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# Humanist chaplaincy according to Northwestern European humanist chaplains: towards a framework for understanding chaplaincy in secular societies

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, views on humanist chaplaincy of Northwestern European humanist chaplains are explored with a view to the question of how to understand chaplaincy in secular societies. Seventeen questionnaires were analyzed, filled in by humanist chaplains from Belgium, the UK, Ireland, and Denmark, who attended an international conference on humanist chaplaincy organized in 2015 in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, humanist chaplaincy has a history of several decades and is meanwhile firmly integrated in public institutions; a brief overview over this history is presented. Using thematic analysis, respondents' understandings of 'humanist' in humanist chaplaincy were explored, yielding 4 key themes: humanist chaplaincy as a calling, caring for all fellow human beings, belief in (inter)personal potential, and struggling with a non-supportive environment. On the basis of these themes, building blocks are proposed for a future-oriented perspective on chaplaincy that allows for open dialogue between all chaplains and identification of common ground.

## KEYWORDS

chaplaincy in secular societies; humanist chaplaincy; non-religious chaplaincy; pastoral and spiritual care

## Introduction

Historically, chaplaincy is a profession that is in the first place related to Christian faith traditions. Chaplains traditionally supported people from a specific faith tradition with a view to their religious life. Several authors have pointed out that, as the role and place of religion in (Western) societies is shifting, so is the role and place of chaplains working in (healthcare) institutions in these societies (Orton, 2008; Pesut, 2016; Schuhmann & Damen, 2018; Thorstenson, 2012). In this article, we follow Taylor's (2007) characterization of "the West, or perhaps North-west, or otherwise put, the North Atlantic world" (p. 1) in terms of secularization, understood as "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others" (p. 3). This understanding of secularization relates both to an increase in religious diversity and to a blurring of boundaries between

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‘the religious’ and ‘the non-religious’ (Ammerman, 2010). In secular contexts, chaplains can no longer restrict themselves to providing support to people within a certain faith tradition; “chaplains are expected to minister to people of all faiths and none” (Mowat, 2008, p. 15). The notion of chaplains ‘ministering to people without religion’ still presumes that chaplaincy is an inherently religious profession. In order to understand the role and place of chaplaincy in contemporary societies, however, it is not sufficient to clarify the work that religious chaplains do with non-religious people (Pesut, 2016); we need a broader understanding of chaplaincy that is not (necessarily) characterized by religion. Understanding chaplaincy as a religious profession does not, for instance, include the practices of humanist chaplains, who now work alongside religious chaplains in various Western countries. Humanist chaplaincy is a relatively young form of chaplaincy on which there is as yet only a very limited amount of research (Savage, 2018). With a view to understanding chaplaincy in secularizing societies, exploring views on humanist chaplaincy may provide useful insights, as humanist chaplaincy does not fit within more traditional, religion-focused views of the profession.

In this article, we explore views on humanist chaplaincy by ‘pioneering’ Northwestern European humanist chaplains with a view to the broader question of how to understand chaplaincy in secular societies (we understand Northwestern Europe geographically as encompassing the countries of Ireland, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Iceland). Here, pioneering humanist chaplains are understood to be chaplains who are at the forefront of developing humanist chaplaincy in the countries in which they work. In the Netherlands, about 200 humanist chaplains are employed in various public institutions; in Belgium (to be precise: only in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), there are about 35 humanist chaplains employed in healthcare institutions, prisons, and the military (and, besides that, there are about 30 humanist community centers employing about 160 counselors who provide humanist services to the local population). In the other Northwestern European countries, humanist chaplaincy is generally provided by volunteers only, although the situation is slowly changing (recently, both in the UK and in Norway one humanist chaplain was employed, see: Humanists International, 2018). The guiding research question is: how do Northwestern European humanist chaplains engaged in developing humanist chaplaincy understand ‘humanist’ in humanist chaplaincy? We analyzed 17 questionnaires, filled in by humanist chaplains from four Northwestern European countries – Belgium, the UK, Ireland, and Denmark – who attended an international conference on humanist chaplaincy that was organized in November 2015 at the University of Humanistic Studies in the Netherlands. It was no coincidence that the conference was held in the Netherlands: here, humanist chaplaincy has a history of several decades, and is meanwhile firmly integrated in healthcare institutions, prisons, and the army. All attendees of the conference were active in efforts of increasing visibility and professionalization of humanist chaplaincy in their respective countries; an aim of the conference was to provide participants with knowledge and tools for supporting these efforts. In order to provide some background to the Dutch situation, we start the article by giving a brief overview over the history of humanist chaplaincy in the Netherlands and introducing the view on humanist chaplaincy developed by Van Praag (1982), founding father of humanist chaplaincy in the Netherlands. We then explore understandings of

**Table 1.** From humanist chaplaincy to a future-oriented perspective on chaplaincy.

| Humanist principles                    | Characteristics of humanist chaplaincy                             | Building blocks for a future-oriented perspective on chaplaincy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) Aspiring for a (morally) good life | (1) Humanist chaplaincy as a calling                               | Chaplains <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• put into practice a moral aspiration towards a 'better life' of people and a 'better world'</li> <li>• advocate for those who are vulnerable and/or marginalized</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                    |
| (2) Equality in a shared world         | (2) Caring for all fellow human beings                             | Chaplains <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• embrace the notion that all human beings equally (irrespective of their worldview) are entitled to receive adequate chaplaincy care</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                 |
| (3) No supernatural power              | (3) Focus on (inter)personal human power/potential                 | Chaplains <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• represent a transcendent belief/faith, whether in humanity or in G(g)od(s)</li> <li>• see all people as orienting towards visions of what is of ultimate value to them, and are aware and considerate of the diversity of such visions</li> </ul>                                                              |
|                                        | (4) Struggling with a non-supportive (or even hostile) environment | Chaplains <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work together towards equal availability of and access to chaplaincy care for all people</li> <li>• engage in dialogue with chaplains with different beliefs and worldviews</li> <li>• unite in their commitment to draw attention to the importance of (care for) existential and spiritual issues</li> </ul> |

'humanist' in humanist chaplaincy according to our 17 respondents. Using thematic analysis of the questionnaires, we identified four key themes: humanist chaplaincy as a calling, caring for all fellow human beings, belief in (inter)personal potential, and struggling with a non-supportive environment. Finally, we reflect on these findings with a view to developing a better understanding of chaplaincy in secular societies. On the basis of the findings, building blocks are proposed for a future-oriented perspective on chaplaincy that allows for open dialogue between all chaplains and identification of common ground (see Table 1).

### Half a century of humanist chaplaincy in the Netherlands: an overview

The philosophical roots of humanism as a worldview can be traced back as far as Hellenistic culture in the fifth century B.C. (Copson, 2015; Van Praag, 1982). Humanistic psychology was developed as a 'third force' in psychology over half a century ago, in the 1950s (Hansen, Speciale, & Lemberger, 2014; McLeod, 2003). Humanist chaplaincy, however, generally has a far shorter history. Although humanist chaplaincy is gaining ground in several European countries and in the US, the Netherlands is the single country where humanist chaplaincy has a history of several decades and has become firmly integrated in public institutions. This unique situation is on the one

hand related to the high level of secularization in the Netherlands (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2016; Van IJssel 2007) but also and especially to the efforts and vision of one person, Jaap van Praag (1911 to 1981), a key figure in Dutch humanism. In his main work, *Foundations of Humanism*, Van Praag (1982) developed a theoretical framework for understanding modern humanism as a dynamic, multifaceted view on life, that is characterized by the attempt to understand the world and life by appealing to human abilities only. Van Praag was a founding father of the Dutch Humanist League in 1946, of the Humanist Educational Institution in 1963 (which in 1989 became the University of Humanistic Studies), and of the profession of humanist chaplaincy in health care, prisons, and the army. He also played a key role in founding the International Humanist and Ethical Union in 1952 (Derks, 2009).

Establishing humanist chaplaincy in the Netherlands as a legitimate profession besides Protestant and Catholic chaplaincy was the outcome of a long political struggle. Just after World War II, when Van Praag (1982) launched his ideas concerning humanist chaplaincy, religious associations fiercely opposed the notion that humanists could offer existential and moral guidance at all. The first humanist chaplains were employed in the army in 1950, but it took several decades until humanist chaplaincy was a common and accepted form of chaplaincy. Nowadays, chaplains of various backgrounds – humanist, Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and ‘unaffiliated’ – are organized together in one professional association. During the last decade, the focus in this association has increasingly shifted from seeing chaplains as representatives of a particular worldview to seeing chaplains as professionals who attend to existential and spiritual needs of all people. In healthcare settings, chaplains of various backgrounds work together as specialists on existential, spiritual, and ethical issues. In prisons and in the army, the situation is (for the time being) different from that in healthcare settings; here chaplaincy is organized along denominational lines.

Although humanist chaplaincy in the Netherlands is the result of a heated battle, it is important to note that Van Praag’s (1982) battle was not with religion but with nihilism. He made a distinction between what he called a ‘small struggle’ and a ‘big struggle’. The small struggle concerned an equal position and equal possibilities for nonreligious besides religious people in society. The big struggle concerned providing support and inspiration for people who did not have a thought-out perspective on life and were in danger of slipping into nihilism (Derks, 2009, p. 12). During World War II, Van Praag had seen how easily people without such a thought-out life view could fall prey to Nazi ideology. In 1943, when circumstances during the German occupation became extremely dangerous for him as a Jew, he had gone into hiding, but many of his Jewish friends and family members did not survive persecution (Derks, 2009, p. 11). After World War II, Van Praag saw it as his life’s mission to develop both humanism as a world view and humanist organizations in order to offer practical support to people who were searching for reflection on life outside of the churches. The eventual aim of his ‘big struggle’ was to strengthen the ‘existential resilience’ of people – to help them resist dehumanizing tendencies both at an interpersonal and societal level.

Van Praag (1982) developed humanist chaplaincy as a practice aimed at strengthening existential resilience, on the basis of humanism as a worldview. According to Van Praag, characteristic for humanist chaplaincy is, in the first place, recognition of the

freedom of clients to search for their own answers to the questions that they face in life. This implies that humanist chaplains encourage their clients to not blindly follow popular or dominant life visions but to develop their own notions of what, to them, given the circumstances, constitutes a life worth living. Van Praag emphasizes that, for clients, developing their own visions on life is not easy, especially when they face tragic circumstances or are confronted with evil. Still, no one, including the chaplain, may impose a view of how people should live on the client. In fact, according to Van Praag, in a humanist perspective there is no final such view; all answers to life questions that we formulate have a provisional character. Reality remains to some extent mysterious to us, so that opening ourselves to the world requires an attitude of awe and wonder. Human beings cannot be completely fathomed either, and in particular cannot be fully explained by human sciences. Humanist chaplains need to open themselves to clients and approach them “by no means as creatures they can see through, but always with wondering trepidation” (Derks, 2009, p. 71).

A second important characteristic of humanist chaplaincy that Van Praag (1982) describes is its foundation in human solidarity: “In a way, [the humanist chaplain] represents human involvement” (Van Praag, 1982, p. 153) and “exists in an existential ‘we’ with the other” (Van Praag, 1982, p. 163). This reflects the humanist view that human beings are fundamentally connected. In particular, Van Praag gives a nuanced description of autonomy which is in line with this view: “In this light the principle of ‘autonomy’ turns out to be something different from an individualistic certainty about values and non-values, but rather a common human capacity to account-for and understand-about the reality in which they find themselves: a capacity that unites people in a very special way in shared responsibility” (Derks, 2009, pp. 70–71). Van Praag’s focus on the connectedness of human beings entails an emphasis on the importance of dialogue in the search for answers to life questions: “Truth is not something that is waiting for us somewhere; it is the result of a never ending process... It is the fruit of being human together” (Van Praag, 1982, p. 79). In particular, Van Praag expresses his belief in the power of dialogue between chaplain and client: he writes that in chaplaincy “the seemingly impossible” may be achieved when a trustful relationship between chaplain and client is established (Van Praag, 1982, p. 162–163).

## Method

### *Participants*

In November 2015, an international conference on humanist chaplaincy was organized in Utrecht, the Netherlands, by the Dutch Humanist Association, the University of Humanistic Studies, and the European Humanist Professionals. The aim of the conference was “to exchange and enhance knowledge on Humanist Chaplaincy and to provide participants with strategic knowledge on how to set up Humanist Chaplaincy within organizations in Health Care, Military and Prisons. Special attention is paid to actually experiencing methodologies and discussing various sources of inspiration” (“Exchange Humanist Chaplaincy,” 2015). As far as we know, this was the first international conference that was ever organized with a specific focus on humanist chaplaincy. Humanist chaplains in the Netherlands and educators from the University of Humanistic Studies

**Table 2.** Respondents' demographic backgrounds.

|         | N  |
|---------|----|
| Age     |    |
| 18–29   | 1  |
| 30–39   | 6  |
| 40–49   | 4  |
| 50–59   | 1  |
| 60–69   | 2  |
| 70–79   | 2  |
| Gender  |    |
| Male    | 7  |
| Female  | 10 |
| Country |    |
| BL      | 2  |
| UK      | 6  |
| DK      | 3  |
| IR      | 6  |

shared their experience and knowledge with humanist chaplains from other European countries. Of the 34 attendees of the conference, four were from the Netherlands. The remaining 30 attendees came from Belgium, the UK, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, and Poland. The situation regarding training opportunities, visibility, and acceptance of humanist chaplaincy in these six countries differ from each other, but all 30 attendees who came from outside of the Netherlands can be described as pioneers: they were at the forefront of developing humanist chaplaincy in their respective countries at the time of the conference. Seventeen of these 30 pioneering humanist chaplains participated in this study: six from the UK, six from Ireland, three from Denmark, and two from Belgium. Ten female and seven male chaplains filled in the questionnaire; the mean age was 47 years (see [Table 2](#) for socio-demographic data).

### **Procedure**

The first and second author (both affiliated to the University of Humanistic Studies) gave workshops at the conference. The first and third author (the third author was at the time also affiliated to the University of Humanistic Studies) realized during the conference that this was a unique opportunity to collect data among the participants concerning their views on humanist chaplaincy. We then decided to develop a short questionnaire which was ready for distribution at the final day of the conference. The questionnaire contained, apart from a request for some biographical data, five open ended questions:

1. How would you describe the mission of humanist chaplains?
2. What does 'humanist' in humanist chaplaincy mean to you?
3. What kind of challenges do you meet with as a humanist chaplain or in promoting humanist chaplaincy?
4. What motivates you to work as a humanist chaplain or to promote humanist chaplaincy?
5. What do you consider to be sources of inspiration in your work as a humanist chaplain/as a promotor of humanist chaplaincy?



The last day of the conference was obviously not an ideal moment to distribute the questionnaires – participants leaving early, for instance – but we still managed to distribute hard-copy questionnaires and informed consent forms among the 30 attendees who were not from the Netherlands. The hard-copy questionnaires had a fixed space for written responses provided. Most of the attendees told us that they were happy that we did collect their answers with a view to writing an article, so that their voices could be heard. Thirteen attendees filled in the questionnaire by hand before leaving the conference. Others asked us to send them the questionnaire by mail so that they could return it later; in this way we received another 4 questionnaires within a month of the end of the conference (total response rate 57%). These 4 questionnaires were typed, and on average the answers were slightly more extensive than the answers in the handwritten questionnaires. Despite the relatively small number (17) of collected questionnaires, we still think that the answers provided represent important data on humanist chaplaincy in Northwestern Europe, due to the pioneering role that the respondents play in their respective countries. All 17 participants in the study signed an informed consent form, giving us permission to use and quote from their answers without identifying them by name. No ethical approval was sought for carrying out the study as the participants were approached in their capacity of professionals giving their views on their profession and were free to not participate in the study.

## **Analysis**

It took two years before we found time to start analyzing the data. The recently increasing interest in non-religious chaplaincy and chaplaincy for non-religious people was an incentive to finally use these data, which seem valuable with respect to issues and questions concerning non-religious chaplaincy. By that time, the third author was no longer working at a university. The first two authors decided to ask the fourth author to join in analyzing the data, so that a varied set of perspectives would be included in the analysis; that of a former humanist chaplain, of a cultural psychologist, and of a unitarian chaplain. We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify themes across the questionnaires with a view to the research question: how do Northwestern European chaplains engaged in developing humanist chaplaincy understand ‘humanist’ in humanist chaplaincy? In doing thematic analysis, a number of choices have to be made (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we did look for patterns that are prevalent across the data and that characterize shared understandings of ‘humanist’ in humanist chaplaincy among respondents. In order to count as a ‘key theme’, the pattern had to be detected in ‘a vast majority’ (at least 12, over two third) of the 17 questionnaires. Second, in our analysis, we aimed for a rich description of the whole data set; in particular we wanted to include the voices of all respondents in the analysis. Third, we conducted an inductive thematic analysis as we wanted to explore notions of humanism according to our respondents without already fitting these into a pre-existing theoretical frame. Fourth, we identified themes at a semantic, explicit level; we mainly aimed at describing instead of further interpreting the views and understandings that respondents had put into words in the questionnaires. Finally, we worked within a constructionist paradigm: we assume that the context in which humanist chaplains work influences the



individual accounts that they give of humanist chaplaincy. This implies that we expressly looked for respondents' remarks on how contextual factors influence their views and practices. The first, second, and fourth author all analyzed the data separately and established themes. We then compared and discussed our findings, returned to the data, revised our themes etc. in a cyclical process until we arrived at consensus.

### **Limitations**

As for data collection, the questionnaire was developed in some hurry during the conference; having had more time we could have come up with more elaborate questions. Most respondents filled it in by hand during the last day of the conference, whereas a few respondents returned the questionnaire later and typed the answers. The circumstances in which the questionnaire was filled in varied therefore, which may have influenced the answers. Furthermore, the fact that respondents had just participated an intensive set of workshops on humanist chaplaincy might have led to a strong reflection of notions of humanist chaplaincy, presented in the workshops, in their answers. On the other hand, the timing of distributing the questionnaires just at the end of the conference might also have had an effect that respondents, who had just been extensively reflecting on issues concerning humanist chaplaincy, would arrive at especially meaningful and nuanced answers.

### **Results**

The thematic analysis resulted in four key themes that together capture respondents' characterizations of 'humanist' in their views and practices of humanist chaplaincy. These themes are: (1) aspiring for a (morally) good life: humanist chaplaincy as a calling, (2) equality in a shared world: caring for all fellow human beings, (3) no supernatural power: belief in (inter)personal human potential, (4) struggling with a non-supportive (or even hostile) environment (see also [Table 1](#)). All 17 respondents were randomly assigned a number, from R1 to R17; in the results section, when quoting a respondent, we write the corresponding number in brackets after the quote.

#### ***Aspiring for a (morally) good life: humanist chaplaincy as a calling***

Respondents relate humanism to an aspiration to live in accordance with certain visions of a 'good' or 'better' life: "All things 'wrong' and unjust, whether by nature, by accident, or by our own doing, are in themselves invitations to make things better" (R13). These visions of a good life that respondents put forward have a strong ethical component: they go beyond a vision of what is good for the individual to encompass a vision of what is good for all people and of a more just or more peaceful world. For instance, one respondent explains 'humanist' as "trying to live a meaningful life while respecting others who may have different beliefs" (R11). There are respondents who illustrate their humanism by pointing to their engagement in peace building, in assisting refugees, in caring for the environment or in climate change campaigns.

Respondents describe humanist chaplaincy as a way of putting their humanist aspiration into practice by aiming for a better life of their clients or a better world in general. One respondent mentions that humanist chaplaincy involves “acting as an advocate for someone who is unable to deal with an issue themselves” (R17). Another respondent explains that “humanists think that empathy and compassion can help make the world a better place [and] good chaplaincy is founded, in part, on this” (R6). Respondents obviously see humanist chaplaincy as more than just a profession. One respondent expresses this as follows: “Being a humanist, this moral code and worldview gives the ‘calling’ that religious chaplains would get from their notion of god/gods” (R8). The term ‘calling’ seems to articulate the weight that respondents in general attach to their work. One respondent phrases this as an “urge to engage in effective altruism” (R1) as motivation for working as a humanist chaplain, and another respondent states: “I feel privileged to have a job in which day in and day out I hear so many personal stories and am sometimes allowed by people to come so close” (R14).

Respondents do not describe one homogeneous ‘humanist vision of a good life’. “Also, humanism is a container concept. It holds several shared values, but it does not determine the ranking order of those values. In some contexts, it will be important to focus on the ‘just’, in some it’s ‘sustainability’, and in some just the search for (new) meaning” (R13). In the context of humanist chaplaincy, however, certain shared core humanist values come to the fore, as explained in the following theme.

### ***Equality in a shared world: caring for all fellow human beings***

A central humanist value that is mentioned by respondents is connectedness with or fellowship between all human beings. One respondent describes this global connectedness in terms of ‘humanity’: the mission of humanist chaplains is “making the person feel (even just a little) connected to other people = ‘humanity’, ‘the family of humans’” (R7). Another respondent relates connectedness between human beings to: “our shared conditions in life: one day we will die. Until that day we live” (R15). According to respondents, humanist chaplains represent this connectedness in their work with clients; humanist chaplains are “centered on the person to person connection” (R3).

Respondents indicate equality as a second value that is central in humanist chaplaincy: humanist chaplains “engage with fellow and equal human beings; the support of someone who places equal value with them” (R12). For two respondents (R11 & R 12), the value of equality entails an exclusive view of humanist chaplaincy: humanist chaplains should care for “those who may feel isolated in their humanism” (R11) or “those who do not wish to use more traditional chaplaincy routes” (R12). They argue that this allows for equal access to chaplaincy care for all people, religious and non-religious. Other respondents too underscore the importance of “promoting equality for the non-religious and others” (R4), but also stress that embracing equality entails an inclusive understanding of humanist chaplaincy as directed at all people who desire support, whether humanist, religious, or otherwise. Respondents generally advocate such an inclusive view of humanist chaplaincy as taking “care of non-religious and all human beings desiring our help” (R5). One respondent articulates the inclusive view strongly as

follows: “humanist means that chaplains should be open and willing to deal with all walks of life” (R9).

In this inclusive view of humanist chaplaincy, there is a less explicit focus on humanism in chaplaincy conversations. Some respondents would “promote the ideals of humanism where to do so does not conflict with promoting the welfare and well-being of any person” (R8). Most, however, would be more cautious: “I still feel that humanistic values are some kind of background or platform – so it might not be there up front ‘in the face’ of someone” (R7). One respondent goes even further and speaks about humanist chaplaincy in terms of neutrality, as “a visible, neutral, accessible support to those seeking space to share and consider their thoughts and feelings in relation to their existential questions” (R16). What respondents share is the idea that “We want to offer care and not promote conversion” (R3).

### ***No supernatural power: belief in (inter)personal human potential***

In line with the previous theme and in particular with the inclusive view of humanist chaplaincy, respondents, when distinguishing themselves from religious chaplains, do not express anti-religious perspectives: “Whilst I am not anti-religious, I do not believe or understand the reference to supernatural beings in aspects of my life” (R5). Several respondents state that a belief in supernatural power or supernatural beings is what distinguishes religious convictions from humanist ones. One respondent describes this distinctively humanist conviction as “a belief that there is no transcendent power” (R10), another one as follows: “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” (R13).

The following two citations include, besides a negative designation of what humanist chaplaincy is not, also a positive designation of what is characteristic in humanist chaplaincy: for humanist chaplains, “the ‘faith’ is in the individual and in no external guiding/divine presence” (R3), and they put the “focus on the person rather than on a concept of a supernatural being” (R2). Generally, respondents associate humanism with a belief in human potential; in their moral potential – a respondent describes herself as “believer in the innate moral potential of all humans” (R1) – or in their capacity to overcome difficulties – a respondent mentions “people who achieved progress in the face of adversity/discrimination (Darwin, Rosalind Franklin, Alan Turing)” (R4) as an important source of humanist inspiration.

In relation to humanist chaplaincy, this belief in human potential is expressed by one respondent as follows: “Humanist chaplaincy believes the individual is capable of finding her/his own solutions within her/himself” (R3). It is, however, especially the ‘interpersonal’ human potential that is emphasized by respondents when they describe humanist chaplaincy. They express the conviction that, as chaplains, they are actually able to help others live a better life. Humanist chaplains “provide people with the opportunity to be understood, be valued as a human being; ... build a sense of autonomy in an environment where this is typically lost” (R17). Some of the terms that

respondents use for describing what is required for this ‘interpersonal power’ to manifest are empathy, compassion, love, kindness, confidentiality, attention, sensitivity, and encouragement. Interpersonal human power works two ways as several respondents describe how their clients are a positive influence in their own life: “The life stories of people I meet with are an invaluable source of inspiration” (R14).

### ***Struggling with a non-supportive (or even hostile) environment***

When describing their views and practices of humanist chaplaincy, respondents refer to the societal and institutional environments that they work in. Most (14 of 17) respondents point to the struggle they face in institutions or society due to their humanist worldview. They use terms like “resistance”, “exclusion” and “discrimination” to describe their struggles. The severity and the kind of struggle that the different respondents report seems related to the specific European country in which they work and to the role and legitimacy of humanist chaplaincy in these countries. Working as a humanist chaplain in a ‘religious society’ may be problematic: “It is difficult in a religious society ... to be heard and respected for my life stance” (R11); however, working in a highly secularized society may pose difficulties as well: “Being in a very secular ... society, people don’t see the support and comfort they can obtain by participating in ceremonies or speaking with another person in a free space” (R10). Respondents explain that coming to the conference in the Netherlands has made them realize even more that the situation for humanist chaplains in their countries is unfavorable compared to the Dutch situation, in terms of general acceptance of non-religious chaplaincy and academic qualification of humanist chaplains.

Respondents mainly describe resistance from religious chaplains and clergy, which they sometimes interpret as stemming from a fear of losing clients, and sometimes as resistance to what religious chaplains perceive as ‘non-moral’ chaplaincy. One respondent states: “Some head chaplains are progressive and welcoming, but many are conservative and put up barriers” (R17); another respondent points to “resistance from religious chaplains whose recruitment policies and practices discriminate against non-religious care providers” (R6). Apart from religious chaplains, psychologists and social workers are perceived as uncooperative by some respondents: “In my institution I meet with a lot of resistance from psychologists concerning our work (despite our efforts at rapprochement)” (R14).

Respondents also name structural hindering factors in relation to working as a humanist chaplain. They speak about “our invisibility, once in an organisation” (R3); about education – there is “a credibility gap between us and religious priests/ministers. The training open to us does not provide the same ‘weight’ as the ordination process” (R8) – and about resources – “The chaplaincy team do not include me in meeting and projects; I am a volunteer, so have no ‘office’ or finances” (R11). One respondent points to the negative perception of humanism as a challenging factor: “The Humanist movement is still seen as a bunch of ‘angry atheists’ to a large extent by those in authority” (R8). Another respondent, finally, emphasizes inhibitive structural factors that all chaplains struggle with, irrespective of their worldview: “the challenge all chaplains face

together ... is the questioning of existential and spiritual needs in general. It's often considered as a luxury problem." (R13).

## **Conclusion and discussion: building blocks for an inclusive perspective on chaplaincy in secular societies**

In this article, we explored views on humanist chaplaincy by Northwestern European humanist chaplains in view of the question of how to understand chaplaincy in secular societies. By analyzing 17 questionnaires, filled in by pioneering humanist chaplains from four Northwestern European countries, we established four key themes describing their understandings of 'humanist' in humanist chaplaincy (Table 1). When we compare these themes to the views of Jaap van Praag (1982), pioneer in the development of humanist chaplaincy in the Netherlands, pointed out at the beginning of the article, we see that these views resonate with the first three key themes. According to Van Praag, humanist chaplains put into practice the humanist belief that we should aim at resisting dehumanizing forces by strengthening existential resilience (compare theme 1). Van Praag understands humanist chaplaincy as rooted in human solidarity (compare theme 2), and in a belief in the power of human connection and dialogue (compare theme 3). Finally, concerning the fourth theme, the struggle for legitimacy and visibility that humanist chaplains describe is reminiscent of the struggle of humanists in the Netherlands after World War II.

In Table 1, these themes are displayed in the first and second columns. Concerning the first three themes, the second column displays a characteristic feature of humanist chaplaincy and the first column the respective humanistic principle that the feature is related to. The fourth characteristic is not related to a humanist principle but to the context in which humanist chaplains work, so that the entry in the first column is empty. Compared to religious chaplaincy, what stands out is the overlap between humanist and religious chaplaincy, at least concerning the first two themes: all chaplains would understand their profession as a calling and would be willing to offer care to any person in need. A crucial and perhaps distinctive feature of humanist chaplaincy appears to be an absence of belief in supernatural power (theme 3). Positively formulated, humanist chaplains work from a faith in 'humanity', in the (inter)personal potential of human beings.

A broader aim of these explorations was to develop a better understanding of the role, place, and significance of chaplaincy in secular societies. One way in which chaplains have adapted to the changing role of religion in Western societies has been to associate themselves with spirituality rather than with religion (Doehring, 2015; Orton, 2008). In the writings of Van Praag (1982) on humanism and humanist chaplaincy from various decades ago, the term spirituality is not used. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that only one of our respondents uses the term spirituality ("existential and spiritual needs") when asked to describe humanist chaplaincy. Maybe this is not surprising given that "the term 'spirituality' carries different connotations in secularized portions of Europe than in the United States" (Walton, 2012, p. 1). In our view, it would be worthwhile to explore how notions of humanist chaplaincy relate to existing and emerging understandings of spirituality and spiritual care, also with a view to establishing a framework for dialogue between (religious and non-religious) chaplains, and given the notions of non-religious/humanist spirituality/transcendence that can already be found

in the literature – for instance the notion of ‘humanistic-phenomenological spirituality’ (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; see also Fowler, 2015), or notions of ‘horizontal transcendence’ (Coleman, Silver, & Holcombe, 2013; Halsema, 2012; Kunneman, 2005).

For now, let us explore how views of Northwestern European humanist chaplains may inform a future-oriented perspective on chaplaincy that encompasses practices of both humanist and religious chaplains, and that promotes an open dialogue between chaplains and identification of common ground. In the third column of [Table 1](#), we propose building blocks for a future-oriented perspective on chaplaincy, derived from each of the four themes. Here we aim for a perspective on chaplaincy that transcends differences in worldview of chaplains, that enables dialogue and highlights common ground. The first two themes seem to translate quite straightforwardly into views that all chaplains are likely to support: the view that chaplains are driven by deeply held moral convictions, that they advocate for vulnerable and marginalized people, and that they see all people as equally entitled to receive chaplaincy care. This last building block points to issues that require careful consideration: to what extent, on what conditions, in what circumstances, does the worldview of the chaplain need to correspond to that of the client? To what extent, on what conditions, in what circumstances, may chaplains with any worldview provide care to clients of any worldview? These seem crucial questions that require both exchange between chaplains and solid research.

The third theme that was established in relation to humanist chaplaincy points at the difference between humanist and religious chaplains. Still, we would argue that this theme also highlights the central role of faith or belief in the work of all chaplains. In the case of humanist chaplains, this is a faith in humanity and a belief in (inter)personal human potential. More generally, for chaplaincy care to be relevant for all people, chaplains need to view all people as orienting towards a good life, guided by (often implicit) visions of what is of ultimate value to them, visions which may or may not be related to religion (see also Savage, 2018; Schuhmann & Damen, 2018). They need to be aware and considerate of the diversity of such visions. In particular, understanding non-religious people as ‘nones’, in negative terms, does not seem a fruitful starting point for developing a future-oriented perspective on chaplaincy – also in light of the view that we often cannot draw sharp distinctions between ‘people with religious beliefs’ and ‘people with non-religious beliefs’, and that people increasingly draw from various worldview traditions simultaneously (Ammerman, 2010).

Finally, the fourth theme points at the influence of cultural and organizational contexts in which chaplains work on their chaplaincy practice. The questionnaires that were analyzed seem to suggest that, when humanist chaplains experience hostility in society or from religious chaplains, they have a more exclusive focus on providing care for humanist or non-religious clients. If there is hostility between chaplains, their common concerns easily disappear from view. We would argue that the central common concern of chaplains would be that spiritual care is provided to every human being for whom this may be beneficial. In our view, therefore, chaplains should aim at working together towards equal availability of and access to chaplaincy care for all people, and unite in their commitment to draw attention to the importance of (care for) existential and spiritual issues. All chaplains care for people who face existential issues, issues to



which there are no definitive answers, by supporting them in searching and groping for understanding. In conclusion, the explorations in this article underscore that, with a view to the future of chaplaincy, what unites chaplains – religious, non-religious – is more important than what divides them.

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