Essays

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ENGAGING HUMANISM IN SPIRITUAL CARE

A Collegial Conversation Across Wisdom Traditions



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Essay 1

Finitude, Fragility, and Contingency: Secular Faith and Spiritual Care

James Croft

Introduction

As the field of spiritual care broadens to encompass not just non-Christian but also Humanist practitioners, new theological and philosophical models are being developed to support spiritual carers' work. However, models for distinctively Humanist spiritual care are lacking. I argue that effective pastoral care for Humanists, no less than for religious people, requires an appreciation for and understanding of distinctive elements of a Humanist approach to life. Then, using Martin Hägglund's distinction between "secular" and "religious faith", I propose a model of Humanist pastoral care for Humanists based on an appreciation of human finitude and fragility, and a recognition of the contingency of life. I argue that in the face of finitude, spiritual carers should encourage care seekers to treasure their finite time instead of succumb to despair; in the face of fragility, we can encourage commitment over surrender; and in the face of contingency, we can promote agency instead of helplessness.

Finitude and Fragility in Florissant

At 5pm on August 20th 2015, Ted Green[1] was closing up his auto body shop in Florissant, Missouri, getting ready to head home for the evening. Minutes later, he was dead: killed by a single shot. No one saw the shooting, and the only lead the police had to follow was a sighting of a dark SUV in the area of the crime. There was no known motive, and no suspects: just a man, once living, now dead.

Ted's brother Michael, and his partner Lucy, were members of the Ethical Society of St. Louis, the Humanist congregation I then served as clergy. The community stepped up to provide support, and the Senior Leader of the congregation led a memorial service in Ted's favourite bar. I, as a member of the clergy team, had pastoral and spiritual care responsibilities at this time of suffering: part of my role was to support Michael, as he grieved, and his partner, as she helped carry him through the loss.

This shocking, violent death raised spiritual care challenges which would be difficult for any faith or belief community to respond to. Any death is a loss to those who knew and loved the

1 This story is true, but names have been changed.

deceased, and causes a rupture in the life of a community. These difficulties are compounded when loss is sudden and unexpected. It can be hard, certainly, to respond effectively to the natural death of someone who has lived a full life. Yet it is far harder to help people make meaning and find solace when loved ones are ripped away by violence while still relatively young.

These challenges can seem especially pressing for Humanists. Humanism, as a nontheistic tradition, does not offer a theistic redemption narrative or the promise of an afterlife. The way Humanists understand things, Ted was dead, and Michael would never see him again. For us, death is final and irrevocable, an expression of the inherent and insuperable finitude of our existence. How do you do offer spiritual care when your tradition is committed to the ultimate finitude of life?

Ted's murder is a reminder, to Humanists, of the necessary fragility of all human endeavours: however committed we are to our relationships or projects, they can all be taken away from us in an instant. Nothing we seek to achieve is guaranteed, as there is no supernatural guarantor, and once we are gone everything we built will begin to fall away unless sustained by others. How do you offer spiritual care when your tradition teaches that all human effort is necessarily fragile?

Finally, as a naturalistic understanding of life, Humanism rejects a teleological framework for understanding our experience. Humanists believe neither the universe nor human affairs follow any set path. For us, there is no "moral arc" built into the universe, and no promise of ultimate redemption. Things might not turn out well. We therefore cannot appeal to any idea that Ted's death was part of any greater plan, nor to any sense that what happened was "meant to be" or will, in the final analysis, come to any good. How do you offer spiritual care when you believe that not everything happens for a reason?

Such questions are the subject of this chapter, which asks "What might a distinctively Humanist approach to spiritual care look like, one which takes seriously the Humanist commitment to the finitude, fragility, and contingency of life?"

The Need for a Humanist Approach to Spiritual Care

A distinctively Humanist approach to spiritual care is needed for a three main reasons. First, because as more Humanists enter spiritual care professions, they will need a secure philosophical foundation for their work. Second, because of the dramatic secularisation of western nations, there are more care seekers than ever who take a broadly Humanist view. To serve them effectively, all spiritual caregivers should understand something of how Humanists approach life. Third, because Humanists are dramatically underrepresented in many spiritual care settings, which means that Humanist modes of spiritual care are undertheorised.

The Importance of a Philosophical Basis for Spiritual Care

Scholars have long stressed the importance of a strong theological basis for chaplaincy and spiritual care.[2] A common theme in spiritual care research is that spiritual carers both embody and employ

2 See Threlfall-Holmes and Nawitt, *Being a Chaplain*; Smith et. al., "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off;" Caperon et. al., *A Christian Theology of Chaplaincy*; etc.

an approach to life which stems from the religious and metaphysical commitments they endorse. As Cobb, Swift, and Todd put it, "one of the distinctive characteristics of chaplains is that they… represent and manifest claims about the nature of reality that inform the way they interpret and respond to human experience".[3]

This is no less true of Humanist spiritual carers. While Humanists will likely not describe our work as depending on a "theological" foundation, we are nonetheless informed by a tradition of thought and practice which orients us toward life and helps us confront its challenges. And, while there are few formal positions of authority within Humanism, and no well-established hierarchy of roles, Humanists who take on formal spiritual care roles (such as chaplains in healthcare settings, the military, prisons, and higher education) will inevitably be seen as "representing and manifesting claims about the nature of reality." Humanist spiritual carers are not just incidentally Humanists – we are explicitly identified by reference to our worldview. Thus we, no less than religious spiritual carers, need a strong philosophical basis for our work.

Furthermore, spiritual carers who work in multifaith environments must understand at least something about the metaphysical and religious commitments of others to effectively serve a diverse community. Spiritual caregivers in diverse settings frequently have to meet the needs of care seekers with different religious and philosophical convictions to their own, and can do so more effectively when they know something about those convictions. While no spiritual carer can be fully fluent in the beliefs and practices of every worldview tradition, some measure of interfaith knowledge and understanding is valuable.[4]

Changes in Religious Demographics Lead to More Humanist Care Seekers

This is particularly important given the major changes in religious demographics seen across the western world in recent decades. Many western nations have seen a dramatic decrease in the proportion of the population which is religious, with younger generations much less likely to claim a religious identity and to participate in religious life than older generations. In the USA, while in 2007 only 16% of adults were religiously unaffiliated, that figure had risen to 29% by 2023-24, a striking increase of 81%.[5] These changes have been accompanied by an even sharper decline in belief in God. In the USA in 2007 only 5% of people said they "do not believe in God or a universal spirit". By 2023-24, that figure had more than tripled, to 16%.[6] While there is some evidence to suggest that the decline of religion in the USA has slowed, American religious life has already been transformed by these dramatic shifts in affiliation.[7]

A similar process of secularisation has long been underway in Western Europe. There, when compared with the USA, much smaller proportions of the population believe in God, see religion as important in their lives, or attend religious services at least monthly. While religiosity differs across the continent, the trend has been clear: Europeans are becoming less religious, such that Western

3 See Introduction to Chaplaincy Studies, Cobb et. al., *A Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies*, 2.
4 See Peng-Keller et al, "Spiritual Care at the Crossroads," 1031–46; Carey, "Inter-Faith Pastoral Care and the Role of the Health Care Chaplain," 21–32.
5 Pew Research Center. 2025. "2023-24 U.S. Religious Landscape Study Interactive Database."
6 Pew Research Center. 2025. "2023-24 U.S. Religious Landscape Study Interactive Database."
7 See Smith et al. "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off."

Europe has "become one of the world's most secular regions."[8] Similarly, belief in God has waned: Pew found in a 2018 study of 15 Western European countries that non-belief in God ranged from 9% in Portugal to 41% in Sweden, with a median of 26%.[9] These figures have almost certainly increased since 2018, and mean that, in Western Europe, the nonreligious make up one of the largest single "religious" demographics – compare, for instance, the 37% of people in the UK who said, in the 2021 Census, that they were nonreligious, to the 6.5% who said they were Muslim.[10] These major demographic changes all but necessitate that spiritual caregivers are increasingly likely to encounter nonbelievers and the nonreligious as they conduct their work.

A Significant Portion of Nonreligious People Hold Broadly "Humanist" Views and Values

Statistics such as these do not tell us what is in the minds of those who say they are nonreligious, however. Not all nonreligious people live according to broadly Humanist principles – many still believe in God or an afterlife, for instance, and some consider themselves religious. Is it possible, then, that while there are many more *nonreligious* people in the west today, there are not many more who take a broadly Humanist approach to life?

This is unlikely. Research suggests that a significant proportion of this growing nonreligious demographic does hold broadly Humanist values. A 2017 study on behalf of HumanistsUK (the national organisation promoting the rights and recognition of Humanists in the United Kingdom), for instance, found that while 44% of the British population "said that they did not consider themselves to belong to any particular religion", 22% of the British population might be termed, broadly, "Humanists". This figure which would make Humanists one of the largest religion and belief demographics in the country – as Humanists UK notes, "more than double the number of Catholics in the UK".[11]

Likewise Blankholm has found that there is a set of positive beliefs commonly held by those who call themselves atheists or agnostics.[12] Particularly, that atheists and agnostics in the USA are likely to be exclusive empiricists; that is, they believe that empirical means are the *only* reliable routes to knowledge and likely to believe in mortal finitude; that is, that this life is the only life we have, in addition to not believing or being uncertain about their belief in God.[13] This means that, as the number of people who identify as atheist and agnostic grows, it is likely that the number of those who embrace their positive corollaries, exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude, is growing too.

Research such as this suggests that large minorities of the USA and Western European countries could be considered, broadly speaking, Humanists. Given the rapid growth in the number of nonreligious people in western societies, and the concomitant growth of nonreligious and Humanist spiritual care seekers, it is important for spiritual carers to give sustained thought to the sorts of spiritual care nonreligious people need. This, in turn, necessitates a well-developed philosophy of Humanist spiritual care.

8 Pew Research Center. "Being Christian in Western Europe."
9 Pew Research Center. "Being Christian in Western Europe."
10 Office for National Statistics (ONS), *Religion, England and Wales.*
11 Humanists UK. "New Poll Shows One in Five Are Humanists and a Third Hold Humanist Beliefs."
12 See Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox*; Blankholm et. al., "The Beliefs of Nonbelievers and Agnostics," 27–49.
13 Blankholm et. al. "The Beliefs of Nonbelievers and Agnostics."

Humanists are Underrepresented in Spiritual Care Settings

We further need a clear articulation of principles to help spiritual caregivers meet the needs of Humanists because, while the proportion of Humanists in the west has rapidly grown, many pastoral caregiving systems suffer from a dearth of Humanist chaplains. While there are some exceptions (like the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, and Australia), in many countries there are hardly any Humanists offering pastoral and spiritual care to members of their community.

An example: in higher education in the UK, where I serve as a Lead Chaplain, there is a dramatic mismatch between the likely proportion of students who are Humanists and the number of Humanist chaplains. The Chaplains on Campus Report from 2019 showed that there were at that time only 16 Humanist chaplains in all UK universities in the whole country, or 1.6% of the total.[14] This compares with 49.8% of students whom, in the Advance HE Religion and Belief Report 2020, said they are not religious.[15] If Humanists UK's research into the beliefs of nonreligious people in the UK is at all accurate, we might expect that about half of nonreligious students are broadly humanists, or 25%. That almost *none* of 1032 chaplains identified by the Chaplains on Campus Report were Humanists, while perhaps a quarter of the student body holds broadly Humanist beliefs, suggests that Humanists are one of the most underserved worldview demographics in UK higher education.

This mismatch – between the percentage of care seekers who hold broadly Humanist views, and the percentage of Humanist chaplains who might serve them – exists in many other sectors in many different countries. Tens of thousands of UK military personnel say they are not religious, but there are only a handful of Humanist pastoral officers, all appointed very recently.[16]

In US healthcare – a mammoth sector which serves tens of millions of people each year – there are very few Humanist or nonreligious chaplains. One 2025 survey found less than 3%,[17] despite there being large and increasing numbers of people who hold humanistic beliefs.

This mismatch between the likely number of Humanists and the number of spiritual carers who serve them adds urgency to the task of providing a solid philosophical basis for Humanist spiritual care.

Humanist Spiritual Caregiving is Undertheorized

Despite this clear need, however, both what it means to be a Humanist spiritual caregiver and how to provide spiritual care to Humanists are severely undertheorized.[18] This is in-part due to the Christian-centric nature of much existing research. As Todd notes, "the knowledge base for chaplaincy developed during much of the twentieth century is shaped by Christian theology, specifically by pastoral and/or practical theology and the practice of theological reflection…But there remains some work to be done in developing a knowledge base that fully supports chaplaincy, as it responds to diverse spiritual needs."[19]

14 See Aune et al., *Chaplains on Campus.*
15 See Advance HE. *Religion and Belief.*
16 "Solace for Soldiers."
17 Wirpsa et al., "The Expanding Role of United States Healthcare Chaplains in Clinical Ethics." 4486–4511.
18 David Savage comprehensively addresses this challenge in *Non-Religious Pastoral Care*.
19 Todd, "Responding to Diversity, 98-99.

This gap in the literature is also the result of how the categories of "religious" and "nonreligious" tend to be understood. In the popular understanding, to be "religious" is to *be* something, while to be *non*-religious is to *not* be something. We speak of religious believers as opposed to nonbelievers, theists as opposed to atheists. To be religious is frequently constructed as normative and central, while to be nonreligious is constructed as abnormal and marginal – sometimes to the point that nonreligious people face forms of marginalisation and exclusion.[20]

Thus, Humanism is frequently understood by reference to what it is not and what it "lacks" - as a nonreligious philosophy which lacks belief in God – rather than by its positive existential and ethical commitments. This (what we might playfully call) "apophatic" approach to nonreligion and Humanism hampers attempts to create a positive Humanist philosophical basis for spiritual care.

Despite this, there *are* significant differences between a Humanist approach to the world and a religious one, and these differences matter to how Humanists might provide and be provided spiritual care. These differences are not always easy to characterise, as one participant in a study by Schuhmann et al avers:

> *"I do believe there is a difference between being a humanist and being a believer of whatever kind. It's hard to explain what is this difference as humanist values might strongly overlap, but from personal experience, it just is fundamentally different to perceive of the world as a place with or without higher powers at play"* [21]

In the rest of this chapter, I seek to describe "what is this difference", providing a model of distinctively Humanist spiritual care which distinguishes it from religious forms of spiritual care. To do so, I will employ Philosopher Martin Hägglund's concept of "secular faith" – particularly his recognition of the inherent importance of human finitude, the fragility of our projects, and the contingency of life and our resulting vulnerability to loss.

Finitude, Fragility, and Contingency in the work of Martin Hägglund

Philosopher Martin Hägglund, in his book *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, seeks to articulate the central differences between what he calls "secular faith" and "religious faith". He locates the difference in a "distinction between living on (prolonging a temporal life) and being eternal (absorbed in a timeless existence)".[22] This distinction has profound implications for how Humanists might seek to offer and receive spiritual care.

Religious faith is defined, argues Hägglund, by pursuit of the eternal: the goal is to *overcome* human finitude and fragility, either by achieving the afterlife (e.g. going to heaven) or by attaining a psychological state which enables us to transcend our earthly cares while we are alive (e.g. attaining nirvana). While religious traditions accept the fact that this life will end, and that our projects in this world are not guaranteed to succeed, they seek to overcome or undercut these facts through the

20 See Edgell et. al, "Atheists As 'Other';" Hammer et al., "Forms, Frequency, and Correlates of Perceived Anti-Atheist Discrimination;" Wright and Hyde, Religious Affiliation and Hiring Discrimination in the American South; Gervais et. al., "Global Evidence of Extreme Intuitive Moral Prejudice against Atheists."

21 Schuhmann et. al., Humanist Chaplaincy according to Northwestern European Humanist Chaplains, 216.

22 Hägglund, *This Life*, 42.

achievement of some eternal good. "All world religions", Hägglund writes, "…hold that the highest form of existence or the most desirable form of life is eternal rather than finite". The life we lead now is seen not primarily as an end in itself, to be pursued for its own sake, but as a gateway or trial which prepares us for something else. This life is viewed, implicitly or explicitly, "as a lower form of being", and is thus devalued.[23]

By contrast, **secular faith** is rooted in commitment to this life as an ultimate end. We engage in projects we know can fail, and dive into a life we know will end, not because we believe they will lead to something better beyond, but because we appreciate them in themselves. The goal is not to *overcome* our fragility and finitude, nor even to live well *despite* them, but to recognize that part of what gives our commitments and cares their value is *precisely that* they are fragile and finite.

Our relationships matter, Hägglund argues, *in part because* we don't have infinite time with those we love. Because our time is limited, how we choose to spend it actually matters, since each choice to spend time on one thing rather than another is the expenditure of a limited resource. If we commit decades of our life to one partner, we cannot spend that same time with another: every choice regarding how to spend our time is an irrevocable expenditure of the very stuff of which our lives are made. Were we to have infinite time, our choice to spend time on one thing over another would be literally meaningless, because we would not be giving up anything by making that choice.

Our projects matter, Hägglund argues, *in part because* without investing time and effort into them they will not come to fruition. Whatever we choose to do with our lives – build a career, start a family, learn a skill, tend a garden – we need to continue to dedicate time to those pursuits if we want them to flourish. Our projects depend on our continued commitment and are not fated to succeed. Were our projects guaranteed to succeed in the end, regardless of what we choose to do, we would not need to sustain them with our own effort, and therefore any energy we put toward them would be pointless.

The fragility of our projects leads to a particular approach to the vulnerability of human life: we know the things we commit our time to might not come to fruition, but that very realisation gives meaning to our commitment. While in many religious traditions, he argues, "the ultimate goal is to be absolved from vulnerability", in fact our vulnerability to loss is essential to the "care that animates our lives". From the perspective of one who holds a "secular faith", "Suffering and loss are not merely necessary steps on the way to bliss or inescapable, unfortunate conditions; they are intrinsic parts of what makes life worth living".[24]

Hägglund's point here is subtle, but powerful. He is not saying that we should desire a life of suffering, nor precisely that suffering makes life meaningful. Rather, he is saying that a life in which we were not vulnerable to suffering would not be meaningful, and therefore the possibility that we might suffer is a necessary condition of a meaningful life. Vulnerability is a precondition for meaning. One who holds a "secular faith", then, does not seek "to overcome this vulnerability but to recognize that it is an essential part of why our lives *matter* and why we care".[25]

Finally, Hägglund's characterisation of "secular faith" is deeply committed to the idea of human life as contingent and undetermined. This is less explicitly stated in *This Life*, but becomes clear

23 Hägglund, *This Life*, 6.
24 Hägglund, *This Life*, 47-48.
25 Hägglund, *This Life*, 48.

throughout the work. For instance, when writes "we are free because we are able to ask ourselves what we *ought* to do with our time",[26] and when he suggests that "Neither social norms nor natural instincts…can by themselves determine what I do",[27] he is committed to the ideas that 1) human beings have real, meaningful choices and 2) that our lives do not accord to some grand plan. Within Hägglund's model of "secular faith" is the idea that the answers to life's questions are not given, and that there is no Plan which governs our existence. Our lives are the result of our own decisions, and also subject to the random contingencies which may befall us.

So, in Hägglund's view, "secular faith" is distinguished from religious faith in the recognition that human life is truly final; in the belief that our projects are fragile and need continued effort to maintain, so we are therefore inherently vulnerable to pain and suffering in a way which cannot be "overcome" without undermining the very intelligibility of our lives; and in its appreciation of the contingency of human existence, which does not accord with any divine plan.

Hägglund offers these considerations in an attempt to provide a comprehensive philosophical framework for secular life, but here I want to draw out some *practical implications* of his view for those offering pastoral and spiritual care to Humanists communities. For if Hägglund has correctly identified some key distinctions between secular and religious ways of navigating life, pastoral caregivers who seek to support those who have a secular, rather than religious, faith should ensure that how they offer care in a way which honours these distinctions.

"Secular Faith" and Spiritual Care

The Challenge of Finitude

The first challenge which faces Humanist spiritual carers is the challenge of finitude: how can we offer succour and support in the face of irrevocable loss? To return to the vignette with which I opened this chapter, Ted is dead, and he is never coming back: this is a harsh truth. Harsher still, perhaps, is the Humanist belief that he has not gone to a better place, and that there is no hope for an afterlife reunion where he and his friends can say all the things they left unsaid in life. For Ted, life is over – and they will not be reunited. His loss is irredeemable. For his friends and family, however, life goes on, and the only way to "overcome" the suffering caused by his loss is to come to terms with it and, somehow, weave it into the tapestry of their lives

While this seems to many religious people a bleak perspective, with appropriate support it need not be. Many traditional religious believers worry that, without a redemptive narrative which "overcomes" death, Humanists must inevitably surrender to **despair**. And, indeed, this can happen. The death of a loved one – especially a violent, shocking, or early death – can cause Humanists to confront directly their own mortality and feel powerless and hopeless. These feelings are, to an extent, warranted: we are in the final analysis powerless to stop death and have no hope of an afterlife.

Hägglund's understanding of "secular faith" gives us other, more pastorally powerful options, however. First, recall what he tells us about the importance of finitude for a coherent conception of

26 Hägglund, *This Life*, 12.
27 Hägglund, *This Life*, 196.

life. An eternal life, for Humanists, is not only unevidenced but undesirable. We should not want to live forever, because if our time is unlimited our choices about how to spend our time would be meaningless, because nothing would be given up in the choice to spend time with one person over another. This does not make death something to be wished for, but it at least recontextualises death. Instead of something which denudes life of meaning, it is one of the essential conditions for living a meaningful life.

This realisation can lead to a healthier response to finitude, which I call **treasuring**. Instead of succumbing to despair when faced with the death of others, or when contemplating our own death, we can see in our finitude a charge to treasure our finite time. The time Ted chose to spend with his friends and family mattered precisely because he was "spending" a limited resource. Likewise, the time friends and family chose to spend with him represented a sacrifice of their limited stock of life, an active decision to prioritise him over other ways they could spend their time. Thus the limited time everyone had with Ted can be seen as something to be treasured in memory, a representation of the fact that they genuinely valued each other.

Furthermore, this approach can encourage the bereaved to treasure their remaining, limited life. Instead of being a cause to give up on our lives in the face of our inevitable death, Ted's end can serve as a spur to recognise our finitude and reevaluate our choices – his finitude can be a reminder of our own. In this way, the death of a loved one can serve, rather than to draw our mind to the eternal and to things and places beyond this life, to reengage us *with* this life.

A skilled spiritual carer can bring this out by emphasising all the ways Ted had chosen to spend his time, and encouraging mourners to treasure the time they had spent with him. The dedication Ted showed to his work as an auto mechanic was a representation of what he treasured, as was the time he spent with his four nephews. Humanist funerals and memorials often encapsulate this response to the loss of a life, and Ted's was no exception. Friends and family gathered at his favourite bar, rather than at a religious sire, because it was a place which mattered to him, a place where he chose to spend his time – it represented what he treasured, and what they treasured about him.

The Challenge of Fragility

Ted had unfinished business when he died, especially so since his life was taken suddenly. Unlike those of us lucky enough to retire and "wind down" our lives, his was cut off mid-stream, half-repaired vehicles left waiting in vain for the return of his wrench. But while Ted's death was unusually sudden, almost all of us will die with projects left to complete, and much of what we have built in life will begin to fall apart once we are no longer around to sustain it. This is the spectre of **fragility**: the fact that, as Hägglund reminds us, everything we care about requires our active investment if it is to be sustained, and is therefore fragile.

The challenge of fragility can provoke a response of **surrender**, in its negative sense of "giving up" rather than the more positive sense of "coming to terms with something". "If we cannot commit ourselves to anything indefinitely," we might find ourselves asking, and if everything we care about will eventually fall apart, what is the point of committing ourselves to anything at all?" Long-term projects, in particular, may seem pointless because they can always be derailed by one of the contingencies of life, and because we never have a guarantee of success.

We might also be confronted, in the face of the collapse of something important to us, with a sense that our lives are meaningless. If the things we put our care into can be destroyed because

of factors outside of our control, what is the point of investing our energy into them at all? An especially powerful version of this objection comes from many theologians and apologists, who aver that, under a Humanist view, none of our projects can possibly matter at all because they have no *ultimate* Meaning. To them, unless things are destined to turn toward good, there is no point in giving human effort to anything. Surrender is the only reasonable response: if everything is going to break in the end, why not let it break now?

A more positive response available to the Humanist is one of **commitment**. We might reflect that very fact that our projects require our effort to maintain them, and that we *do* maintain them nonetheless, is a reflection of how much they matter to us. The fragility of something can be a spur to cherish it and commit to keeping it well, rather than an encouragement simply to allow it to crumble. We understand this instinctively: we usually do not say, of a garden we have tended for years, "It will all collapse when I die, so what's the point of tending it?" Rather, we commit to the project because it has inherent meaning for us, and we might even hope that the care we take with our garden will inspire others to a similar commitment.

We can help care seekers recommit to life after a loss by reminding them of the things they cherish and have chosen to commit to before. This, perhaps, is what Ted's friends and family were doing when they installed a memorial the auto repair shop where he had worked: a wrench they had all signed, hanging in the window. The wrench was a symbol of the care he took with his work – something many remarked upon at his memorial, and which characterised him in the eyes of his community. Yes, it was true that without his care those vehicles would have to be repaired by someone else, but that did not invalidate the care he had put into them. Rather, it was an inspiration to others to put the same amount of care into their own projects: Ted's death spurred recommitment rather than surrender.

The Challenge of Contingency

Finally, the challenge of **contingency**. Ted's death, from a Humanist perspective, was not preordained. It was not part of any divine plan, and had no capital-P Purpose behind it. It may have been the result of the conscious decisions of an individual, but it was not written into the fabric of the universe that the murder should occur, nor does it have any cosmic meaning, nor any "Lesson" it was designed to teach. This is because, consistent with Hägglund's appreciation of the essentially contingent nature of human experience, Humanists tend to believe the causes of our suffering are proximate and natural, and that there is no "bigger picture" into which the pieces of our lives neatly fit.

The inherent contingency of life can lead Humanists to respond to loss with a feeling of helplessness. If bad things can happen to us for no reason, then what is to prevent bad things from happening to us in the future? If human beings are a cosmic accident, if our lives are constantly affected by forces beyond our and anyone's control, and there is no plan into which our lives fit, in what sense can we think we are in control of our own lives? Do our choices really matter if our very lives can be upended by random chance?

Consider Ted's murder. From a Humanist perspective, Ted's death did not have an ordained "Reason" behind it. Perhaps Ted was shot because someone chose to kill him, and specifically him – in which case the cause comes down to whatever it was in their relationship which made the shooter want to kill him. Perhaps there was nothing more to be said than that Ted got unlucky: he was in

the wrong place at the wrong time, and was caught up in something that had nothing to do with him. Sometimes terrible things just happen, and the inability to articulate a reason why something has happened can cause us to feel helpless.

By the same token Ted's death could have been avoided or prevented. Had Ted left work early, or had his killer chosen a different mechanic's shop to visit, he might still be alive today. This is a realisation which can *also* prompt helplessness, because while things *could* have been different, in this case they *were* not. The possibility that things might have been better can make us feel that our suffering is especially unfair.

Yet even here the Humanist can respond in a different way: we can see in the very contingency of life our capacity for **agency**. While contingency and agency may seem to be at odds, the human capacity for choice is inherent to the Humanist understanding of life as beset by contingency. To say "Things were not preordained to happen this way" is precisely to say "Things could have been different." The Humanist belief that our lives are not part of some cosmic plan thus leaves us vulnerable to contingency, but also opens a space for human action. This is true even is some of our suffering is the result of random occurrences, for even then we still have the capacity to choose our response.

Therefore, to help Humanists respond to the challenge of contingency spiritual caregivers should avoid any narratives that suggest there might be a redemptive or any other Purpose behind their suffering. When working with members of my congregation after Ted's murder I wanted to help them come to terms with the fact that 1) sometimes people do bad things to each other for bad reasons and 2) that they didn't have to find any reason to be content with this. This means that anger, shock, bewilderment etc. are all perfectly legitimate reactions, and need not be squared with any redemptive idea. Sometimes, simply validating people's right to feel angry and confused begins to help them come to terms with what has happened.

Crucially, though, the Humanist rejection of the idea that suffering has a Purpose does not mean that we think life is purposeless. Rather, it means we place the responsibility for the creation of purpose and meaning on our own shoulders – again, the agency is ours. Thus the pastoral encounter can be seen as an opportunity to empower others to make sense of suffering, to reclaim their agency from the sense of helplessness which otherwise might overwhelm them.

Is Any of This Distinctively "Humanist"?

One final consideration: religious readers may bristle at my description of the above as a distinctively Humanist approach to spiritual care. "Religious spiritual carers," they might aver, "employ many of the same ideas and approaches in their work." I do not disagree, and indeed have observed many of my religious colleagues do many of the things I suggest above. This might lead us to conclude that what I have described is not distinctively Humanist at all.

I have two responses to this. The first recalls one of the important findings about Joseph Blankholm regarding the distinctive positive beliefs of nonreligious people: nonreligious belief systems can be characterised, at least in part, by what they reject or proscribe as well as by what they embrace. When noting that many atheists and agnostics are what he calls "exclusive empiricists", he points out that while this belief community is not the only one to prize science and an empirical approach to knowledge, they are distinct in that they believe, broadly speaking, that science and reason are

the *only* secure routes to knowledge. While religious believers might also consider revelation or scripture to be a source of knowledge alongside science, atheists and agnostics, by and large, do not. That exclusion of other sources of knowledge gives their community a distinctive ethos.

Similarly, spiritual care for those with "secular faith" can be distinguished by what it proscribes. It would be pastorally inappropriate to include references to god or the afterlife when working with those who do not believe in those concepts, not only because that approach simply does not match the beliefs of the care seeker, but also because an appeal to the eternal or infinite actively undermines, in the view those with "secular faith", one of the very bases for life's meaning and significance. Indeed, the model I've provided can help caregivers understand why some Humanists respond so very negatively to religious approaches: they not only introduce views they disagree with to the pastoral encounter, but risk undermining the very system of values which underpins their life.

There is something deeper to say here, though. Hägglund's philosophical approach seeks to reveal the essentially secular nature of the concerns which animate our lives. He argues (persuasively, in my view) that religious conceptions of life which seek to "overcome" suffering and death through an appeal to the eternal exist in inherent tension with the way we all must live this, finite life. Through analysis of the writing of religious authors such as CS Lewis and Augustine, he shows how this tension continually pulls religious thinkers back to this, secular, life even as they seek to overcome it.

This leads to a provocative possibility for future research. While Humanist spiritual care is often conceived as the secularisation of an inherently religious practice, perhaps we could instead see religious spiritual care as the religiofication of an essentially *secular* practice. Perhaps *all* spiritual care is fundamentally *secular* – as in rooted in "secular faith", and the concerns which arise from that – and thus Humanist spiritual care is thus not a special case of spiritual care in general but the basis of it all.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

I have sought in this chapter to articulate a distinctively Humanist vision of spiritual care, based primarily on the version of Humanism described by Martin Hägglund as "secular faith". What I have provided is necessarily a sketch, and the start of a larger project. Human beings face other challenges that the three I have explored, and there are many healthy responses to those challenges beyond the ones I have suggested.

I hope, nonetheless, the model I have presented is helpful and has wide application. While I have used Ted's death as a vehicle to explore different potential responses to suffering, none of the approaches I describe are of use only in situations of bereavement. The challenges of finitude, fragility, and contingency are, as Hägglund shows, inherent to the human condition and are in play whenever we commit ourselves to anything. We *always* have to deal with the fact that our life is finite, that our projects could fail, and that we are beset by contingency.

When a relationship breaks down, part of the pain is that we had invested some of our limited time in that relationship – time we cannot get back. The future we had imagined and planned for will never be. And, perhaps, situations outside our control are partly responsible. When we become

sick, part of the suffering is that our sickness prevents us from spending time pursuing our desires and prevents us engaging fulling in our projects, increasing the potential for failure. When we are anxious about an upcoming exam or presentation at work, it is in part because of the time we have invested in securing success, the care we have for the endeavour we have chosen, and the worry that our plans will be derailed by outside forces.

Every day, in all our affairs, we all have to choose between despair and treasuring; between surrender and commitment; between helplessness and agency. To choose the latter in each case is to respond to suffering by digging into this, secular, life – and it is the responsibility of Humanist spiritual caregivers to help people do so.

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Essay 2

Humanism as a Critical, Entangled, and Inclusive Worldview

Carmen Schuhmann, Joanna Wojtkowiak, and Gaby Jacobs

Abstract

The central question in this essay is how to understand contemporary humanism as a worldview. Three developments in humanistic thought – towards critical, entangled, and inclusive humanism – are presented as guidelines for outlining a dynamic, contextualized, and critical view of contemporary humanism. This view critically engages with work by Dutch authors who have, over the last decades, theorized humanism as a worldview, in particular work by Jaap van Praag and Peter Derkx. Furthermore, as worldviews comprise an understanding of spirituality - an understanding of goodness that people may connect with, even in the face of severely disorienting experiences – the notion of humanist spirituality is elaborated on, on the basis of philosophical ideas by Iris Murdoch, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hannah Arendt.

Introduction

Humanism is a term with many different, sometimes conflicting, meanings. In fact, the term did not emerge until the 18th century and is often used post hoc to describe historical phenomena which, when they occurred, were labeled differently (Derkx, 2011). The question of what kind of phenomena the term humanism refers to is in itself a topic of discussion:

> *Humanism appears as an ideology, a theology, an anthropology, a philosophy, a psychology, a politics … a noun, an adjective, a verb. In short, it is many things and no single thing. There seems no definitive reply to the question: What is humanism? (Radest, 2014, p. 7)*

These days, humanism is often understood as a worldview: "Humanism has been variously termed a 'worldview', an 'approach to life', a 'lifestance', a 'way of life', and a 'meaning frame'" (Copson, 2015, p. 5). Pinn (2014) refers to humanism as a "life orientation" (p. 33) which "like those things we recognize easily as religious traditions, seeks to provide a systematic approach to life" (p. 33). Derkx (1993) distinguishes three main features of Western European humanism which point to different facets of humanism as a worldview: 1) Humanism as formation to higher humanity. This refers to the tradition of *Bildung* and the belief in the potential of human beings for development, resilience and flourishing. 2) Humanism as a moral and political aspiration, directed at a caring and just society that is characterized by supporting human flourishing for all, freedom, peace, and

recognition of human dignity. 3) Humanism as an 'art of living' in which the focus is on the desire to enjoy and share things of beauty, and esthetic experiences are seen as important entry points to living a good life.

In this chapter, we develop a view of contemporary humanism as a worldview in the sense of a framework that may provide people with orientation in life, in particular in disorienting situations and circumstances (see also Chapter 1). Worldviews accommodate experiences of severe disorientation by providing some kind of transcendence: a sense of goodness 'beyond' the severely disorienting situations and circumstances people may find themselves in.[28] Worldviews also function as sources of faith – faith that some good remains, even in the face of extreme adversity (Tillich, 1957). Any worldview may thus be seen as comprising an understanding of spirituality: an understanding of what is ultimate goodness - goodness that involves transcendence and inspires faith - and how to connect with it.[29] Following Smart (1999), we may distinguish seven dimensions of worldviews: 1. practices which support or express people's connection with the good (*ritual/practical*); 2. formal ideas about reality that underlie the visions of a good life making up a worldview (*doctrinal/philosophical*); 3. (meta)narratives or myths expressing these visions (*mythic/narrative*) ; 4. a sense of how the good is experienced and what emotional states are involved (*experiential/emotional*); 6. ethical notions that prescribe good (versus bad) behavior and action (*ethical/legal*); 7. institutions and communities in which visions of the good making up a worldview are upheld, consolidated, practiced and discussed (*organizational/social*); and 8. material objects like buildings or works of art that are seen as symbolizations or manifestations of the good (*material/artistic*). So, worldviews offer a variety of modes of meaning making in the context of negative or positive experiences of disorientation, for instance by means of rituals, core texts or meaningful objects.

When outlining a view of humanism as a worldview, we draw in particular from humanistic studies, a transdisciplinary academic field in which humanism is both a source of inspiration and an object of study (see Introduction to the volume). In humanistic studies, critically looking at humanism goes hand in hand with developing and renewing views of humanism. From this perspective, critiquing humanism does therefore not imply that humanism needs to be discarded. In contrast, over the last decades humanism has sometimes been declared outdated, dead, or dangerous on the basis of claims that it promotes a Westernized notion of 'the human' and an anthropocentric view of human life, contributing to many of the problems we struggle with today, like colonialism, racism, and the ecological crisis.[30] Still, when using humanistic perspectives - for instance, as we do in this book, to better understand contemporary chaplaincy - we need to acknowledge that these perspectives are contested. In our explorations of contemporary humanism, we therefore draw from the following three recent developments in humanist thought, all of which address critical notes on humanism: 1. *critical humanism*, which addresses the criticism

28 In religions, such transcendence often involves a move beyond worldly affairs toward a supernatural, eternal world.

29 This notion of spirituality is grounded in the understanding of the 'spiritual' as described in Chapter 1. In Chapter 3, we show how this understanding of the 'spiritual' character of orientation processes connects (and is in line) with the consensus definition of spirituality by Puchalski et al. (2009) which is usually used in relation to spiritual care.

30 For instance, Levinas (1972/2003) speaks about "the crisis of humanism" in view of the atrocities and cruelty that people time and again prove to be capable of (p. 127); or we may think of radical feminist thought which criticizes the idea of 'the human' implicated in Western humanism, where the sovereign notion of 'reason' - a masculine, white and Western ideal - is seen as the standard for what counts as human and as the motor for human development. As a response, feminist and anti-racist movements developed their own forms of anti- or neo-humanism (Braidotti, 2017).

of universalism and essentialism in humanism; 2. *entangled humanism*, which addresses the criticism of seeing human beings as decontextualized individuals, separate from each other and 'masters over nature'; and 3. *inclusive humanism*, which addresses the criticism of humanism as anti-religious and as complicit in the disenchantment of the modern world. We start the chapter by briefly introducing each of these humanisms.

While developing an understanding of humanism as a (multi-stranded) worldview, we build on the pioneering work of van Praag (1982), a key figure in Dutch humanism (see Introduction to the volume). He emphasized that, as a worldview, humanism needs to be more than a set of abstract beliefs and values: it needs to provide motivation and inspiration to actual people in their actual situations, in particular supporting them to contribute to society.[31] We also elaborate on the question of how to understand humanist spirituality. In particular, we explore what notion of transcendence can be found in humanism, and what inspires humanist faith in the face of severely disorienting experiences.

Humanisms: critical, entangled, inclusive

A starting point for identifying a common core in the various appearances of humanism is to consider related terms like 'humaneness', 'humanity', and 'humanization', which are evaluative words, indicating an aspiration or a task that human beings should pursue in this world. "The human so understood is of and in the world" (Pinn, 2014, p. 34), and any appearance of humanism comprises a value-laden project of engaging with the world in an attempt to promote humanization and to counter dehumanization. Such projects acknowledge on the one hand the creative and moral potential of human beings which allows them to strive for humanization, and on the other hand the fallibility of human beings which, time and again, results in dehumanizing behavior and societal or institutional structures.

It is precisely because of human fallibility that appearances of humanism, as human-made ideas, projects and practices, need to be critically assessed as to the question of what notion of 'being human' underpins striving for humaneness and humanization. The three developments described below, towards critical, entangled, and inclusive humanism, each of which address a certain element of existing criticism on humanism, allow us to critically assess appearances of humanism throughout this chapter.

Critical humanism

A main point of criticism that humanism nowadays faces is that it propagates an essentialist view of human nature that is rooted in Western Enlightenment and reflects a Western-centric view of being human. Humanism thus confirms existing power structures and contributes to marginalization and oppression. Addressing this criticism requires a contextualized and multiple understanding of

31 For van Praag, understanding humanism as a worldview was especially important with a view to his efforts to establish humanist chaplaincy (see Introduction to the volume).

humanism, in which Western Enlightenment humanism is just one form of humanism. The fact that humanism is so often identified with this form of humanism in itself reflects how power operates in relation to establishing what humanism 'is' and what it 'is not'. Plummer (2021) elaborates on the notion of 'critical humanism' to allow a variety of humanisms into the picture and counter parochial understandings of humanism:

> *Different humanisms bring contested claims about what it means to be human. These change over history as different (usually powerful) groups make different claims. Critical humanism engages with (and tells the stories of) the perpetual narrative reconstructions and conflicts over what it means to be human. (p. 5)*

Critical humanism thus comprises non-essentialist views of humans living in relation to dynamic socio-political, cultural factors and power structures. Examples of critical humanism are Frantz Fanon's (1952/2008) "new humanism" (p. vii), Mahatma Ghandi's nonviolent humanism (van Goelst Meijer, 2015), and African American humanism (Pinn, 2012). Critical humanism is never 'finished' as "it is an ever-changing endeavor to rethink and remake a narrative of world humanity" (Plummer, 2021, p. 12). Always again, the critical question of which voices are not heard in this narrative and which lives do not fit within it needs to be posed. A similar move away from essentialist humanism is proposed by Wentzer and Mattingly (2018) when they advocate for a 'new humanism': "Such a humanism highlights the ambition to approach the human through its complex and multifocal variations. It takes its point of departure in real people living real and messy lives in their sociocultural and natural ecologies" (p. 146).

Entangled humanism

A second, often-repeated critique of humanism concerns its individualism and anthropocentrism, which is rooted in a view of human beings as separate from other life forms and nature in general. The conception of human domination over nature plays a key role in major problems like climate change, environmental pollution and loss of biodiversity. Connolly (2017) proposes entangled humanism, a form of humanism with a different view on the world and human beings:

> *Today it is perhaps wise to try to transfigure the old humanisms that have played important roles in Euro-American states into multiple affirmations of entangled humanism in a fragile world. . . . One such transfiguration of humanism acknowledges a world composed of innumerable entanglements. (p. 168)*

This links in with critical humanism; as Connolly points out, outside of the Western world we can find various traditions which have embraced an entangled view of the world for centuries. In entangled humanism, human beings are no longer seen as having a special place in, or rather above, nature, but as entangled with other life forms and with planetary forces and processes. Even though the focus here is on the entanglement of human beings with the non-human, entanglement also applies to the interpersonal domain, leading to a radically relational perspective on human beings instead of an individualistic one.

Vignette 5 introduces humanist chaplain Lilian who leads group meetings for climate activists. Her humanist worldview strongly resonates with entangled humanism: "In her work, Lilian is inspired by an ecohumanist perspective on life on this planet: she sees the value of all life forms, and sees human beings as a humble part of and connected to all life on earth. She also draws from indigenous views on land and water." Lilian underscores the importance of these indigenous views as follows: "There is acknowledgment of what nature has to teach us and what it has done for us, showing a reciprocal and interdependent relationship with nature."

Furthermore, in an entangled perspective, humanism should not be equated with secularism or an antireligious stance: "Some variants of entangled humanism may embrace a god or gods of entanglement; some may be nontheistic; some may pursue an immanent divine, and some the theme of an immanent naturalism" (Connolly, 2017, p. 170). Entangled humanism is therefore linked to inclusive humanism, which we introduce next.

Inclusive humanism

A third point of critique that contemporary humanism needs to address is the reproach that it opposes religion. There certainly is a link between secularization and humanism: according to Taylor (2007), the change in the West after the late Middle Ages from a world in which it is almost impossible not to believe in God to a world in which belief in God is optional is intimately linked with the rise of 'exclusive humanism'. Exclusive humanism refers to "a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything beyond this flourishing" (Taylor, 2007, p. 18). While in the pre-modern, enchanted world, people generally had a 'porous' sense of self, open and vulnerable to forces beyond the human realm, the modern disenchanted world is linked with a 'buffered' sense of self which is central in exclusive humanism: "This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meaning of things for it" (Taylor, 2007, p. 38).

Derkx (2015) emphasizes that what is crucial in humanism is not 'exclusivity' but openness, dialogue and tolerance. Embracing humanism should never lead to intolerance towards others, including religious people. Derkx proposes to "speak of 'inclusive humanism' by means of which humanism is conceived as an open, dialogical, and tolerant meaning frame found not only outside churches, mosques, and the like, but also inside them" (p. 429). Inclusive humanism acknowledges that values which are central in humanism may also be found in other worldviews, and vice versa. It also acknowledges that there are ethical limits to the perspective of the buffered self, and thus to exclusive humanism, as this may entail closing oneself off from dialogue in order to hold on to a sense of invulnerability.

Humanism as a worldview

In the Netherlands, since the middle of the twentieth century, there have been efforts to systematically develop humanism as a worldview. The main initiator of these efforts was the Dutch humanist van Praag (1982), who played a key role both in providing a theoretical underpinning of humanism as a worldview and in founding humanist organizations aimed at providing people, interested in humanism, with inspiration, and supporting them to put humanism into practice (see Introduction to the volume). It is mainly due to his tireless efforts that the first humanist chaplains were employed in the Netherlands in the 1950s (see Schuhmann et al., 2021). We outline a view of humanism as a contemporary worldview by first presenting key ideas by van Praag. We then describe ideas about humanism by Derkx (2014) and by Alma and Anbeek (2013), all of whom build on the foundational work of van Praag. In our discussion of these ideas, we apply the perspectives of critical, entangled, and inclusive humanism that were introduced earlier.

Humanist postulates

When elaborating on humanism as a worldview, van Praag (1982) used a method of phenomenological reduction to figure out the core ideas that lie at the root of all appearances of humanism. He calls these core ideas 'humanist postulates', formulating both anthropological postulates which are core ideas about human beings, and ontological postulates, core ideas about the world. Humanist postulates underpin "a humanist orientation pattern from which humanist views unfold themselves, as it were, of their own accord" (van Praag, 1982, p. 58). The postulates thus capture the view of reality that underpins humanist orienting frameworks. Two examples of the anthropological humanist postulates are the postulate of equality - despite their differences, all human beings are equal in dignity; and the postulate of rationality - even though much in life and the world cannot be grasped rationally, human beings have the ability to use reason, in particular in relation to moral evaluations.[32]

If we look at van Praag's (1982) work from the perspective of critical humanism, we see that he does understand humanism as a worldview which may appear in a variety of ways. He also emphasizes that his humanist postulates are not set in stone; they provide a theoretical model that always again needs to be reviewed and revised on the basis of real experiences of real people. Furthermore, van Praag has an eye for the limited scope of his historical explorations of humanism, stating that he restricts himself to Western humanist traditions only and, because of his lack of expertise on the matter, excludes non-Western traditions that might also deserve a place in the story of humanism. However, he does not elaborate on the questions of what it means that non-Western voices are left out of his account of humanism, and how humanist ideas and practices are entangled

32 The remaining anthropological postulates state that human beings are natural (they are part of the world); related (they are interconnected and independent), and free (free – even when possibilities are limited in the given circumstances, they (need to) make choices among these possibilities). The ontological postulates state that the world 1) can be experienced through the senses; 2) exists, not as something 'out there' but as something that is inseparable from human experience; 3) is complete, in the sense that it does not refer to something outside or beyond it; 4) is accidental (it has no pre-given purpose); 5) is dynamic. See van Praag (1982) for further explanation of these postulates.

in power structures that have contributed to or are contributing to marginalization and oppression.

Furthermore, the perspective of critical humanism leads us to question the focus on equality and reason in van Praag's (1982) postulates. These can easily lead to exclusion and marginalization of those who cannot take part equally in society, because the 'right to be different' and make autonomous decisions is attributed to individuals who are first equated as rational, independently judging, masculine beings. This still does not allow the other to name their own experiences and desires and to articulate their uniqueness (see also Kunneman, 1993).

Taking the perspective of entangled humanism also leads to questions about the postulate of reason. Even though the postulate does leave space for that which cannot be understood rationally, it does take the rational as the dominant view. From the perspective of entangled humanism, humans are entangled in a material and social world. They have a body and they are *embodied* in a natural and material world with others. Drawing from the work of the French feminist philosopher Irigaray (1990), this embodiment can itself be seen as an essential source of freedom for making choices, and for an open and equal communicative relationality. Moreover, while humans have the strength or capacity to reason, questions of meaning are strongly guided by emotions. Emotions tell us when something 'doesn't feel right' or when we are immensely happy. Emotions, while often being underrepresented in research on or the conceptualization of processes of meaning, are significant in the search for meaning (Nussbaum, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016; Park, 2010) and in moral life (Haidt, 2001). Anthropologist Rosaldo (1984) frames it as follows: "Feeling is forever given shape through thought and . . . thought is laden with emotional meaning. . . . Emotions are thoughts somehow 'felt' in flushes, pulses, 'movements' in our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin. They are embodied thoughts" (p. 143). The relation between emotion and cognition is established here through embodiment: feelings contain thoughts and thoughts contain feelings.

In Vignette 2, humanist chaplain Nathan, who works in a care home for elderly people, expresses how, in his view on life, the senses are an important pathway to meaning making. Working with people who sometimes struggle to tell coherent stories, he follows this pathway to connect with clients and to create space for embodied meaningful experiences, for instance, by listening to music together: "Music contains slices of life that we can feel and recognize together. Listening together, sometimes holding hands, I see our shared human vulnerability. I might not know exactly what they feel or think then. But I know there is something known to both of us, intuitively, in that moment."

From the perspective of inclusive humanism, we see that van Praag sometimes seems to set humanism and religion against each other in order to clarify humanist positions, for instance when he states that "as opposed to the traditional forms of the major religions, humanism does not provide definitive answers to fundamental questions" (van Praag, 1982, p. 12). However, he also writes about religious humanism, and describes the affinity between religion and humanism when it comes to certain experiences:

> *This idea of being related to the whole of existence leads us to consider a religious feeling that also occurs in humanist expression. . . . One should think of one of the original meanings of the word religere, in the sense of being awed. What it means is that people can stand in awe of the world and realize that they don't have it in their pocket. (van Praag, 1982, p. 128)*

Characterizing contemporary humanism

Building, amongst others, on the work by van Praag, Derkx (2014) proposes a concise characterization of humanism as a category of meaning frames that fulfill four criteria – or 'tenets', as Derkx usually calls them. Derkx describes meaning frames as follow: "A meaning frame provides you with a sense of direction, stability, identity, continuity, and with criteria to evaluate situations and one's life course" (Derkx, 2014, p. 49). They are what we call orienting frameworks, as explained in Chapter 1.[33]

The first tenet that Derkx (2014) proposes is epistemological in nature. It states that *any ontological or normative view, in particular any meaning frame, any view of reality, any vision of the good, any worldview, is a context-dependent human construct* (see Derkx, 2014, p. 49). In particular, meaning frames – religions included - are historically and socio-culturally situated. They do not express final, eternal, unchanging, supra-historical ideas, and are open to doubt, questioning, and revision:

> *Embedded in this tenet is recognition of historical consciousness, human fallibility, and experience of doubt. It also draws from a critical and dialogical attitude and requires a willingness to account for one's views and actions with openness, tolerance, and an appreciation of diversity. (Derkx, 2014, p. 49)*

Looking from the perspective of critical humanism, we find that this criterion counters essentialist accounts of human nature in humanism, as there is no final such account. We also see that meaning frames cannot be considered in isolation from questions of power and social justice, questions of how power structures prevent people and groups to orient towards certain visions of the good that are available and reachable for others.[34]

The three remaining criteria are normative in nature. The second humanist criterion mentions human dignity, one of the central values in humanism: "*all human beings should regard and treat each other as equals, that is, as equal in human dignity*" (Derkx, 2014, p. 51). This implies that "humanism conflicts in principle with all forms of discrimination—racism, sexism, ageism, and discrimination based on sexual orientation" (Derkx, 2014, p. 51). From the perspective of critical humanism, however, we see that any notion of human dignity already entails a view of what it means to be human which may leave out easily overheard voices, thus increasing marginalization, as we already remarked in relation to the anthropological humanist postulate of equality formulated by van Praag. We therefore add that regarding and treating each other as equals involves constant critical questioning of how privilege and power operate in the specific situation at hand, and, more generally, in the story of humanism.

This tenet also points to another important humanist value, that of self-determination. This means "that each person is best positioned to assess and determine how he/she should live" (Derkx, 2014, p. 51). The perspective of entangled humanism provides a caveat here. Self-determination should not be understood in terms of striving to cut oneself off from the influence of others or from one's environment – which is impossible in light of entanglement - but in terms of acknowledging

33 These four criteria - clarified and slightly reworked – form the heart of the 'humanistic perspectives' that we adopt throughout this book.

34 See also Chapter 1, where we describe the socio-cultural dimension of orientation processes.

that, for all human beings, at all times, living their life starts from their unique, embodied position in the world, a position that no one can take for them.

Vignette 6 shows how humanist chaplain Noor, who works in the military, takes the idea of self-determination as the starting point in her work: "I help the person in front of me figure out what they do, feel, choose, think as they search for the right path. I do not claim to know what path they should take. We are all humans trying to find our way, and instead of seeing a uniform, I ask about the person in the uniform that I encounter and try to offer a landing spot for them to rest and reroute. Humanist institutions, doctrines, and so on are of less interest to me than the very practice of humans showing genuine interest in each other: 'who are you, what matters to you, how can I help you along?'" This statement also seems to reflect a relational view of self-determination: we find out who we are and what matters to us by speaking with someone who shows genuine interest.

The third humanist criterion that Derkx (2014) proposes is the one that is probably most often associated with humanism, as it is related to autonomy and to the capacity of thought. Derkx calls this the principle of self-fulfillment and formulates it as follows: "*one should consciously create the form and content of life, choose purposes and seriously try to achieve them, and one should use one's freedom to develop one's personal capacities and talents*" (Derkx, 2014, p. 52). In light of the perspective of entangled humanism, we propose an 'entangled' interpretation of this tenet, where the self is seen as entangled with others and the environment. This also leads to an entangled view of autonomy, a view which we already find in van Praag's work, when he connects autonomy with people's shared responsibility (see Derkx, 2009, pp. 70–71). Furthermore, embracing an entangled perspective has ethical implications concerning the purposes or goods that one should try to achieve. These should involve attempts to engage with others or otherness in as wide a sense as possible. In a similar vein, van Praag writes that true self-realization requires engaging with the 'not-self', and that humanism can be understood as anti-egoism (see Derkx, 2009, p. 69). We go deeper into this ethical understanding of *self-fulfillment* when writing about humanist spirituality below.

In Vignette 4, humanist chaplain Lucas, when talking about supporting Jonas, who is severely ill and has had his request for physician-assisted dying approved, expresses how the principle of entangled autonomy is the basis of his humanist worldview and his work: "As a humanist, I support people's autonomy and thus the possibility of dying with dignity. I believe everyone has the right to choose for themselves how to live and die, and I believe that there are no ready-made answers to questions about life and death, only the answers we formulate and reformulate for ourselves. Human relationality is of immeasurable value, so when meeting with others I focus on the connection between us and ask about meaningful connections to other humans and non-humans in their life."

The fourth and final humanist tenet is that *human beings should nurture a love of specific, vulnerable, and irreplaceable persons* (see Derkx, 2014, p. 54). This counters the idea that human beings may

be grasped and approached in terms of a generalized notion of 'the human being', which connects this tenet to critical humanism. There is also a link with entangled humanism, as this principle emphasizes that human beings are vulnerable instead of always 'in control'. However, the perspective of entangled humanism also shows that this tenet has a narrow focus on people and suggests that people should nurture love in a wider sense, for all kinds of beings and for our fragile world in its entirety.

If we think about worldviews in terms of the seven dimensions distinguished by Smart (1999) which were outlined in the introduction to this chapter, the postulates by van Praag (1982) can be seen as a proposal for characterizing the doctrinal dimension of humanism. Furthermore, Derkx's (2014) tenets can be seen as a proposal for characterizing both the doctrinal and the ethical dimension of humanism. Alma and Anbeek (2013) come up with a proposal for all seven dimensions of humanism. They conclude that humanism "manifests itself, particularly in the narrative, philosophical, ethical and experiential dimensions" (Alma & Anbeek, 2013, p. 14). They point to the poverty of humanism when it comes to the ritual, organizational, and material dimensions. As the different worldview dimensions offer various spiritual pathways towards meaning making, this suggests that there might be a certain poverty when it comes to spiritual resources in humanism. If we take a closer look, however, we see how humanism also manifests in the ritual, organizational, and material dimensions – although in somewhat non-traditional ways. For instance, even though there are no ancient, shared rituals in humanism that people may fall back on in hard times or when celebrating life events, we see a development towards more openness to and appreciation of humanist rituality while in some European countries (e.g. Belgium, UK, and Norway), there are already more established humanist rituals and celebrations.

Vignette 3 shows how humanist chaplain Kimberly uses embodiment, symbols, and small rituals as pathways towards meaning making, in this case in an abortion support group. For instance, "Kimberly has asked participants to bring something meaningful to them regarding their abortion, for instance an object, a song, or a poem." These symbols allow participants to share feelings and experiences which cannot be grasped by rational logic and are difficult to put into words. Kimberly also stresses the embodied dimension of meaning making, as she asks participants where in the body these feelings and experiences are felt. Another ritual element Kimberly uses is her invitation "to write a letter to themselves and/or the imagined child." According to Kimberly, working in this way expresses her humanist values, as "she believes in and strives to nourish the power, potential, connectedness, dignity, and freedom of humans." Kimberly herself symbolized her abortion by getting a tattoo a few months afterwards: "It symbolizes my loss and transformation. Getting an abortion changed me. This tattoo makes that visible. That is something I missed: some visible mark that this happened to me."

Humanist spirituality

In Chapter 1, we explained that worldviews comprise an understanding of spirituality: an understanding of what is ultimate goodness - goodness that inspires faith and involves transcendence - and how to connect with it. So, when exploring humanism as a worldview, we need to address

the question of how humanism involves an understanding of goodness that we may orient towards, even in situations of severe disorientation. How can humanism provide a sense of orientation in situations which cannot be grasped or understood by reason or logic - in the context of severe suffering, tragic events, or interpersonal and structural violence, or when people experience awe and wonder? What notion of transcendence, of goodness 'beyond' severely disorienting experiences can be found in humanism? And what inspires humanist faith in the face of extreme adversity?

In Vignette 1, humanist chaplain and celebrant Chris explicitly states how spirituality is part of his humanist worldview and resonates in the marriage celebrations he holds: "Feelings and spirituality are important to my humanism and I understand spirituality as a broad term. Spirituality can be anything that makes someone feel connected in a transcendent way, to something bigger, while still down-to-earth – or not. For example: if a couple wants to honor their ancestors during the ceremony and either they feel like their ancestors are watching over them or they feel this connection in the sense of gratitude for what their ancestors have done to make their current lives possible... both can be examples of spirituality, if you ask me. I adjust my ceremonies to be as spiritual or down-to-earth as the couple wants. But there is also down-to-earth spirituality – connecting with each other. That is important to my humanism." Chris elaborates further on this relational quality of spirituality: "Humanist values play a role in how I go about guiding couples. Most importantly, reverence for humans as equal individuals but not just individuals. We are social creatures, we need each other. Community is everything. People want these ceremonies because they want to share their story, they want to involve people in their story, they need others to help them with their story."

An early text about humanist spirituality is by Elkins et al. (1988), who write: "The concept of humanist spirituality is not new, but it may be an idea whose time has come" (p. 15). They build on work by authors like Abraham Maslow and John Dewey when describing spirituality as a human phenomenon that may be expressed through religious traditions but also in non-religious ways. Even earlier, van Praag, without actually using the term spirituality (which was not current at the time), provided us with a wealth of ideas that we would now see as describing humanist spirituality. For instance, he paints a picture of the world that has 'enchanted' aspects when he speaks about "the mystery of life" (van Praag, 1982, p. 163) or about how "miracles" (van Praag, 1982, p. 163) may happen when people really listen to one another. Also, in van Praag 's humanism there is room for experiences of awe (as mentioned earlier), and for experiencing "ecstasy: a sense of standing outside the normal reality of day-to-day living" (van Praag, 1982, p. 129).

Starting from these early ideas, we elaborate on humanist spirituality along three lines. First, we explain how Iris Murdoch, on the basis of assumptions that are in line with the view of humanism presented in this chapter, develops notions of spirituality and transcendence in terms of attentively and lovingly looking beyond the self. Second, we present Emmanuel Levinas' notion of 'small goodness' as a central element of humanist spirituality. Third, we explore how Hannah Arendt's notion of natality informs a worldly view of faith which fits within humanism.

Humanist spirituality as cultivating courageous love

Like Taylor (1989), Murdoch (1970) understands people's spiritual life in terms of orientation towards visions of the good that have a certain weight.[35] While in Taylor's account of spirituality visions of the good have spiritual weight when they represent what is of ultimate value to people, Murdoch offers a more substantial and explicitly ethical account.[36] Her account is rooted in two assumptions: "I assume that human beings are naturally selfish, and that human life has no external point or τέλος" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 76). In this view, when we orient to visions of the good that represent what is of crucial importance to us, we might well be engaging in rather egocentric projects. Murdoch reserves the designation 'spiritual' for orientation processes in which we are not driven by selfishness but cultivate love and compassion for others and otherness. She uses the term 'the Good' to denote the focal point of such orientation processes: "We are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good" (p. 100).[37]

According to Murdoch (1970), the Good is indefinable, unreachable and remains forever mysterious: "it lies always beyond, and it is from this beyond that it exercises its *authority*" (p. 61). So, there is no prescribed endpoint to our spiritual journey – orienting to the Good involves some form of transcendence, of always moving 'beyond'. Murdoch pays extensive attention to the notion of transcendence, pointing out that the term is often used to refer to a move away from the world – a 'vertical, upward' move – and thus away from seeing and loving what is 'here'. She proposes a view of transcendence which involves a move *towards* the world, which may be understood as a 'horizontal' or 'downward' move.[38] What is transcended here is not the world and its fragility and imperfection, but the human tendency to look at the world in terms of personal interests and wishes. This tendency prevents us from "seeing what there is outside one" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 57). It often leads us to remain in our personal fantasy world, to overlook, to look away, or to judge. In Murdoch's view, 'seeing what there is outside one' requires, on the contrary, an attentive, loving and compassionate gaze. A loving gaze shows us what is 'really there' instead of the reflections of our own fantasies.

According to Murdoch (1970), transcendence can therefore be seen as a form of realism. Orienting to the Good is a spiritual journey towards 'what is'. It involves a sustained effort to engage with the world by "really *looking*" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 89). This explains why, in Murdoch's eyes, spiritual journeys are hard, and require devotion and discipline: on many occasions, we find looking at reality difficult, and we are inclined to overlook or look away. Murdoch mentions severely disorienting situations like confrontation with evil and suffering as examples of such occasions. Orienting to the Good in such situations is possible; learning to do so is a *task*: "It is a task to see the world as it is" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 89). This spiritual task of cultivating attention, love, and compassion requires courage and is never finished. Furthermore, Murdoch emphasizes that this task cannot be achieved by will. It is a matter of 'willingness' and discipline to always again turn

35 In Chapter 1 we elaborate on Taylor's understanding of the spiritual aspect of orientation in life.

36 In Chapter 1, we mentioned that Taylor's view of the spiritual character of orientation processes includes the possibility that people make sense of their lives spiritually in ways that are ethically questionable

37 In the chapter *On God and Good*, Murdoch explains the similarities between the way in which the Good functions as the central object of attention in people's moral-spiritual life and the way in which God is the focus in people's religious life.

38 See Wojtkowiak and Schuhmann (2022) for an explanation of the concept of horizontal transcendence and its background.

our attention away from our own fantasies, thus inducing a "reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 53). Sometimes, this reorientation just 'happens to us', in what we may call spiritual moments: when something 'catches our attention' we are drawn to it, and our sense of ego dissolves.

The centrality of small goodness in humanist spirituality

Murdoch's (1970) emphasis on the crucial role of love and compassion in our spiritual life relates to the work of Levinas (1988/1994), who positions 'goodness' in the love and compassion that people bear in their hearts for everything that is alive. According to Levinas, goodness is a small act, stemming from an insatiable desire that is aroused in the encounter with the other, manifesting as an unplanned, coincidental, fleeting, humble, largely invisible kindness. This goodness, like the orientation to the Good according to Murdoch, cannot be produced by will or plan, it cannot be organized, and there is no certainty about the outcome either. Small goodness exists without a guarantee that it will survive or have an effect. It is fragile because it can easily be transformed and misused. Levinas explains the notion of small goodness using, among others, the following quote from Vasily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate*:

> *There exists, side by side with this so terrible greater good, human kindness in everyday life. It is the kindness of an old lady who gives a piece of bread to a convict along the roadside. It is the kindness of a soldier who holds his canteen out to a wounded enemy. The kindness of youth taking pity on old age, the kindness of a peasant who hides an old Jew in his barn. It is the kindness of those prison guards who risk their own freedom, smuggle the letters of prisoners out to wives and mothers. That private goodness of an individual for another individual is a goodness without witnesses, a little goodness without ideology. It could be called goodness without thought. The goodness of men outside the religious or social good. (p. 91)*

Even when we face evil and, as a consequence, experience severe disorientation, small goodness has the potential to make a slight difference. Levinas (1988/1994) speaks about "the sovereignty of that primordial goodness or mercy that evil cannot overcome" (p. 90).[1] At the same time, Levinas warns us that often small, casual and thoughtless forms of indolence, laziness, indifference and absent-mindedness, push back or inhibit goodness (Burggraeve, 2020). Therefore, the essence of goodness is 'non-indifference', which allows for a selfless and caring attitude towards the other.

Natality as inspiring humanist faith

Levinas' (1988/1994) emphasis on human encounters as the place where goodness manifests resonates with the focus on relationality in Arendt's (1958) work. Natality is an important concept here. Arendt originally framed natality as the human condition that emerges from our birth, our

1 Interestingly, Murdoch (1970) uses a similar phrasing in the title of her book: *The sovereignty of Good.*

literal beginning. Our birth stresses that we come from someone and are not born from no one. Moreover, we are born into a world that already exists, which acknowledges that, from the beginning, we are relational beings who are entangled with the world and others. We are, as Arendt phrases it, born into a "web of human relationships" (p. 183). Moreover, we originate from the body of another human, which means that our entanglement with others is necessarily embodied. This makes us somewhat mysterious creatures as we cannot be captured by any description of 'who we are': "The moment we want to say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is . . . his specific uniqueness escapes us" (Arendt, 1958, p. 181). According to Arendt, it is only when we speak and act in the context of the web of relationships that our uniqueness and humanness can be revealed. This disclosure of who we are requires an atmosphere "where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them" (Arendt, 1958, p. 180). In such an atmosphere the human condition of natality is actualized: something new, completely unexpected, may happen. Arendt speaks about this emergence of something new in terms of a miracle: "the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle" (p. 178).[2]

While spirituality is often linked to mortality, humanist spirituality may also be linked to natality (Wojtkowiak & Schuhmann, 2022). From a natality perspective, goodness may be understood as involving the nurturing of an attitude of being *with* others, thus encouraging them to appear in their uniqueness through speech and action. Nurturing this attitude may be seen as a humanist spiritual practice that supports life, countering the objectification of human beings. Echoing Arendt (1958), we may say that where people come together, a potential space is opened up where 'miracles' may happen. In particular, the perspective of natality allows for a worldly understanding of faith which also nurtures hope: "Only the full experience of this capacity [to act] can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope" (Arendt, 1958, p. 247). Even when all hope seems lost, for instance when people face tragedy and suffering, we may have faith in the possibility that something new and unexpected may happen when people show interest in each other.[3]

Conclusion

Understanding humanism as a worldview starts from the notion that visions of the good do not represent pre-given, supra-historical ideas, but are dynamic, contextualized human constructs. In particular, any set of normative postulates, principles, or tenets that is proposed as characterizing humanism requires a continuing process of critical reflection. Such reflection needs to address both the more global question of how these principles are entangled in power structures and involved in dehumanizing tendencies and major current problems humanity struggles with, and the more local question of how they relate to the lived reality of actual people and their actual desires and

2 Arendt emphasizes that our actions, precisely because they take place in the web of relationships, have unpredictable consequences, which may also be negative. The consequences of our actions transcend our intentions: "Since actions act upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others" (Arendt, 1958, p. 190). Arendt speaks about the 'boundlessness' of human action; as relational beings, we are not in control of how our actions eventually play out. We become, as Arendt points out, 'guilty' of unintended and unforeseen consequences of our actions. As remedies to the irreversibility and the unpredictability of action, Arendt points to the human capacities to keep promises and to forgive.

3 Similarly, van Praag often used the phrase "Expecting nothing, hoping for everything", which illustrates his humanist faith.

struggles. Our reflections on these questions in this chapter have led us to highlight that humanism as a lived worldview needs to accommodate the ways in which people orient in life as embodied and relational creatures in a material and entangled world. In particular, we have proposed a view of humanist spirituality as arising in the encounter with the other or otherness. Paradoxically, in humanist spirituality, what is called the 'sacred' or the 'highest' is at the same time earthly, messy, and modest, since it emerges from our embodied relationships with others and the world.

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Essay 3

Interfaith Spiritual Care from a Humanist Perspective

In the Villa in Dubai
Interfaith Work in the Terrorist Unit

Margriet Minnema, Nikki van Biemen, and Hans A. Alma

Introduction

The rise of humanism in Western culture is closely linked to the process of modernization, driven by the ideal of a modern society where human reason is no longer subordinate to divine revelation and historical tradition. According to the philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1992), Renaissance humanism can be considered the first origin of modernity. It can be described as the cultivation of "true" humanity within the context of everyday practices (practical orientation), as a moral and political pursuit characterized by benevolence, altruism, and humanity, and as an art of living with an aesthetic dimension focused on civility and style (Derkx, 1993).

According to Toulmin, the second origin of modernity lies in a shift in the concept of rationality in the 17th century, bringing human thought to the forefront and emphasizing the emancipation of individuals towards autonomy and maturity. Enlightenment humanism in the 18th century builds on this modern concept of rationality, emphasizing that moral values are attainable even without belief in God's command. Enlightenment humanism exudes optimism: the world is controllable, society is malleable, and humans are capable of doing good through reason.

The term humanism has only been used regularly in Dutch since the 19th century, with various meanings, including humanism as a worldview. This often involves rejecting religion, labeling any form of it as irrational, and promoting humanism as a non-religious worldview. However, Derkx (1993) describes humanism as an open worldview with a dialogical character. "The normative criterion is the never definitively closed dialogue in which everyone participates and which also reflects on the unique context in which that dialogue takes place" (p. 109). Thus, humanism can also exist within religious traditions, and religious humanism can exist alongside atheistic humanism.

In 1856, the first organization of pantheists, atheists, and materialists, "De Dageraad" (The Dawn), was established in the Netherlands, aiming to reach non-religious individuals through publications. Gradually evolving along atheistic lines and fighting against religious dogmas, it became the first organization for non-religious people in the Netherlands. Since 1957, it has been known as "De Vrije Gedachte" (The Free Thought), an association of freethinkers (Flokstra, 1993).

In 1945, the Religieus Humanistisch Verbond (Religious Humanist Association) was founded in Amersfoort, with Henriëtte Roland Holst as a key inspirer. In 1946, it merged into the

Humanistisch Verbond (Humanist Association), which had two main objectives: 1) to provide life-philosophical empowerment to combat the risk of nihilism after the horrors of the war (referred to as the "great struggle"), and 2) to emancipate people not affiliated with a church or religious organization (referred to as the "small struggle"). One of the founders of the Humanist Association was Jaap van Praag (1911-1981), who strongly believed in the importance of a vital worldview that could guide people's lives and counterbalance the appeal of totalitarian perspectives (Derkx, 2009). Van Praag (1947) advocated for a renewal of spiritual life in a non-religious, humanist sense.

Van Praag laid the theoretical and methodological foundations for humanist spiritual care. For the training of humanist counselors, the Humanistisch Opleidings Instituut (HOI, Humanist Training Institute) was established. This was a higher vocational education institution, meaning humanist counselors did not hold an academic degree, unlike their religious colleagues. This situation changed in 1989 with the recognition of the University of Humanistic Studies, offering a university-level education for humanistic chaplains spanning six years, equivalent to a theological education.

The Humanist Association remains both a sending institution and a member organization with over 19,000 members today, committed to areas such as meaning-making and humanization. A governing board appointed by the members oversees the association's policies. The fact that the Humanist Association is also a member organization partially determines the tone and substance of institutional humanism.

Inspired by its rich humanist history, the Humanist Association seeks meaning-making that strengthens the resilience of individuals and society as a whole, contributing to the creation of a just and sustainable society (also referred to as humanization). Thus, humanism as a reflective and living tradition is not only philosophical but also socio-political in nature. The Humanist Association employs various means to achieve this, such as encouraging reflection when making meaningful choices, as well as engaged activism to address and initiate political and societal changes in areas like climate, self-determination, and polarization. In this way, it directs its focus both inwardly and outwardly (Humanist Association Multi-Year Policy Plan 2022-2026).

Humanist Spiritual Care in the Netherlands

The Humanist Association (Humanistisch Verbond) appoints humanistic chaplains (HGV-ers) as a sending institution, ensuring their position in various fields such as justice, defense, and healthcare. This makes the Humanist Association responsible for the authority to work as a representative of the Association, while the University of Humanistic Studies ensures the competency of HGV-ers. Currently, approximately 275 HGV-ers are appointed by the Humanist Association and are active in different fields. The work of HGV-ers includes individual contacts, group sessions, reflection meetings, rituals, and presence activities. They also contribute to internal training and educational sessions, participate in ethical consultations, and advise organizations on ethical and societal issues related to meaning-making, humanization, and worldview perspectives.

The essence of their representative function is that the guidance of patients, residents, and clients is shaped by humanist inspiration. HGV-ers are guided by core values such as authenticity, openness, self-determination, connectedness, responsibility, dialogue, human dignity, and autonomy.

Their work draws from the statement of principles of the Humanist Association (1973), the text *Contemporary Humanism* (2010), and its elaboration in the foundational document included in the *Professional Standard Humanist Chaplains* (2019). This professional standard describes and regulates the ministerial affiliation of HGV-ers, focusing on their relationship with the Humanist Association and the humanist foundations of their work. It complements the broader *Professional Standard for Spiritual Caregivers* of the Association of Spiritual Caregivers (VGVZ, 2015).

Another important resource for HGV-ers is their personal worldview. Based on their individual worldview inspiration, HGV-ers engage in the values community of their colleagues and the Humanist Association, continuously reflecting on their own positioning (*Professional Standard Humanist Chaplains*, 2019). This translates into practice, for instance, through group evaluations held every five years, facilitated by a discussion leader. These evaluations foster mutual inspiration, deepen the meaning of humanism for their profession, and explore any challenges together. Additionally, they provide an opportunity for HGV-ers to demonstrate how they embody the worldview mission, ensuring alignment between the HGV-er and the Humanist Association.

Case Study: Philosophy on the Terrorist Unit

Philosophical Group Discussions on the TU

Weekly, the HGV-er facilitates philosophical group discussions on one of the so-called Terrorist Units (TUs), part of the Dutch prison system since 2006. The reasoning behind creating a specific unit for inmates convicted or suspected of terrorism-related crimes is twofold: firstly, to enhance staff expertise in managing this group of inmates for successful reintegration, and secondly, to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies among inmates (ICSR, 2020, p. 58).

As with inmates in regular units, this group has free access to spiritual care, a right guaranteed by the Penitentiaire Beginselenwet (Prison Principles Act), which in Article 41, Paragraph 1, ensures the right to practice one's worldview while in detention (Van Zessen & Koolen, 2013). On the TU, specific spiritual care activities are offered because inmates cannot participate in regular activities such as prayer services or discussion groups due to their strictly separated daily program. These activities are tailored to the TU population in consultation with the institution. The Directorate of Judicial Institutions (DJI) handbook on TUs (2020) highlights the desirability of spiritual care for this group of inmates due to its unique characteristics, such as ideological motivation and the relatively high proportion of young adults, who often have existential questions requiring attention. Consequently, specific activities like philosophical group discussions are organized by Islamic and humanist spiritual caregivers.

The philosophical group discussions take place in the unit's recreation room and last an hour. Participation is voluntary. While regular attendance and engagement, such as reading texts, are encouraged, participation is not mandatory. On average, two to five inmates join the discussions, though there are typically eight inmates per unit. Limited participation can be attributed to language barriers or the content of the discussions not aligning with some inmates' ideological beliefs. Participants are predominantly between 20 and 30 years old, with varying ethnic and religious backgrounds, though all identify as Muslim. The discussions aim to foster "flexibility of thought," challenging participants to adopt different perspectives by presenting philosophical texts and traditions *(Evaluation Report by Radar-Advies on behalf of DJI, 2021).*

To illustrate the interfaith work of the HGV-er on the TA, the following case describes how an HGV-er welcomes a new inmate to the unit. At that time, three inmates were participating in the philosophical group discussions, two of whom had been regular participants. The case is presented in the first person to provide insight into the internal reflections of the HGV-er during the discussion group.

The Case

Ilyas is new to the unit. Before the philosophical discussion group, I decide to introduce myself and invite him to join. The guard knocks on his door and asks if Ilyas would like to meet "the humanist." I hear him mumble hesitantly, "What..? What's a humanist?" The guard suggests he find out for himself. He steps into the doorway of his cell, coming across as somewhat shy. I ask if I may shake his hand. He agrees. I introduce myself, and when he states his name, I inquire about its meaning. He tells me he was named after his grandfather. "Ilyas, wasn't that also a prophet?" I ask. "Could be," he replies, but he's not sure. I share the meaning of my own name and then explain what it means to be a humanist. Ilyas seems intrigued and cautiously asks what I'm there to do. I tell him about the weekly discussion groups and invite him to observe one. He says he'll think about it. I ask if I may follow up in a few weeks, and he agrees.

The next time we speak, he decides to accept the invitation. Together, we walk to the recreation room, where the other participants are already waiting. Once everyone is seated, and the coffee is served, Ilyas has a few questions. He asks whether the discussions are confidential and why we talk about philosophy. I assure him I'll address both questions. Starting with confidentiality, I explain that I am bound by professional secrecy and that the content of our discussions will not be reported or shared with others. He asks, "But how do I know I can trust you?" The group shifts uncomfortably in their chairs. A long-time participant impatiently interjects, "She said she has professional secrecy, like the imam. Just trust her." I sense that Ilyas is willing to let the question go to avoid annoying the group. However, I believe it's a very valid question—trust is the foundation for our dialogue. I acknowledge this by saying it's a good question and pose my own: "Indeed, how do we know we can trust one another? What does it take to trust someone? What do you need from me to feel enough trust to engage in this conversation?" The men laugh, and one of them remarks, "There's your answer to the second question: that's why we philosophize." I continue looking at Ilyas with interest. Eventually, he says, "I think trust has to grow." I respond, "Especially if trust hasn't always been a given." He nods and says, "In my position, people don't trust you easily, so I don't trust others either." His words carry a lot of weight, but I hold back from probing further as the group grows restless, and his second question about philosophy still lingers. I propose we take it step by step and see what's needed to build trust, emphasizing that he's always welcome to revisit or withhold certain topics if he chooses. He agrees to this arrangement. I also explain that we have an agreement among participants to keep group discussions confidential and not share them with family or staff. "Code of honor," someone mutters, spitting on the ground. Ilyas agrees to this too.

"And about your second question, why do we discuss philosophy: does anyone here (I glance at the group) have an answer to that?" His neighbor responds, "To think about themes like justice for ourselves and hear others' perspectives." Ilyas looks doubtful. He says, "But isn't that contradictory to Islam? Why think for yourself if the Quran has all the answers?" I reply, "If that's true, it sounds wonderful. But it

makes me wonder: why were we, as humans, given the ability to think about such matters? What's the purpose of that?" The group falls silent until someone suggests involving the imam. Ilyas seems lost in thought but then speaks: "Imagine you're in the middle of the Sahara. You haven't eaten or drunk anything for days, and sand dunes stretch beyond the horizon. There's no help, and you know none will come. What do you do?" I answer, "If there's truly no hope left, I think I'd turn to something greater and try to come to terms with my fate." He nods approvingly and continues, "At that moment, a jeep arrives. The driver, in an air-conditioned car, gives you water and promises to take you to his villa, where there's plenty of food and drink. You can even live there, with everything you could ever want. The only condition is that you do exactly as he says. What do you do?" It's a difficult question. "I don't want to be dependent on someone I don't know, and I don't know what strange things he might ask of me. But it's my only hope, so I'd say yes and see what happens." Ilyas responds, "Good answer. He takes you to his villa in Dubai, and you get everything you need: delicious food, a loving spouse, and beautiful children. But there's one door in the villa he says you must never open. Do you obey or not?" We all laugh, recognizing the temptation of unopened doors. Before I can answer, he adds, "That, ma'am, is the difference between those who philosophize and those who believe. That door represents everything God has commanded me to do. I don't question what's behind it, how to open it, or even what material it's made of. I live according to what the Quran and Hadith tell me, leave the door alone, and try to enjoy what God has given me in this life. Why would I think further?"

By now, the entire group, myself included, is captivated by Ilyas' words. It's a beautiful story. I ask the group if they resonate with Ilyas' description of faith as a mandate to obey. Some nod cautiously. On this unit, devout belief is an important norm. Ilyas' neighbor glances around the bare recreation room and quips, "So we're living in a villa in Dubai, and all we have to do is obey?" Laughter ensues, even from Ilyas. Life on the TU is far from luxurious, and obeying staff is a necessity rather than a choice. Still, I want to return to the heart of what Ilyas is saying. I tell him, "Ilyas, I can see how comforting that kind of faith must be. I'm even a bit jealous—it must be wonderful to have clear guidelines given through revelation. At the same time, I can imagine situations, like here on the TU, where the guidance isn't always straightforward—like how to handle rules here or whether you can trust me to have your best interests at heart. I believe we've been given reason to think about how to live well, in accordance with your faith or, in my case, certain values I hold dear. Would you be open to exploring that together to see how it aligns or doesn't align with your beliefs?" Ilyas seems interested but not entirely convinced. We agree to discuss the role of philosophy in Islam with the imam next week.

In consultation with the imam, we decide to read a text by an Islamic philosopher about reason. The theme of the discussion is "faith and knowledge" and the differences between them. Ilyas, encouraged by the enthusiasm of other participants, appears willing to engage. In the following weeks, the inner conflict between philosophy and his faith seems to recede somewhat. However, it's not always easy; there are weeks when he chooses not to attend without explanation. During one visit, he tells me, "Faith is the only thing that matters." I ask, "And the only thing you have?" He nods.

Content Themes: The Villa as a Moral Space

In the case study, a delicate interplay develops between Ilyas and the humanistic chaplain (HGV-er), where various themes of meaning and life interpretation emerge alongside the navigation of differing life-stance principles. This section explores these dynamics further.

Humanism fundamentally centers on the human being and the capacity and dignity of individuals to shape their own lives. This leads to an attitude of openness—openness to the other, to the new, and to the unfamiliar. This openness does not mean passively adopting the convictions of others but rather engaging critically with one's own values and beliefs in confrontation with the other or the unknown. Consequently, humanism is "incompatible with forms of dogmatism and fundamentalism that rely on an infallible authority" (*Beroepsstandaard HGV*, version 2012, p. 8). It is precisely this principle that comes under strain in the case study while simultaneously offering an opening for connection. It is this attitude of openness that initiates the first contact and facilitates the conversation.

However, as the case illustrates, this openness is not a given for Ilyas. For him, an openness of thought threatens his faith, his obedience to God, and perhaps his sense of security and stability. Ilyas believes in an infallible authority that provides guidance on the purpose of life and what he must do to lead a good and meaningful existence. The metaphor of the villa in Dubai is emblematic of this: one does what the villa's owner commands, receives what the owner provides, and follows their rules.

At the same time, Ilyas accepts the invitation to engage in dialogue, suggesting a curiosity and longing for alternative perspectives. Although he is convinced that faith outweighs independent reasoning, he does not impose his beliefs on others and poses questions about the unknown. This creates an opportunity for the HGV-er to cautiously establish a connection and explore existential themes that may be significant in Ilyas' life. Themes such as the role of faith in his life, the trust he places in God, and his lack of trust in others are central to this exploration.

The Villa as a Moral Space

The humanistic chaplain supports individuals for whom existential processes do not unfold naturally. When someone ends up in prison, it often leads to a reorientation of their framework of meaning, or as Charles Taylor would phrase it, their moral space (Taylor, 1989). This moral space is characterized by existential questions—questions about how to live. Taylor refers not only to an orientation toward what is 'moral' or 'good,' but also to what constitutes a meaningful or dignified life. The moral space subsequently offers certain frameworks, which Taylor calls "visions of the good," that help us orient ourselves. These visions are presented to us through our cultural or religious background and represent "deep-rooted images of a good—just, dignified, fulfilled, or meaningful—life" (Schuhmann & Damen, 2018, p. 79). When a significant life event occurs, such as incarceration, our moral space may be temporarily disrupted. Spiritual care can then be understood as guidance in reorienting toward the good, and philosophical group discussions as the exchange and revision of specific visions within our own moral framework.

Returning to the case, we see that Ilyas presents a sharp metaphor of what can be called his moral space. The villa represents the framework within which he assigns meaning to the world and derives a sense of purpose and stability. God provides him with what he needs, and what he must do to lead a good life is to obey the rules outlined in the Quran. But what if— as one of Ilyas' fellow detainees points out— the villa is not a villa but rather a TA (Terrorist Unit) ward? In the case, the humanistic chaplain attempts to explore what being on the TA ward (and the preceding events) means for Ilyas' moral space and his faith. The goal is not to strip him of his faith but to make room for possible doubts or discrepancies in his beliefs and worldview. This is not because the chaplain assumes Ilyas' moral space to be incorrect but because humanism holds the conviction that every individual is both dignified and vulnerable. It is part of the chaplain's role to meet the other in their full humanity.

This vulnerability becomes apparent in the final part of the case, where Ilyas acknowledges that faith is his most important anchor—it is the only thing he has. This hints at potential loneliness and despair, where the villa symbolizes a safe oasis in the barren landscape of his current existence. The chaplain must address these existential themes with an attitude of unconditional acceptance and empathy, an approach that will be further elaborated upon in the section on methodologies.

The chaplain is responsible for the spiritual well-being of the individual they are supporting. At the same time, humanistic spiritual care also encompasses a moral dimension. Schuhmann & Damen (2018) explain that the other person's "visions of the good" are central to the guidance provided, but this does not preclude chaplains from questioning these visions. Jaap van Praag, in his description of humanistic advisory work, also writes that it is the chaplain's task to offer counterbalance when those they support reduce others "to an object in egocentric fantasies" (Schuhmann & Damen, 2018, p. 84). The humanistic perspective underlying this is that we are relational beings, entangled with one another, and "thereby both suffer harm from the actions of others and, intentionally or not, cause harm to others" (Schuhmann & Damen, 2018, p. 84). Spiritual care from a humanistic inspiration, therefore, includes questioning the other person's ideology, especially when it might lead to forms of violence, abuse, or oppression—a scenario not explicitly apparent in this case but conceivable given the context of the TU ward.

In conclusion, the case clearly highlights the thematic tension between the anchor Ilyas derives from his faith, the vulnerability underlying it, and the balance between respecting his vision of the good and critically questioning it. This tension is a defining feature of the chaplain's work.

Trust

A central theme in the case is trust. Like any chaplain, the humanistic chaplain is bound by confidentiality, ensuring the privacy of conversations. However, this confidentiality does not automatically establish trust between Ilyas and the chaplain. As Ilyas himself notes, trust must "grow."

It is common for detainees to have lost trust in others, the system, or society in the past. The chaplain keeps this in mind when questioning the naturalness of trust. Ilyas affirms that, in his "position," he is not easily trusted. This position could refer to various identities— "terrorist," "radical believer," or "detainee." His position in life means he is not quickly trusted and, in turn, does not easily trust others. In the case, the chaplain chooses not to delve deeply into this topic

to avoid disrupting the group process. However, she takes his concerns about confidentiality very seriously, asking Ilyas what he needs and making clear agreements with him and the group. Additionally, the chaplain adopts an approach that views Ilyas as an individual, not as a "terrorist" or "detainee." Throughout the case, she continues to engage with the person Ilyas is. This aligns with the humanist ideal of always creating space for the humanity of the other, regardless of or inclusive of their actions. This inclusive and egalitarian engagement is fundamental to the work of a humanistic chaplain. Meeting others involves respecting them as fellow human beings (Derkx, 2011, p. 85). In a context where individuals can be reduced to their actions, this attitude of openness and humanity contributes to a process of humanization—one of the core tasks of the chaplain, as outlined in the 2019 *Professional Standard Humanist Chaplains*.

Humanism and Spirituality

In the case, Ilyas describes a situation of both physical and existential distress. When faced with hopeless survival prospects in the desert, where life places an extreme demand on us, what do we turn to? The chaplain responds that in the absence of hope, she would turn to something greater than herself and try to come to terms with her fate. Yet, she later states she does not believe in God or divine revelation. Humanism does not inherently reject the possibility of forces beyond individual life. The *Professional Standard Humanist Chaplains* distinguishes between secular humanism and spiritual humanism. Similarly, in the literature on humanistic chaplaincy, different perspectives emerge. Ton Jorna (2008) centers spirituality in his approach to spiritual guidance, while Jan Hein Mooren (2013) primarily focuses on meaning-making. Recent scholarly research on humanistic chaplaincy increasingly acknowledges the role of spirituality (Leget, 2017; Nolan, Saltmarsh, & Leget, 2011). Carmen Schuhmann and Gaby Jacobs (2021) draw on thinkers such as Charles Taylor and Iris Murdoch to frame spirituality in humanistic chaplaincy. They argue that processes of meaning-making inherently possess a spiritual dimension when understood as processes of orientation in a moral space, as described by Charles Taylor. Visions of the good that transcend everyday perspectives are essential to serve as anchors in times of existential crisis.

When religious frameworks no longer serve as spiritual orientation, the question arises: where do humanists or chaplains turn? In this context, it is understandable that the chaplain in the case admits to being "a little jealous" of Ilyas and his clear vision of the good. Nevertheless, it is intrinsic to the chaplain's role to continue seeking meaning, significance, and connection with what transcends individual existence, even in the barren desert of existential uncertainty. Whether this involves reaching out to others with compassionate love (Murdoch, 2013) or being inspired by aesthetic experiences (Alma, 2020), the search persists—especially when life's tragedies encroach.

The Other as Other and What We Share: Tradition-Specific and Transcending Methods

When the roles of the chaplain described in Chapter 1 are compared to the role of the humanistic chaplain (HGV-er) in the case, a unique aspect of the humanistic perspective emerges. None of the described roles seem to align perfectly. For instance, humanity is present and significant in the case through the way the chaplain fully meets the detainee in their dignity as a person. However,

the chaplain does more than simply be present as a fellow human. She also chooses to critically question someone's vision of the good at times. It is precisely in this attitude that the humanistic inspiration becomes apparent—not in a proselytizing sense but in how her perspective and values emerge through the way she conducts the conversation, through the method. In terms of Chapter 3, Humanistic Chaplaincy is profoundly dialogical. More than just providing support, it is about engaging in an equal conversation that empowers the other. How this is done is explored in this section through several lines.

Socratic Dialogue

As mentioned in the introduction, the core task of humanism is the "great struggle" against nihilism. According to Suarez Müller (2021), this "radical" fight against succumbing to all-encompassing cynicism is what can save humanity. Simultaneously, Suarez Müller sees the reflective and contemplative nature of humanism as the force that gives humanity wings. He believes this combination of radical struggle and reflectivity is embodied in the life and work of the philosopher Socrates, who admitted the finitude of his knowledge without abandoning the pursuit of truth.

The Humanistic Chaplain employs elements of the Socratic method, based on Socrates' questioning attitude and aimed at seeking "truth." Although the structured Socratic methodology does not appear one-to-one in the case, elements of it are certainly recognizable. For instance, the Socratic method distinguishes between the substantive conversation and the so-called meta-conversation (Duyndam, 1997). The meta-conversation runs parallel to the substantive conversation and addresses what remains unsaid. If this meta-conversation influences the substantive discussion to the extent that the conversation halts or tensions rise, it is up to the facilitator to address this. An "intervention on the meta-level" then occurs, temporarily shifting the substantive conversation into the form of the meta-conversation.

In the case, this can be seen subtly when the chaplain senses that the question about confidentiality must first be sufficiently addressed and when she notes the group's impatience. A meta-level intervention might have been to make this impatience explicit and integrate it into the discussion. After all, there could be a substantive message underlying the group's restlessness about the topic of trust, which could enrich the conversation. The chaplain chooses to proceed with the discussion (perhaps to avoid embarrassing Ilyas), which is itself a meta-level decision that shifts the course of the substantive conversation.

Balancing Sensitivity and Methodology

The reason the Socratic method cannot always be fully implemented in the Terrorist Unit (TU) lies in the ongoing dynamic described in previous sections. Much attention is devoted to aligning expectations, trying to understand the other, and building trust. A substantive discussion based on philosophical principles, with the search for "truth" as its central aim, then takes a backseat.

It is characteristic of the Humanistic Chaplain to be sensitive to what the participants and the group need at any given moment, rather than prioritizing the methodology. This sensitivity, combined with a willingness to adjust the approach based on the situation, underscores the humanistic emphasis on meeting the other as they are, while remaining open to what they bring to the interaction.

Rogerian Core Attitude

In addition to the Socratic method, Carl Rogers' person-centered approach is a commonly used methodology in spiritual guidance, particularly because of its humanistic foundation (Schuhmann, 2015). This approach is based on the assumption that human nature inherently desires and has the potential for growth and self-actualization, provided it is given the necessary space and freedom. According to Rogers, the primary goal of guidance is to help the individual move toward becoming "a more fully functioning person" (Rogers, 1961, p. 194): "he is more able to completely engage in the process of being and becoming himself." This process can be fostered when the guide operates from three core conditions: unconditional acceptance, congruence, and empathy. Collectively, these conditions are referred to as the Rogerian core attitude (Schuhmann, 2015).

Unconditional acceptance, according to Rogers, involves consistently approaching the other without judgment. Of course, the Humanistic Chaplain (HGV-er) may form judgments about the person they are engaging with, but it is their responsibility to temporarily suspend these judgments and continue to accept the other as they are. Closely tied to this is the Rogerian principle of approaching the other with empathy. Empathy is defined as meeting the other as a fundamentally distinct other. This definition assumes that while we can strive to understand the other, we can never fully comprehend them. The other will always remain different from ourselves. Jaap van Praag, founder of the Humanist Association, described this as the paradox inherent in the work of the Humanistic Chaplain. There is empathy and an effort to understand, but no complete identification with the other takes place. This understanding of empathy aligns with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (2005, 2012), who emphasized that the other holds an infinity in themselves to the extent that they remain infinitely foreign to us.

Empathy and unconditional acceptance are core conditions in the interaction with Ilyas. From the very first moment, the HGV-er engages with Ilyas based on the assumption of accepting the other without imposing conditions. Additionally, the HGV-er endeavors to continuously see Ilyas as distinct, showing interest in his ideas and worldview to create the freedom and space for potential growth. In the long term, this may not always prove easy, considering the distance Ilyas sometimes maintains and the potential judgment he might hold regarding what the HGV-er offers him.

Here, the third core condition of congruence can be particularly useful in ensuring that person-centered guidance remains possible. Rogers defines congruence as a state of being in which what the HGV-er says is consistent (congruent) with how the HGV-er perceives the client (Schuhmann, 2015, p. 177). This creates an attitude of authenticity, inviting the other to cautiously reveal themselves. In the case study, this is evident when the HGV-er responds positively to one of Ilyas' questions. However, it could also be the case that the HGV-er finds certain behaviors or words unpleasant, or that her own judgment starts to interfere. In such instances, congruence would involve sharing this feedback with the other, without judgment (unconditional acceptance), while remaining curious about their response (empathy).

In this sense, congruence ensures that the other two conditions—acceptance and empathy—can be maintained. After all, the other can only be approached with acceptance and empathy if the HGV-er's own thoughts and emotions do not obstruct the interaction. Congruent engagement creates ongoing space for the other without the HGV-er disappearing from the contact. In this way, the Rogerian core attitude is particularly well-suited for engaging with individuals who hold different beliefs or follow a different worldview.

HGV-er as a Normative Professional

One of the most beautiful definitions of humanism is perhaps that humanism is a question rather than an answer. To avoid slipping into moral relativism, it is essential to continuously reflect on this question and arrive at an answer within the specific situation. This is particularly important in the complex contexts in which spiritual caregivers work. The humanistic chaplain (HGV-er) positions themselves as a normative professional. Professionalism in this sense refers not only to the technical and instrumental execution of certain tasks but also to entering the "murky territory" of complex cases where human well-being is at stake (Van Ewijk & Kunneman, 2013, p. 34). The normative professional understands that there are no clear-cut answers in this realm and that a careful evaluation of the values at play in each situation—a normative evaluation—is required (p. 60).

One of the cornerstones of normative professionalization is the continuous reflection between the concrete situation, the tensions within which it unfolds, and the professional themselves. A methodology often applied in such reflection is *double loop learning* (Van Ewijk & Kunneman, 2013; Schön & Rein, 1994). In the first loop, the professional reflects on what is happening in the specific situation and what it demands of them. In the second loop, they take a step back to observe the interaction between their own normative framework, that of the client, and the contexts in which the encounter occurs.

In the case study, the HGV-er reflects in the first loop on the situation itself: "What does Ilyas need to meaningfully participate in the group? How much attention do I devote to his questions and underlying existential themes in relation to the other participants? How does his questioning affect my position within the group, and how does the interaction impact me personally?" This reflection provides insight into how to act not only instrumentally but also ethically. The second loop could occur afterward, involving reflection on the HGV-er's own value system in relation to that of Ilyas and the other participants. Consideration might also be given to the various tensions inherent in the encounter: the confidentiality the HGV-er strives to uphold in a setting where participants are systematically observed, or the pursuit of equality in an inherently unequal context, where the roles of the HGV-er and the "terrorist" or "detainee" are fundamentally different. This reflection is essential in the HGV-er's work and outlines the framework within which the guidance can occur. Additionally, it informs the HGV-er's responsibility to facilitate processes of humanization. For instance, if dehumanizing practices arise that harm the well-being of detainees or others involved, it is the HGV-er's duty to identify these issues and report them, perhaps to the facility's management.

Finally, the normative professional pays attention to the *aesthetic dimension* of their work. "Professionals who lack aesthetic sensitivity may, despite their expertise and ethical orientation, still fail to connect" (Van Ewijk & Kunneman, 2013, p. 60). The normative professional is characterized by a sensitivity to the "beauty" of the dialogue, the content, and the dynamics that emerge between the HGV-er and the participants as well as among the participants themselves. This plays a critical role in inter-worldview work.

Inter-Worldview Consultation

The conversation with Ilyas in the case study concludes with a promise to consult with the imam about philosophy and faith. On the TA ward, the HGV-er and the Islamic chaplain work closely together. They frequently seek each other out to exchange information about what has occurred in

their respective group discussions. This allows them to test assumptions and reflect together on what has transpired. On the TA, there is an additional dimension where inter-worldview consultation becomes essential.

This becomes evident in another situation when the HGV-er is pouring coffee for participants in a discussion group and one of them declines the coffee. The HGV-er knows that he sometimes fasts due to religious convictions and asks if he has started fasting again. This seemingly innocent question, stemming from care and interest, leads to an unexpected response. The young man does not reply and remains silent for the rest of the session, clearly troubled.

When the HGV-er later describes the situation to her Islamic colleague, he explains that, in the boy's eyes, her question may have pushed him into committing a perceived sin. He elaborates that, for some believers in Islam, it is essential to perform good deeds—such as fasting—in order to "earn" spiritual merit. However, the proper intention behind the action is crucial. If someone fasts to show others how devout they are, the intention is deemed impure, and the deed no longer "counts." By asking the boy about his fasting, the HGV-er inadvertently compelled him to boast about his religious deeds, which, in his view, invalidates them.

This example highlights the value of inter-worldview consultation with colleagues, as it deepens understanding of participants' behavior and group dynamics. Such collaboration enhances the quality of the discussions and fosters a more sensitive and effective approach to interfaith engagement.

Conclusion

The humanistic perspective on interfaith spiritual care began with a brief overview of the origins of humanism in Western culture, specifically in the Netherlands. Since 1946, the Humanist Association (*Humanistisch Verbond*) has played a significant role. It presents itself as a worldview movement striving for a meaningful and dignified life for everyone and serves as the sending organization for humanistic chaplains. The guiding core values of HGV-ers, as articulated in the 2019 *Professional Standard for Humanistic Spiritual Care*, were outlined.

The case study illustrated how HGV is practiced in the inter-worldview context of philosophical group discussions on a Terrorist Ward. This revealed how the HGV-er addresses existential themes in Ilyas' life while respecting his Islamic faith. The HGV-er gained insight into the vulnerability underlying his faith—particularly regarding trust—and challenged his vision of the good. The dialogical nature of HGV was discussed in depth, as reflected in its application of Socratic dialogue, the Rogerian approach, and normative professionalization. This demonstrated the strength of these methods in inter-worldview work.

However, given the occasional lack of essential background knowledge, inter-worldview consultation emerged as an indispensable component of dialogical work in contexts of worldview diversity.

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