Spirituality in humanist chaplaincy: Theoretical and empirical perspectives

Consultation ENHCC
June 2018

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Questions I had as former humanist chaplain in a Dutch prison

- What is the ‘pastoral’ aspect of my work?
- What do I represent as a humanist chaplain?
“Can there be a ‘secular spirituality’?”

“Can resolutely secular people – including self-described atheists – be thought of as spiritual?
This is a pertinent question given the increasing number of atheists and secular people in the West.
Are any of these people ‘spiritual’?”

(A. Singleton (2016), In: de Souza, Bone, & Watson (Eds.), Spirituality across disciplines: Research and practice)
Sources of my personal spiritual (humanist, secular) inspiration
Humanist practice in the Netherlands: a ‘long’ tradition

Jaap van Praag (1911-1981)
(Co-)founder of the Humanist League in 1946

→ Humanism as a world view
(meaning frame providing orientation in situations of tragedy or dehumanization)

→ Humanist chaplaincy (since 50’s) in prisons, the military, healthcare institutions
“not expecting anything, hoping for everything”

“fully aware of the mysteriousness of life”

→ Cultivate a sense of hope and of mystery
Spirituality as a dimension of human existence

“In our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality. We all have a sense of this, which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it” (Taylor, 2007)

Human beings are “spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good” (Murdoch, 1970)
An inclusive ‘rationale’/language for chaplaincy

- Need to develop an inclusive understanding: “... there is need for a discourse on chaplaincy which preserves its core value but speaks to people of all religions and none” (Kevern & McSherry, 2015, p. 49)

- What about ‘spiritual care’? No religious connotation, but focus on personal meaning making. However: different professionals work in the domain of spirituality too (nurses, social workers, therapists).

- What, then, is the role of spirituality in an inclusive understanding of chaplaincy?
Charles Taylor: Orientation in life

**Human existence:**
Search for orientation in *moral space* (the space of existential questions or ‘questions about the good’)
When we manage to orient we ‘make sense of our lives *spiritually*’.

**Orienting systems:**
(culturally rooted) *visions of an ‘ultimately good’ life* that are *believable* to us in our actual life situation

(Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 1989;
Schuhmann & van der Geugten, *Pastoral Psychology*, 2017;
Schuhmann & Damen, *Representing the Good*, 2018
Chaplaincy: supporting orientation processes in moral space

Healthcare chaplains meet with people in severely disorienting situations:
- Illness
- Loss and death
- Birth, marriage

“I feel lost”
“I feel I am wandering in the dark”
“I do not know how to go on from here”
What is the ‘typically pastoral’ quality of supporting orientation in life?

“Chaplains . . . represent and manifest claims about the nature of reality” (Cobb, Swift, & Todd, 2015)

Religious traditions:
Represent (the possibility of connecting to) God, even in desperate situations

In a secular age?
Murdoch (1970): On God and Good
Connect “a clear-eyed contemplation of the misery and evil of the world with a sense of uncorrupted good”
Exchange program on Humanist chaplaincy (Nov. 2015)
34 participants from 9 European countries
Humanist chaplains across Europe: What does ‘humanist’ mean?

Humanists as believers...

“Believer that morality is founded upon a shared concern for the experience of conscious creatures” (m, 22)

Humanist chaplain “believes that client is capable of finding his/her own solutions within him/herself” (f, 51)

“based on the belief that there is no transcendent power” (m, 46)
Humanist chaplains across Europe: chaplaincy as a ‘calling’

“Being a humanist and the moral code that it gives are the motivators for seeking to promote welfare and well-being of any person who appears to need help. It gives the ‘calling’ that religious chaplains would get from their notion of god/gods” (m, 39)

“If humans could stop for a moment in this crazy world & think of their humanity and show it to everyone, then the world would be a better place” (f, 72)

“caring for all humans in a positive, ethical way & taking consideration of our environment” (f, 40)
Humanist chaplains across Europe: Sources of inspiration

“People who have achieved progress in the face of adversity, e.g. discrimination – Darwin, Rosalind Franklin, Alan Turing” (f, 34)

“Meditation on compassion and mindfulness” (m, 22)

“Nature (walks in the countryside); contemplation; mindfulness” (f, 51)

“The good in people” (m, 64)
Iris Murdoch on Good and transcendence

Transcendent visions of the good (‘the Good’) as focus of moral life involve:

- Turning attention away from the “fat, relentless ego” → move from selfishness to unselfishness

- **Realism** (“as a moral achievement”): Compassionately looking at reality, particularly at other people, suffering and evil

- **Mysteriousness**: they are orientation points that always remain distant, beyond
Chaplaincy: Representing transcendent visions of the good

- **NOT**: Imposing visions of the good (transcendent goods as mysterious; ‘fragility of goodness’ – Nussbaum, 2001)

- Representing **faith** that some good remains believable in ultimate situations (Capps, 1995: “agents of hope”)

Intended as (a step towards) a shared understanding of chaplaincy that makes sense in various religions and worldviews;

In which spirituality & transcendence are central notions.

Nurturing spirituality in chaplaincy would then mean:

- Seek knowledge of various traditions of the good that are of importance to our clients

- Keep exploring our own position with respect to these traditions

- Keep fostering a living relationship with transcendent goods (involves an acute awareness of ‘the fragility of goodness’)

- Keep developing insight in our egocentric inclinations, limitations in attentively, compassionately and lovingly look at reality (others, suffering, evil, ...)

Spirituality in humanist chaplaincy
Representing the Good in chaplaincy practice

- Recognizing the mysteriousness of the client as Other (Levinas, Butler);

- Apply ‘recognizing mysteriousness of the Other’ to ‘others’ in clients’ story (not: ‘anything goes’ stance) – “‘Spirituality’ is not a synonym for ‘goodness’” (Pargament, 2007)

- Address political question which visions of the good are visible/available to whom (in organizations, in society at large) → social justice
The relevance of chaplaincy in the 21st century

There is “no ultimately believable framework” (Taylor, 1989) that guides us through moral space.

In a globalizing world:
- “myriad traditions of the good” (Gergen, 2009, Ammerman, 2010)
- Complexity of “the search for moral truth” (Gilligan, 2014)

Disorientation in moral space: a condition of our time?

Chaplaincy as practice of supporting ‘search for moral truth’: existential, spiritual, ethical and political work.
Thank you for your attention!
Literature