and which is not easily translatable into language but rather borders on a common profound, revered silence (Kearney, 2011, p. 179). He demonstrates how it is possible for those who persist in their efforts, to return to a more liberating faith (Burkey, 2010, pp. 160-166).

When we decide to accept God, against this backdrop, it means that we accept him/her fundamentally as *Stranger*. The points of reference of this process of acceptance are not, however, located in any Holy Scriptures, rituals, prayers, existential certainties or even in particular fulfilment of wishes. Instead, they are to be found in the manner in which we are prepared as people to involve ourselves actively, hospitably and purposefully in and with the world (Samuel, 2013, n.p.). For this reason, the remainder of my paper enquires into the pedagogic potential of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)[vii]. It suggests how, for example, simulation games could be used as classroom-based pedagogic tools to accompany learners (on a personal level) in their search for new, authentic and credible religious memories that could, in turn, help to augment their social awareness in an expanding international context of what is now emerging as *neo*-reconciliation pedagogy.

CHAT as pedagogic vehicle for using anatheism

CHAT is based on the neo-Vygotskian notion of activity theory (De Beer & Henning, 2011, pp. 1-2). Modernised by Engeström (2009), it argues that human practice (including life- and worldview, faith-based, religious practice) is always mediated by tools (Mentz & De Beer, 2017, p. 90). It claims that no human activity or interaction can be explained without due reference to the relevant social and cultural contexts that are at play. This implies that also the religious behavior of people will always be embedded in a particular socio-cultural activity system that usually operates on three levels, namely the personal, interpersonal and institutional (or community) level (Van Jaarsveld, Mentz & Ellis, 2017, pp. 805, 806).

Viewed from a CHAT-perspective, a religiously disillusioned learner's search for new, authentic and credible religious memories constitutes "pedagogic activity".

Such pedagogic activities are made up of the shared, coordinated actions of a wide variety of role-players and stakeholders with diverging roles and expertise: the learner(s) themselves, the classroom-based teacher, the subject head, the grade head, members of the professional management team of the school, designated members of the school's governing body, faith-based leaders in the community, parents and legal caregivers, etcetera. A subject (e.g. the classroom-based teacher) initiates and coordinates the searching-activities of her religiously disillusioned learners. While the resultant behavior of all individual role-players and stakeholders have relevance to their respective roles, mandates and objectives, all action is steered by a concerted, conjoint motive (e.g. to assist our religiously disillusioned learners in their attempts to search for new, authentic and credible religious memories) (Van Jaarsveld, Mentz & Ellis, 2017, p. 805).

If the objective of our activities includes the pedagogic accompaniment of learners and development of their knowledge and skills with respect to voluntary exhibition of religious tolerance and vulnerable hospitality behavior, hospitality as way of life, forgiveness, authentic dialogue, authentic listening, always putting the Stranger first and only then thinking of the self, etcetera, then any classroom-based simulated enactment of the above presupposes two outcomes: a deeper understanding of what lies at the root of a different religious tradition, and second, an opportunity for self-critique of one's own religious tradition, of what is undiscovered or underdeveloped in one's own tradition. In any case, the divine Stranger is always an infinite Other incarnate in finite others and through authentic dialogue something more, something unassimilable calls both educator and learner to transcend themselves and to engage in previously unenvisioned, virtually impossible acts of grace, hope, charity, and wonder.

Within a structured teaching and learning environment (e.g. a school classroom) active teaching and learning strategies, authentic dialogue strategies, authentic listening skills, sympathy and empathy training, problem-based interpersonal skills, etcetera can all be safely employed within the ambit of the rules and regulations of relevant curriculum guidelines, the school's code of learner conduct, etcetera, to facilitate the learners' search for authentic and credible religious memories. As critical, reflective practitioners, both educators and learners participate in the simulation games and, in the process, the classroom-space becomes an emancipatory space – for the self, as well as for the Stranger.

Operationalised in this manner, CHAT elevates Anatheism beyond all possible allegations of a method for instigating "super humanism" or "super civil behavior". Instead, Anatheism requires of the educator to teach the learner how to respond appropriately to the radical surprise of the Stranger as an invitation to faith; to make the impossible possible, to bring justice where there is hate, wisdom where there is ignorance.

This brief attempt at highlighting the affordances and versatility of CHAT as pedagogic vehicle in the classroom, hopefully illustrates how Anatheism could be used to develop a more nuanced understanding of teachers', educators' and learners' attempts to search for the possibility of a "God after God" in a post-truth society (Mentz & De Beer, 2017, p. 101).

Conclusion

Complex situations that plague contemporary education, such as pedagogic attempts to assist religiously disillusioned learners in their attempts to return to faith after (their own) loss of faith, is what makes CHAT such a powerful pedagogic resource. It takes the historical, cultural and socio-economic context of the individual learner into consideration when implementing current life- and worldview, ethics and philosophy education programs worldwide. An anatheist approach supported by CHAT-based pedagogy that allows for taking the holistic context of the learner into consideration holds promise to assist educators and educationists alike in proposing solutions to the growing numbers of learners worldwide who are searching for a more authentic and credible idea of God than the one they have been confronted with since birth.

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[i] In the original Dutch, the word "inboorling" was used. The best English translation of this concept is, arguably, either "aborigine" or "native". However, to millions of people across the world, these words continue to communicate derogatory and insulting evidence of the (recurring) reproduction of social division and derision. I have therefore decided to borrow Rudi Visker's phrase *representative(s) of "mineness"* (1994: 91) to refer to the Dutch noun "inboorling". Given the temporal-spatial context in which Den Doolaard had used this concept in 1958, I am satisfied that Rudi Visker's *representative(s) of "mineness"* is not only linguistically more accurate, but socially perhaps a more just and nondiscriminatory translation.

[ii] After, for example, Auschwitz-Birkenau, 9/11 and the farm-murders in South Africa...

[iii] Its captivating honesty requests from theists, atheists and agnostics alike a tempering of the tendency towards dogmatic and confessional certainty and the kind of snobbish, exaggerated and pretentious self-assuredness that more often than not lies in the unspoken monologue between a believer and a non-believer: "You poor, wretched creature. You don't know the truth. Mine is the only true faith…"

[iv] "The God who beheld everything, and also Man: that God had to die! Man cannot endure it that such a witness should live." (Nietzsche, F. 1883, pp. 400-401) (Translation – FJP).

[v] Personally, I find the term "inter-confessional" to be religiously too restrictive. I prefer the term "trans-confessional", instead. Methodologically we are, however, not nearly there yet.

[vi] As opposed to the old-fashioned kind of ritualized hospitality that is fast losing its moral credibility at present. (*Vulnerable hospitality*© – FJP)

[vii] This paper assumes that the reader is sufficiently familiar with Cultural-Historical Activity Theory – both as scientific method, and as methodology (i.e. as theory of science).