

Project 'A way of getting closer' by Antoinette Nausikaa  
Het Wilde Weten- Rotterdam - 18 November 2012 – 15.00u

TALK – Annewieke Vroom, religious philosopher (VU University)  
'FINDING RELIGION IN EVERYDAY LIFE'

I

The first drawing of Antoinette I saw on the mobile phone of a friend of mine, Gertjan. It was a drawing of a humanlike figurine that stood on a high pole. It reminded me of a koan from the Zen tradition, which reads as follows: 'Master Sekiso said: You stand on a 33 meter high pole. How do you take the next step?' In Zen-practice, a koan is an impossible case to practice with, as a way to get beyond your own control over life. The drawing of Antoinette possibly was inspired on that koan, or – as it became clear later – the predicament that is expressed by the koan. As I recall the drawing, the little humanlike figurine just took a step off the pole, into the space. But, under those feet there was still another pole, a slightly lower one. And the drawing showed that again another pole was there, and yet another. For me that pole you stand on, expresses the predicament of life: there actually is nothing to say, but nevertheless you have to speak up. What struck me in that drawing was the choice for stepping off, and the insight that this choice continues to always exist. Whether it is true that after each of our steps a new pole arises, I do not know. Maybe sometimes you will also land in the middle, right on your face. But hey, if you don't lose the ground beneath you, then something perhaps carries you. It reminds me of the old-testament texts: beneath me your everlasting arms. Really? It would not have surprised me, if the following day Antoinette would have erased the poles. A figurine in the open space, it seems to fit her work.

II

Last week I talked with Antoinette over Skype and because I am a philosopher of religion, she asked me, 'what I do, is that actually somehow connected to religion? For me it's simply what I do, what I should do and nothing more'. My answer to this question is yes, and no. I like to explain how in my view her work is connected to religion, and how it is not. But, before we continue, what do we actually mean with religion?

As a model that helps in answering the question whether this is connected to religion, I distinguish four elements of religion. Initially I approach religion very broad, as an anthropological maxim, so as something that is part of being human.

The four elements that I distinguish:

1. The quest of the person that finds himself confronted with existential questions.
2. The collection of (sometimes contradictory) answers given to these questions.
3. The worldview and way of life that arises on the basis of these responses, that structures reality and indicates the coherence between parts and whole.
4. The common practice of such a path, that guides personal and societal development in a certain direction.

The first two components: the quest and the answers, seem quite innocent. The third and fourth, the formulation and common practice of a path, is more dangerous – let this be

clearly stated in nowadays reality. In time, answers solidify and what fundamentally was a quest for meaning in reality, turns into an artificial attempt to shape reality according to the ideas about it. Here religion becomes an element that leads to a long-term history of oppression, violence and murder. But, the question is whether humans can do without a path. We cannot remain on top of the 33 meter high pole. And randomly jumping off left and right, with eyes closed, is not sufficient. Perhaps, someone walks beneath us whom we then crash - if not ourselves.

### III

That the quest reflected by Antoinette's art is connected to the quest that comes from experiencing existential questions seems obvious to me. Nevertheless, I make this explicit, because of the philosophers vocation to discuss everything in and with language.

I look at the humanlike figurines as images of impressions of the moods that arise in this seeking life. Last week I dreamt about this exhibition, and in it there was a very large sign with the title 'Emotions'.

Over the years Antoinette has, so I deduce from her work, also developed a path, a working method. I see her walking through the city, with her outer and inner eye open, looking for contact with what she likes to refer to as 'things'. Her way as an artist and human actually is this quest. She has chosen to do this solo, in the vicinity of the objects of the city, and today in a chapel. This evokes certain specific insights, and excludes certain others. This is how religious traditions arise and persist.

The most important guidance on the path seems to be a preference of how reality actually is experienced: through 'empfindlichkeit' (sensitivity), through sensitively merging with it, and then carefully expressing it in an image or drawing. It appears to be a path of opening up, in which something can then enter. She has for example drawn a figurine accompanied by the text 'space here, here space, space here' - in head, heart and belly. It is waiting for a revelation from the inside. And then something surfaces. Or it overwhelms.

The humanlike figurines are accompanied by words and thoughts. Some of these figurines give her advice, for example one makes a gesture to the ground: 'down!'. Ground yourself! Whether these are the kind of answers we are used to getting from the religions, too loud and too clear, initially appears not to be the case. The answers are rather like mollusks; sometimes it even seems to come close to the adoration of submissiveness. It has the power of receptivity, of resisting activity, of going with the flow. But even this the figurines do not fully embody, not loud and clear. Striking is a figurine, just born out of clay, still wet, and on her back already the text: 'Where do I begin?'

The quest is a search for 'things outside' but always travels through the 'inside'. The search reflects our self that experiences. The reflexivity of the quest thus remains locked in the answer. Yet, the words written on or near the figurines -not really answers, more kind of confirmations of the path - do not automatically lead to development, because the figurine's question keeps the search going. Thus, a path in life is formed, like in the children's book where the tiger tied to the tree runs in circles, his trails deepening into a path in the sand. Well, and what is the tiger running after?

### IV

In the four elements I just mentioned, religion is not yet distinguished from a non-religious

philosophy of life. The distinguishing criterion for religion is, that there is some sense of Transcendence, something that traverses, grounds and goes beyond humans and the everyday experience. According to the analysis of a philosophy of religion that looks beyond theistic traditions, this transcendence can, as I learnt from my professor, be interpreted in three ways. *Cosmic*, like in the Stoa or Zen, when it is about the All or being. Or *a-cosmic*, as in Neo-Platonism or Advaita, when it is about the One beyond this muddy world. Or, *theistic*, as a God in relationship to the creation. This is just a model for clarification. Mostly, these three types of transcendence intertwine (for example, Daoism has a cosmic worldview but still uses the imagery of the Mother), but in each religious movement, one is dominant.

It is exactly this directedness towards the transcendent, that makes it so pivotal for religions to design an image of where the quest is headed. This is where poetry about transcendence, whether God, Tao or the All, finds a use. In a way, this end-image works teleologically, pulling the practitioners towards itself. Even if it's always just an image. The design of the telos, and the developed route (often captured in a dynamic of discipline and surrender), determine the deepening of the Path. Without holding on, one easily starts moving in circles.

I do not know what Antoinette as an artist is seeking. Possibly she simply seeks the imagination of the emotive. Or herself. Then this is also what she opens up. A deepened awareness of sensitivity and increased reflexivity is the result. As such this is not necessarily religious. Yet, repeatedly we encounter in her work an emptiness or openness, beyond the boundaries of the subject. However large it becomes, it does not get a fixed form: even the great friend on the balcony is made of wire gauze.

Her work thus expresses the fluid quality of existence. With their long arms and legs the figurines blend with surroundings they cannot clutch. Even baked in clay, and does it get more earthly, they remain cartoon figures. Baked, the figures are fragile again, ready to break from the minimal touch. Only through questions, loosely connected to them with a thin stripe, or scratched in their body, or their posture itself, they communicate with reality. The artist's left brain hemisphere, turned off in the quest for symbiosis with the present time and space, invariably returns and catches up with intuition again, in the form of an hyper-reflexive question that haunts the symbiosis as a shadow. A momentary exception is the large wire gauze figurine, communicating by being permeable –but Antoinette's question soon accompanies her: 'why do I make you?'

There seems to be an alternating movement, between an emotive symbiosis with parts of existence, away from the subject, and the reflexive questioning of these parts, in which the subject returns as an I-position. (This ambiguity between symbiosis and reflexivity is also visible in her recent drawing of a circle with in it the text that contradicts itself: 'I am the things around me'.)

V

If this was a religious path, I would ask two questions concerning 'religion Antoinette Nausikaa'. First, what is the possibility of a path that does not seek for something? Is the seeking itself that is the eternal object of the quest? Or the eternal subject of it – wherefor the seeking only stops, when momentarily it synchronises with itself? In a sense this art

comes from nowhere, and goes nowhere.

In the religious traditions, there is besides the apophatic tradition ('way of negation'), that of crossing-out words to open up experience anew, there is also a kataphatic tradition ('way of affirmation'), of shaping forms and mapping out guiding points of view. Is this element present here? Is anything affirmed? Or are we left with the figurine that has 'GO!' printed on her t-shirt, without a further clue about whereto? One hint is given, in many works: find your feeling. As in the drawing with the two figurines, where one says, 'I want to know how I feel'. The other quietly puts an arm around her/him.

And then again the counter-movement: escaping from the subject, from its paralysis. This has to do with the desire to manifest, like in the drawing: 'I must make a point. How many? Three points.'

I started with the koan on the 33 foot pole. I talked about taking a step into the impossible. The pole is also often interpreted as a metaphor for enlightenment. In the Zen tradition there is much criticism about abiding in the experience that is the result of the attractive qualities of Samadhi, the serenity that can arise during meditation. Zen master Keishin comments as follows: 'One who sits on a 33 foot pole, has not attained the highest wisdom. Step down from the height and throw your body in the 10.000 worlds'.

This is about the need to go beyond merely abiding in blissful states. But how to get out of the symbiosis? Where to retrieve strength? Can these little clayed figurines throw themselves in the worlds, or are they too weak? Do their arms and legs dip into it too much, for tightening the muscles? Can they only wait until they are thrown?

This is not about the figurines nor about Antoinette. What her art expresses is about contemporary existence, about anyone who tries to live in surrender to openness itself.

What leaves us with the question, to use the phrasing of Dorothee Solle, a famous theologian of the last century: How to turn from mysticism to revolt?