

Ferdinand J Potgieter

Towards a Narrative Vision for Philosophy of Education: Postmodernism, the Pilgrim and the Journey

Abstract

This paper argues in favour of a narrative vision for philosophy of education in a postmodern context. I argue that while the nihilisticⁱ strand of postmodernity might continue to challenge the viability of religious discourse in education(al) environments, postmodernity also re-opens the world towards its pre-rational foundations by means of the rediscovery of the primacy of narrative. In a postmodern age, any philosophy of education implies a basic understanding of, at least, the (historical) present and the past in order to establish its place in the scholarly community of educators and educationists. I theorize the postmodern rediscovery of narrative by demonstrating how the journey of the pilgrim is a continuous narrative of living ethics and vulnerable hospitality.

Keywords: narrative, postmodernity, philosophy, education, pilgrim, vulnerable hospitality

Introduction

Krüger (2018, pp. 1-2) argues that three entangled sets of problems (that occur in various mixes in different parts of the globe) compel us to rediscover and return to the root and nature of things. These are: (a) the ecological crisis announcing the destruction of many forms of life (the extreme fragility of nature), (b) the social crisisⁱⁱ and (c) the loss of legitimacy of all traditional religious and other value systems. Krüger (2018, p. 2) maintains that traditional religions have not only lost the right to claim moral leadership of society, but that they are, in fact, all in crisis. He concludes: “Humanity has entered a new kind of culture, global in spread but shorn of ultimate meaning” (2018, p. 2).

All of this spells dire consequences for how we reflect, as scholars, on the concepts of religion, philosophy of education, as well as the relationship between them. For one thing: religious traditions and religiously motivated people continue to this day to be important actors in civil society and they have, by no means, suddenly gravitated to the neutral zone. Secondly, religious traditions, including religious worldviews and convictions, have a tendency to act themselves out and to impact upon the global stage. At present this particular global stage is being populated with increasing numbers of interlocutors who all claim to be representing some or other social grouping – a process of social jostling which, instead of reconciling and uniting humanity, accomplishes exactly the opposite, namely to divide humanity even further.

It is against this backdrop that Gabriel (2017, p. 317) claims that because the majority of people on our planet are religious, the above-mentioned dialogue more often than not implies *interreligious* dialogue. She fittingly points out that there are increasing doubts and growing disappointment among scholars worldwide as to

whether any form of interreligious dialogue can really live up to these high expectations that it continues to raise. To put this in perspective, I suggest in the next paragraph that we rethink the notion of postmodernism.

Postmodernism and the role of narrative

Loughlin (1996) and Braun (2019, personal communication) explain that there are essentially two versions of postmodernity, namely a nihilistic and a religious one. This theory confronts “secular” postmodernity by drawing on (pre-rationalistic) interpretations of, amongst others, the work of non-foundational theologians such as Karl Barth, George Lindbeck and Hans Frei (who are regarded as narrative theologians) (Loughlin, 1996, p. 33). These four thinkers all favor a religious version of postmodernity that makes use of postmodern insights in order to re-describe the world narratively and, in the process, to link it up with the symbolic realism of ancient religious wisdom. Compared to religious postmodernism, nihilistic postmodernism is believed to condemn humanity, eventually, to endless violence. It sets the world against the Voidⁱⁱⁱ (Braun, 2019, personal communication) and it remains rooted in the modern narrative of autonomous human emancipation from the divine (Loughlin, 1996, p. 25). According to Cupitt (1991, p. 93) this is why it ultimately leads to nothing. Religious postmodernism, instead, is a postmodernism of unending hope. It imagines the possibility of harmonious difference and peace.

Even though nihilistic postmodernity seems to have deprived the master narratives of the past of their power to prescribe to their adherents what they should be ascribing or attaching value to, it nevertheless caused the resultant value-gap to be filled in by the values that individuals could obtain for themselves by “shopping around” in the ever-expanding “value supermarket” (Potgieter & Van der Walt, 2015). This means that nihilistic postmodernism has managed to convince a growing number of people of the perceived need to navigate a *mélange* of value systems. As a result, the individual’s own, personal life- and worldview became merely one among many (Loughlin, 1996). It would seem that everyone not only has a worldview, but also the right to it (Smith, 2006).

Master-narratives are essentially all-comprehensive. This fact is significant, because there are still those who, against the background of religious postmodernity, continue to narrate religious narratives (Loughlin, 1996). An example is the fact that the mainstream Christian churches across the globe continue to embrace the Augustinian theological narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. Although this narrative continues to this day to place human beings within the drama of God’s created, fallen, and redeemed world, others have succeeded in presenting transformed stories in modernity: “Marxism places us within the unfolding dialectic of history; Darwinism writes us into the epic of evolution; Freud locates us in the theatre of the psyche” (Loughlin, 1996, p. 8).

Try as it might, postmodernity cannot escape the master narratives, for by telling our own, individual stories among the ruins of former master narratives, we, as well as the stories themselves, still presuppose a deep, reflective understanding – a Woodsian^{iv} “knowledge in the blood” – of everything prior to it in order to establish our place in the world and to argue convincingly in favor of it (Lyotard, 1992). This is important, because postmodernity’s suspicion towards master

narratives presupposes not only an understanding and evaluation of such narratives, but also that postmodernity itself creates an alternative master narrative, thereby contradicting itself (Braun, 2019, personal communication). As the reformational philosopher Strauss explains, “The reaction of postmodernity against such totality perspectives evinces a lack of understanding of the *conditions* of human thinking” (Strauss, 2009, p. 57).

It is clear, then, that by rejecting the modern project of emancipating human beings through the light of universal reason (Vanhoozer, 2003), nihilistic postmodernity is, in fact, oxygenating religious postmodernity, because it re-opens the “world” toward its pre-rational foundations. In doing so, it frees up the space for anyone to start narrating new, truthful stories about what should be pursued as most meaningful in life and why. Religious postmodernity, it seems, is in fact contributing to a steady increase in global attempts at rethinking the significance of religion in the public sphere and, by logical inference, in education as well (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Braun & Potgieter, 2019).

The fact that the main precursors of nihilistic postmodernism were passionate critics of traditional religion and that they all happened to live during a time when traditional religion was still a dominant cultural force, indicates that religious postmodernity could only have emerged through an interaction with religious narrative and its historical (dialectical) relationship to, for example, Greek philosophy. Their main contributions (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016) are therefore intrinsically linked to the symbolic network of their time, which cannot be properly understood in isolation from their religious heritage – a heritage that had been communicated through narrative.

Narrative re-describes the world as a world that is open to the future, while never losing its connection to tradition. Because the interplay of innovation and sedimentation is derived from narrative schematisms that constitute tradition (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 77), narrative is an antidote against traditionalism. It possesses the power to reconfigure our temporal experience constantly through the work of us humans’ productive imagination. In Ricoeur’s sense, tradition is therefore not a dead deposit of material but “...the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 68).

A nihilistic version of postmodernity that antagonizes religion (i.e. as a pre-modern and auto-legitimizing ancient tradition, according to its reputed nature) ultimately fails in fulfilling its potential to become post-secular and to overcome the secular illusion of religious neutrality (Taylor, 2007; Braun & Potgieter, 2019). This failure to overcome the secular illusions of religious neutrality is essential to the field of philosophy of education, for “there is no neutral, non-formative education; in short, there is no such thing as a secular education” (Smith, 2009, p. 26). This is why a postmodernism of unending hope needs also to rethink the meaning of religion and what we now believe to be most meaningful in life and why.

Rethinking the meaning of religion

Religion reflects two orders of relevance and in order to rethink the meaning of religion, we need to contemplate beyond religion’s first-order of (horizontal) relevance (Krüger, 2018, p. 2), namely the progressively artificial, insincere, short-

term and immediate attempts at gaining social leverage by gathering as much of life and the world as possible (Krüger, 2018, pp. 2, 5). The normative teachings, socialising rituals and disciplinary ethics (Krüger, 2018, p. 5) of organized religion represent, at most, the societal outside of the human search for ultimate meaning.

According to Krüger (2018, p. v), a second order of (vertical) relevance of religion emerges from humankind's search for the furthest, most inclusive horizon, the domain of silence, which underlies all of our most primordial religious and metaphysical urges. This is essentially an individual quest, not a collective enterprise (Krüger, 2018, p. 5) that attempts, in the Kantian way of "pushing through to the root of things" (Krüger, 2018, p. 2), to relativize all human claims to exclusive, absolute truth that might be proclaimed by any religious or metaphysical, mystical position. It frees up space for not only hospitably inviting, but also affirming the unique value and dignity of each. This kind of "pushing through to the root of things" moves beyond all possible stances of enmity, indifference, syncretism or homogenisation of all:

It affirms ... that each religious, mystical and metaphysical orientation in its relative singularity represents or contains the whole and derives value from that, and that each represents or contains every other. This homoversal solidarity stimulating individual uniqueness is different from and in fact implies criticism of the process of globalization. (2018, p. v)

In light of the above, a new understanding of the concept of *religion* is emerging. As opposed to the three rather saddle-backed semantic values of religion, namely (a) awareness of the divine (from the Latinate *relegere*), (b) being bound to the divine (from the Latinate *religare*) and (c) worship of the divine (from the Latinate *religio*) (Diedericks, 2015, pp. 25, 27), we may now understand religion as world orientation with an exceptionally radical and integral intention (Krüger, 2018, p. 5). This means that, according to its second order of relevance, religion is essentially about the individual pilgrim's journey of continued search for and experience of unity or non-duality with the ultimate dimension of cosmos and existence; an individual pilgrim's continued compass-swinging in the world with reference to a transcendent source of meaning (Krüger, 2018, p. 7).

The pilgrim, the narrative and the threshold

The background provided above, suggests that, in terms of the work of narrative, it remains the individual's responsibility (and not some or other group's or collective's responsibility) to bring forth a synthesis, a plot, which brings together scattered events, goals, chances and causes into the whole of a complete story (Ricoeur, 1984, pp. ix-x) of the pilgrim's continued search for a peaceful, understanding silence – a 'learned ignorance' (*docta ignorantia*) – about the ultimate horizon where serious talking, religious and otherwise, finally expires (Krüger, 2018, p. xix) and where humble understanding starts to incubate.

The archetype of the pilgrim is the perfect circumscription, according to religious worldviews, of the limited human condition with regard to knowledge. Pilgrims have no permanent city on earth and this means, symbolically speaking, that although humans explore and expand their territory, building culture and setting up "walls" to protect themselves from unexplored threats (i.e. their own, personal dragons), they are obliged to keep negotiating the liminal threshold between the

known and the unknown. Every action and thought of the pilgrim in this space is thus adding to and developing the plot of his/her personal narrative. Despite dwelling in this narrative space between order and chaos, on the verge of a continued search for and experience of a transcendent source of meaning (Krüger, 2018, p. 7), however temporary, the pilgrim is never quite alone.

To keep pushing through to the root of things, the pilgrim is obliged to keep meeting and conversing with the Other. Because the pilgrim has deliberately chosen to move beyond all possible stances of enmity, indifference, syncretism or homogenisation, it stands to reason that by virtue of his/her meeting and reaching out to the Other, their own narratives are continuously expanded upon. The ethics of the pilgrim are therefore circumscribed by means of vulnerable hospitality. It speaks for itself that this kind of authentic (or vulnerable) hospitality should not only be about the pursuit and expression of benevolence and charity to the Other *per se*. Instead, vulnerable hospitality can only be activated when both the pilgrim-as-host and the Other-as-stranger-and-guest profoundly understand that they are both obliged to switch places (both physically and mentally) and be willing to resign oneself to the other (Fewell, 2016, p. 347).

By telling and re-telling the stories that we have accumulated on our journey as pilgrims, we can finally start to move away from the potential conflict of, for example, interreligious dialogues and public debates where the first-order, social leverage-aim of any argument or discussion is very rarely progress and enlightenment, but victory, instead. This has a wide variety of implications for any future, narrative vision of Philosophy of Education.

Conclusion

Philosophy of Education should involve, amongst others, thinking about fundamental questions such as:

- What should the aim of education be?
- Who should be educated?
- What should be taught and should this differ with interests and abilities?
- How should we be educated?

This paper suggests that if we are really interested – globally as well as locally – in helping to introduce a new pedagogy of hope and reconciliation worldwide, we have little choice but to rethink, re-imagine and transform our paralyzing and asphyxiating dependence upon the kind of normative teachings, socializing rituals and disciplinary ethics that are produced by our continued, irrational devotion to religion's first order of relevance – the kind that frantically searches for opportunities to gather as much of life and the world as possible (Krüger, 2018, pp. 2, 5), instead of helping the individual pilgrim to search for the furthest, most inclusive horizon, the domain of silence, which underlies all of his/her most primordial religious and metaphysical urges. Instead of socially dividing dialogues and debates, a new philosophy of education should be interrogating the possibilities of glocalised pedagogies of narrative; postmodernally grounded in a kind of vulnerable hospitality of unending hope that could accompany every serious, focused pilgrim towards imagining – and, eventually operationalizing – the possibility of harmonious and peaceful coexistence.

A future, narrative philosophy of education should, for example, also recognize that mountains, rivers and forests are the prime language of the pilgrim's journey. Moses on the mountain, Guru Nanak in the river, Dante in the dark wood, Jesus on Golgotha, and countless other examples, all provide us with plots and sub-plots for our personal narratives (Chater, 2018). Stories are, indeed, a key way in which all of us can encounter evil safely. Let us hope for a future where most people might have their first encounter with evil through a story. Narrative is a safe, yet vivid, threshold from which to observe threat, jeopardy, and the harm it can do (Chater, 2018). It is also the liminal portal through which we might detour towards a transcendent source of meaning.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the continued assistance offered by Prof. Dr. Guilherme Braun, from the Internationale Hochschule, Bad Liebenzell, in Germany.

References

- Braun, G. J. (2019): Personal communication with author. Potchefstroom: North-West University. 20 and 21 February.
- Braun, G. J. & Potgieter, F. J. (2019): A Confessional and Narrative Vision for Philosophy of Education: Justification and Basic Presuppositions of a Postmodern Approach. *Journal of Christian Higher Education*, 18(3-4). [forthcoming]
- Chater, M. (2018): Response to Professor Heidi Leganger-Krogstad's paper, 'The teaching of the bible in education in church'. https://www.yorks.ac.uk/media/content-assets/international/isrev/documents/ISREV-2018-programme-7_18-draft-zl.pdf (Accessed February 2019).
- Cupitt, D. (1991): *What is a Story?* London: SCM.
- Diedericks, M. (2015): Guidelines for the development of religious tolerance praxis in mono-religious education institutions. Unpublished PhD thesis. Potchefstroom: North-West University.
- Fewell, D. N. (Ed.) (2016): *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gabriel, I. (2017): All Life Is Encounter: Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue and Concrete Initiatives. *Religious Education*, 112(4), 317-322.
- Jacobsen, D. & Jacobsen, R. (2012): *No longer invisible: Religion in university education*. Oxford, Mississippi: Oxford University.
- Krüger, J. S. (2018): *Signposts to Silence. Metaphysical mysticism: theoretical map and historical pilgrimages* (HTS Religion & Society Series Volume 2). Cape Town: AOSIS.
- Loughlin, G. (1996): *Telling God's story: Bible, church and narrative theology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University.
- Liotard, J. F. (1992): *The postmodern explained to children: Correspondence 1982-1985*. Translated by Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas. London: Turnaround.
- Potgieter, F. J. & Van der Walt, J. L. (2015): Postmodern relativism and the challenge to overcome the "value-vacuum". *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 1(1), 235-254.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984): *Time and narrative volume 1*. Chicago, Illinois: The Chicago University.
- Smith, J. K. A. (2006): *Who's afraid of postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2016): Postmodernism. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/#1> (Accessed November 2016).
- Strauss, D. F. M. (2009): *Philosophy: Discipline of the Disciplines*. Grand Rapids: Paideia Press.
- Taylor, C. (2007): *A secular age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap of Harvard University.
- Vanhoozer, K. (2003): Theology and the condition of postmodernity: a report on knowledge (of God). In K. Vanhoozer (Ed.) *The Cambridge companion to postmodern theology* (pp. 3-25). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University.
- Watson, J. (2014): Transition beyond postmodernism: Pluralistic culture, incommensurable rationalities, and future objectivity. *Review & Expositor*, 111(1), 33-40.
- Zieberts, H. G. (2019): Call for papers: religion, democracy and citizenship. https://www.theologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/fileadmin/01040400/Religion_and_Human_Rights/CfP_fin_-website.pdf (Accessed February 2019).

Prof. Dr. Ferdinand Jacobus Potgieter, North-West University, South Africa

-
- ⁱ Nihilism is the philosophical viewpoint that suggests the denial or lack of belief towards the reputedly meaningful aspects of life.
- ⁱⁱ The product of political transformation processes, such as the rise of populism, the rise of neo-nationalism, the increase in various attempts at challenging and influencing global thinking about, *inter alia*, democracy and capitalism, the global upsurge of a “post truth” epistemology, the collapse of norm structures, moral decay, social instability, violence, socially unacceptable behaviour such as corruption, state capture and a collapse of discipline in general and in schools, an unceasing rise of in-group and out-group thinking, a continuous shift in political power relations, territorial and land (-grab) claims, as well as military and anarchist threats are now endangering the lives and livelihood of more people in more countries of the world than ever before in the history of humankind. Social cohesion in – especially Western – societies is dwindling fast (Zieberts, 2019).
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Void is just movement, change (Cupitt, 1991, pp. 61, 95).
- ^{iv} MacDara Woods wrote the celebrated poem: ‘Knowledge in the Blood’. The book, *Knowledge in the Blood*, by Jonathan D Jansen, takes its title from this poem by Woods.
- ^v Recently, the importance of narrative for religious thought in a postmodern context continues to be promoted as a means of transition beyond postmodern relativism and towards a type of religion which prioritizes truthful narration over truthful reason (Watson, 2014).