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Reconsidering Humanist Chaplaincy for a Plural Society: The Implications for Higher Professional Education

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Abstract: Recent developments in Dutch society and its healthcare system pose new challenges to humanist chaplaincy. Thus far, chaplaincy has been predominantly rooted in institutionalized religion, but it now has to serve a diversity of people who are increasingly secularized with personal ways of worldviewing. Moreover, chaplaincy is increasingly becoming a profession like many others, reducing the focus on its world-viewing competencies. The main question this article addresses is what this implies for the education of chaplains, more specifically for humanist chaplains who are educated on a Master's level course at the University of Humanistic Studies. Using the concepts of interprofessional learning communities (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007) and dialogical professionalism (Jacobs, 2010), two visions are put forward for developing the education of humanist chaplains that might also be relevant for other chaplaincy educational programs.

Keywords: secularization, plural society, professionalization, chaplaincy, healthcare, education, humanism

Samenvatting (Nederlands): Recente ontwikkelingen in de Nederlandse samenleving en de gezondheidszorg stellen de humanistisch geestelijke verzorging voor nieuwe uitdagingen. Tot dusverre was de geestelijke verzorging voornamelijk geworteld in geïnstitutionaliseerde levensbeschouwelijke kaders en daarmee gericht op specifieke levensbeschouwelijke groepen. Zij ziet zich anno 2020 echter voor de taak gesteld om een diversiteit aan mensen te dienen die in toenemende mate gesecculariseerd zijn en een hoogstpersoonlijke levensovertuiging hebben. Bovendien is er een tendens om de geestelijke verzorging steeds meer te zien als een beroep zoals andere professies, waardoor haar levensbeschouwelijke karakter lijkt af te nemen. De belangrijkste vraag in dit artikel is wat dit betekent voor de opleiding van geestelijk verzorgers, meer specifiek voor humanistisch geestelijk verzorgers die zijn opgeleid in de masteropleiding Humanistiek aan de Universiteit voor Humanistiek. Gebruikmakend van de concepten van interprofessionele leergemeenschappen (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007) en dialogische professionaliteit (Jacobs, 2010), worden twee visies naar voren gebracht voor de ontwikkeling van de opleiding voor humanistisch geestelijk verzorgers die mogelijk ook relevant zijn voor andere onderwijsprogramma's op het terrein van de geestelijke verzorging.

Sleutelwoorden: secularisatie, plurale samenleving, professionalisering, geestelijke verzorging, gezondheidszorg, opleiding, humanisme

Introduction

At the start of the twentieth century, Dutch politics adopted a rather unique structure for the organization of its society, with the aim of guaranteeing the peaceful co-existence of the many churches, religious currents, and worldviews that were characteristic of the Netherlands. Within a system of “pillars,” every belief was allowed to develop its own independent sub-society,

with its own schools, healthcare institutions, political parties, and insurance companies. After the Second World War, this pillarized system gradually fell apart in complex processes of secularization, individualization, globalization, and immigration. The Netherlands has become a secular and plural society, in which the influence of religious and non-religious traditions and organizations has been strongly reduced, and which has a diversity of – often not institutionalized – worldviews.⁵ These changes affect humanism and humanist organizations, including the debate on humanist chaplaincy, and they cover a range of positions between atheist, spiritual, and political humanism.

Alongside this, there is a trend toward professionalization of chaplaincy, particularly in the health and social care sector, resulting in the repositioning of chaplains within healthcare institutions, an increase in research into chaplaincy processes and outcomes, and an increase in interprofessional collaboration. These transformations require a reorientation regarding the question as to what training and qualifications humanist chaplains should receive, in order to support a diversity of people, both affiliated and unaffiliated. They also raise questions about the competencies required for effective chaplaincy, the ways to best educate chaplains, and the role of the organizations in which chaplains are employed (Cadge et al., 2019).

In this article, we will describe our university’s ongoing debate to find answers to these questions. We will first focus more specifically on the aforementioned two transformations that are still taking place within Dutch society and the field of healthcare chaplaincy. After that, we will describe the current Master’s course for humanist chaplaincy at the University of Humanistic Studies, and the changes we propose in the coming years in order to make humanist chaplaincy “future proof.”

Secularization and plural beliefs in Dutch society

The first major cultural change is a societal and spiritual one. The philosopher Charles Taylor argues that secularization characterizes life in modern Western societies; Western society has changed from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to a society in which this has become an option, even an awkward option in certain environments (Taylor, 1989, 2007). Moreover, globalization and immigration of highly

5. In 2017, over half the Dutch population identified themselves as (religiously or spiritually) unaffiliated. See <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2018/43/meer-dan-de-helft-nederlanders-niet-religieus>. For earlier but similar data on religious affiliation and a sociological analysis, see also Bernts & Berghuijs (2016).

diverse populations have led to an increased plurality of worldviews and religious and spiritual traditions, including Muslim and Buddhist traditions. Consequently, many people who are not religiously affiliated are searching for new, more personalized forms of spirituality or belief practices, which may be a hybrid bricolage taken from different religious or spiritual traditions. Therefore, contemporary Dutch society can be seen as a plural society – its worldviews are dynamic, multiple, and interactive. Secularization and re-spiritualization go hand in hand; this is a fundamental paradox of many Western societies, including Dutch society, at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005).

The development toward pluralism is intensified by globalization, generating increasingly complex societies wherein diverse meaning frames and traditions are lived realities. We speak of plural belief environments, marking societies produced by a new phase in modern culture, that of “liquid modernity” and fluidity of beliefs (Bauman, 2000). Taylor (2004, 2007) introduces the concept of “social imaginaries,” these being virtual spaces in which people share as well as contest the meaning of their existence, often in unconscious as well as transient ways (Castoriadis, 1987; ten Kate, 2018). This sharing should not primarily be understood as a cognitive agreement between people about a vision or a set of ideas and values. People share plural beliefs⁶ in a fragmented way as often embodied experiences. Burning a candle to mourn or commemorate a lost one, or using a Buddhist symbol on a wedding ring without being a believer, are examples of how people share experiences of meaning without explicitly knowing what they are doing (Wojtkowiak, 2017) or adhering to that particular worldview. Worldviews partly determine their imaginaries, but at the same time people play with them and transform them into new imaginaries (Droogers, 2010). Hence, the relation to worldviews in a plural belief society is an active one. We take the concept of worldviewing from Alma and Anbeek (2013) to indicate the active ways in which people give meaning to their lives and existential experiences, thereby transforming and pluralizing stable worldview systems from within.

6. In the following analyses, the term “plural belief” is used to map the various worldviews of people within a globalizing world. The reason why this term is used instead of “plural faith” or “multi-faith” is because of its inclusivity. A belief is defined as liquid, open, transient, and plural (ten Kate, 2018; Kearney, 2001).

Humanism in the Netherlands as a plural belief society

Inspired by famous Dutch humanist philosophers such as Erasmus (sixteenth century) and Spinoza (seventeenth century), humanist thought and ethics are deeply rooted in Dutch society (Alma & Smaling, 2009; Cliteur & van Houten, 1993; Derkx, 2015; van Praag, 1946, 1978). In 1946, the Humanist League was founded in Amsterdam. It created an official “home” for a growing number of people who had turned away from religion. Soon, humanism was officially recognized as an organized (non-religious) worldview, driven by ideals of human emancipation, independence, and social justice. In this capacity, organized Dutch humanism actively contributed to the secularization of society. It was the Humanist League which, in 1960, first began a training program for humanist chaplains in the army. This was followed, in 1962, by the establishment of the Humanist Educational Institute, where humanist pedagogy and education were further developed. Official recognition as an organized worldview gave the humanist movement the right, in 1989, to open its own university, which is – like all other Dutch universities – financially supported by the state. It is at this University of Humanistic Studies that humanist chaplains are still educated. Its stated mission is clear: through research and teaching on the basis of humanist inspiration, it aims to contribute to the development of a humane, caring, and sustainable society in which all people can lead a meaningful life.⁷

However, as Dutch society changes in the context of globalization, all organized worldviews, including humanism, search for ways to resituate themselves within the liquidity of plural beliefs in shifting social, cultural, and political environments. Where there were once seemingly clear boundaries between different worldviews with respect to their roles as meaning frames when dealing with existential questions, these boundaries now seem blurred, perhaps even kaleidoscopic. How does one, in such an increasingly complex, pluralist society, contribute to the possibility of the humanist ambition for all people to live a “meaningful life”? What do humanist traditions and values mean in the twenty-first century? Humanism – like all other worldviews – is plural and liquid. There are humanists who advocate a distinct atheist position, thereby fortifying the boundaries of their worldview, and there are humanists who seek dialogue and common ground with others in the context of the liquidity of our times.

This plurality also has implications for humanist chaplains in the Netherlands, who work on a daily basis with people who seek their help in their

7. See <https://www.uvh.nl/university-of-humanistic-studies/about-our-university/mission-and-strategic-plan>

quest for meaning and humanization. Particularly when confronted with life-altering or life-threatening developments, most humans (religious or not) ask themselves questions about life, based on their existential needs (van Deurzen, 2012; Yalom, 1980), without necessarily referring anymore to large religious traditions. Many humanist chaplains work in plural belief contexts, and want to renew or revitalize a humanist-inspired meaning frame which helps them in their professional approach. Against this changing context, we will situate another transformation in the next paragraph, namely, the broadening and professionalization of chaplaincy in the Netherlands.

The broadening and professionalization of chaplaincy

Like other public professions, chaplaincy is in a process of professionalization. This is reflected in the recent changes to the *Professional standards* of the Association for Spiritual Caregivers in the Netherlands (Vereniging voor Geestelijk VerZorgers, VGVZ). In its 2015 edited version, chaplaincy is defined as “professional guidance, assistance and counselling in questions regarding meaning making and philosophy of life” (VGVZ, 2015). This definition marks a growing emphasis on the professional quality of the work, supported by professional standards, registration, research, training registers, and codes of conduct for the profession. This professionalization puts forward at least three challenges for chaplaincy.

The first challenge addresses the collaboration between chaplaincy and other healthcare professions. Traditionally within healthcare, chaplaincy has defined itself alongside other health professions and as “something” complementing them, this “something” being expertise in issues regarding meaning in life, religion, and spirituality.⁸ In the last decades, however, following developments in palliative care toward holistic care and the re-spiritualization in society, other healthcare professions such as nurses, general practitioners, and social workers are also called upon to pay attention to the existential needs of people, thereby entering the area of expertise traditionally held by chaplains. This requires health and social care chaplains to articulate their specialized knowledge and expertise in spiritual care more clearly, and to collaborate with other disciplines to provide person-centered or integrated care.

8. Cadge et al. (2019), in their sociological analysis of this profession in the United States, have referred to chaplaincy as a “companion profession” within healthcare, because chaplains defined as their task what other professions did not, thereby complementing them and profiling themselves within the healthcare domain.

Second, and following on from the first challenge, chaplains are asked to articulate their own expertise within the context of evidence-based healthcare, in which every profession is required to prove their added value supported by empirical academic research. This requires chaplains to become familiar with the language of healthcare and of evidence-based practice, and to strive for accountability and a contribution to cost-effective patient care (see, for example, Cobb, 2007; Kelly, 2012; de Vries et al., 2008). In this context, research is conducted into the outcomes for people, in order to foster new professional development and to provide proof of added value for healthcare institutions (Fitchett, 2017; Snowden & Telfer, 2017). However, there are also many reservations about becoming an evidence-based healthcare profession like other healthcare professions (Swift, 2004; Swinton, 2003). Some fear that the uniqueness of the profession may get lost if chaplaincy is integrated into “care routes” and “care protocols,” and if it is researched according to institutional measures that do not capture the intent or “visions of the good” of this profession (Damen et al., 2019). In order to deal with this concern, collaborative and narrative methods of research are proposed – in addition to methods of “outsider research” – that engage chaplains as researchers and as developers of their own practice (Jacobs, 2020). Chaplains themselves are thus engaged in conducting chaplaincy research and developing the appropriate measures.

A third challenge is a shift in focus from worldview-based frames (non-religious or religious) to professional frames of reference. This raises the question as to how this influences the professional identity development of chaplains. To what extent, for example, may humanist views still determine the professional identity of humanist chaplains? (Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014). And how do these humanist views manifest themselves in plural belief contexts as outlined in the previous part of this article? In this regard, Zock (2008) refers to the “split professional identity” of the chaplain: on the one hand, many chaplains still have a religious or humanist mission and in that sense are representatives of a worldview tradition; on the other hand, they are “spiritual care professionals,” who, like other professionals, contribute to the holistic care of patients. The secularization and pluralization of Dutch society shift the religious or humanist mission of chaplains into the background, expecting that they should be able to serve all people, atheist as well as those from different religious and spiritual backgrounds. The question is whether this is the way forward for the profession.

In the Netherlands, this third challenge becomes particularly apparent in the expanded work areas for chaplains. In 2019, for example, 15 chaplains were recruited for the police force. Their task is to support police officers in their mental and moral resilience and sense of purpose, considering the

major impact of police work on personal lives and well-being. These chaplains are recruited as generic chaplains without the need for any spiritual or religious endorsement. Chaplains have also been appointed in the earthquake zone in the Netherlands. Here, too, the task of chaplains is not primarily related to representing a specific religion or worldview, but to helping people give meaning to disrupting events and disrupted lives. Recently, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport gave a strong financial boost to chaplaincy in primary and community care. This chaplaincy work – like that of inpatient healthcare settings – is characterized by working sectorially and in close collaboration with other health and social care disciplines.⁹

The shifting, broader context of chaplaincy toward a society of plural beliefs and the three challenges with regard to professionalization, demand a critical rethinking of humanist chaplaincy education, which is the focus of this article. In the following sections, we will first describe the Master's course in Humanistic Studies, and then discuss the implications for educating humanist chaplains at the University of Humanistic Studies.

The Master's course in Humanistic Studies

The university's vision is to educate chaplains who can provide professional guidance and assistance in questions regarding meaning-making and philosophy of life, at an individual or group level, and who can promote a humane climate within organizations and in society at large. This education is explicitly inspired by plural humanist traditions. To become a humanist chaplain, one has to enroll on the Master's course. This course has undergone several changes in the last decades. Between 1989 and 2012, the university offered a Master's degree with several separate tracks, of which one focused solely on chaplaincy. This Master's degree underwent a change in 2012, when the university's graduation options were merged into an all-round educational program to become a humanistic specialist. The current Master's course in Humanistic Studies is a three-year full-time course, which aims to develop scientific knowledge and professional skills in five different areas identified as educational tracks within the curriculum. These areas include: humanism, chaplaincy, education, organization, and research.

Concerns about the reduced number of modules on chaplaincy in the new course, expressed by both students and humanist chaplains, played a role in the recent strengthening of the chaplaincy track within the course.

9. A research program subsidized by the government has been implemented to strengthen professional chaplaincy work in primary care and community care.

This resulted in an extra optional module on “Methods of chaplaincy” in the second or third year; a streamlining of modules specifically aimed at professional skills in chaplaincy; and a mandatory internship in chaplaincy for those students who want to be appointed as humanist chaplains.

In the first year, students attend eight required modules, two in each educational track (each module allowing for 7.5 ECT¹⁰). In the second year, students attend three mandatory modules and choose two modules on professional skills. In addition, they follow an internship (22.5 ECT) in a chosen field of work. In the third year, students attend two mandatory modules and choose three modules from the University of Humanistic Studies or from another university in the Netherlands or abroad. They finish the course with their Master’s thesis (22.5 ECT). See Table 1 for an overview of the Master’s course.

The modules differ in their focus on the learning objectives to which they contribute. The Master’s course is organized around the five following competencies.

1. Knowledge and insight regarding relevant perspectives on meaning-making and humanization from a historical, philosophical, and social-scientific perspective, and regarding humanist chaplaincy, democratic citizenship, and education.

Table 1: *Overview of the Master’s course in Humanistic Studies*

| Year | Track | Mandatory or optional | Module |
|------|--------------|-----------------------|--|
| 1 | Chaplaincy | Mandatory | Existential guidance from a humanist perspective |
| | | Mandatory | Existential group work for meaning in life and empowerment |
| | Humanism | Mandatory | Humanism and resilience |
| | | Mandatory | Humanism, meaning in life, and aging well (in English) |
| | | Mandatory | Worldviewing and religion in a secular age |
| | Organization | Mandatory | Humanization of the public sector |
| | Education | Mandatory | Humanism and education |
| | Research | Mandatory | Philosophy of science |

(Continued)

2. The ability to apply knowledge and insight to professional practices and research relevant to Humanistic Studies, and to (international)

Table 1 (Continued)

| Year | Track | Mandatory or optional | Module |
|------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| 2 | Chaplaincy professional skills | Optional | Moral deliberation and competency |
| | | Optional | Methods in existential/spiritual guidance |
| | | Optional | Ritual practices for existential experiences |
| | | Optional | Mediation skills |
| | Organization | Mandatory | Pursuing social justice: redistribution and/or recognition? |
| | | Optional | Coaching skills |
| | Professional skills | Optional | Facilitating moral learning in organizations (in English) |
| | | Mandatory | Moral education and citizenship education |
| | Education | Optional | Didactical educational skills |
| | | Optional | Professional identity development and education |
| | Research | Mandatory | Narrative research and oral history |
| | Internship | Mandatory | |
| 3 | Chaplaincy professional skills | Optional | Methods in existential/spiritual counselling |
| | | Optional | Moral deliberation and competency |
| | | Optional | Ritual practices for existential experiences |
| | | Optional | Mediation skills |
| | Organization professional skills | Optional | Coaching skills |
| | | Optional | Facilitating moral learning in organizations (in English) |
| | Education | Mandatory | Humanistic practices in a globalizing world (in English) |
| | | Optional | Didactical educational skills |
| | Professional skills | Optional | Professional identity development and education |
| | | Mandatory | Practice-oriented mixed methods research |
| | Research | Mandatory | |
| | Master's thesis | Mandatory | |

political and social developments and diversity issues in the field of meaning-making and humanization.

3. The ability to make critical analyses of, and judgments on, possibilities and limitations, based on relevant scientific knowledge, critical

- (self-)reflection, and a sustainable dialogue with others, embedded in the scientific and social context.
4. Communication (and professional) skills, including conversation and writing skills and the support of individuals, groups, or organizations in dealing with meaning-making and humanization issues through the use of dialogical and analytical skills.
 5. Personal worldviewing skills: the ability to articulate one's own philosophical positioning and one's own value framework.

The mandatory modules generally accentuate knowledge, its application, and critical judgment (learning goals 1–3), whereas the professional skills modules aim to balance these learning goals with skills (learning goal 4) and personal worldviewing competencies (learning goal 5). Table 2 describes the knowledge/judgment competence, the professional competence, and the personal worldviewing competence of the chaplaincy modules.

Table 2: *Chaplaincy competency modules*

| Year/Module | (1) Knowledge/judgment competencies (2) Professional competencies (chaplaincy skills) (3) Personal worldviewing competencies |
|--|---|
| Year 1. Existential counseling from a humanist perspective | (1) Psychological and philosophical theories about meaning-making; various approaches to individual guidance regarding meaning-making; humanist principles and their application in contemporary chaplaincy practices. (2) Analysing the existential/spiritual dimension in situations of existential guidance. (3) Explicating elements of students' own worldviewing and investigating the role of humanist principles in students' own worldviewing. |
| Year 1. Existential group counseling for meaning in life and empowerment | (1) Philosophical and psychological perspectives on experiences of vulnerability, violence, and mourning in relation to resilience; relational theories of empowerment and meaning in life; theory about existential group work. (2) Facilitating groups with regard to existential experiences and themes. (3) Investigating students' own experiences with regard to vulnerability and resilience. |

(Continued)

Table 2 (Continued)

| | |
|---|--|
| Year 2/3. Methods in existential/spiritual guidance (newly developed) | (1) Theories of chaplaincy and existential guidance. (2) Methods of chaplaincy. (3) Articulating students' personal views of "the good" in relation to humanism |
| Year 2/3. Moral dialogue and competency | (1) Knowledge about relevant ethical theories and theories in the field of moral guidance and moral deliberation; professional codes of conduct; the meaning of official secrecy, professional secrecy, right of non-disclosure. (2) Coaching of individuals and groups with moral questions and dilemmas (moral guidance and moral case deliberation); dialogical skills in situations with conflicting views; implementing moral deliberation in organizations. (3) Articulating students' values and their impact on moral guidance. |
| Year 2/3. Ritual practices for existential experiences | (1) Theory on existential experiences (such as loss, mourning, farewell, birth) with special attention to physical experiences; the role of emotions, senses, materiality, and physicality in meaning-making; ritual theory; meaning of new rituals and symbols in a secularizing world. (2) Designing rituals: translating questions and emotions of meaning of persons or groups into a ritual form; translating inspiration into a text, a reflection or ritual. (3) Identifying sources of inspiration and values and translating them into the design and implementation of ritual. |
| Year 2/3. Mediation skills | (1) Understand and explain theories about non-violence and mediation skills; analyse and assess conflict situations on the basis of non-violence and mediation skills theories. (2) Apply professional skills of non-violent communication, conflict mediation, and mediation skills in a (humanistic) practice; offer guidance to persons and groups in dealing with conflicts. (3) Reflect on and evaluate one's skills and actions as a mediator in conflicts. |

Visions for the future education of chaplains

The recent renewal of the chaplaincy track within the curriculum has strengthened the professional education of students in becoming chaplains. Students feel more equipped for their future work and more supported in their internships. However, there are still some urgent issues that need to be addressed in the near future. We will put forward two visions for the future education of humanist chaplains that follow from the two developments described in this article – the professionalization of chaplaincy and

the secularization and pluralization of society – and which are related to the three categories of competencies and the weight they should be given.¹¹ The first one discusses the relationship between academic and professional competencies; the second vision addresses the personal worldviewing competence and its relationship to humanism.

First of all, the all-round Master's degree covers the professional education of chaplains, but it also serves a much broader field of humanist professionals. Although the modules in the other curriculum tracks will also be useful for chaplains, they are not specifically aligned with chaplaincy competencies, the above-mentioned challenges in the field of chaplaincy, or the newly developing work areas. Historically, humanist chaplaincy was mainly focused on supporting people in individual encounters and, more recently, group sessions and secular rituals. Current developments in the domain of health and social care chaplaincy also require other skills from chaplains, such as educating healthcare colleagues in spiritual care; interprofessional collaboration; contributing to research; entrepreneurial skills for chaplaincy in outpatient care; and skills to represent chaplaincy in conversation with stakeholders such as managers, policy-makers, health insurance companies, and politicians. This requires a curriculum that still covers a broad range of competencies, but with a focus on “existential guidance.” This also puts forward the need for a stronger connection between academic and professional goals. So far, the focus on knowledge (content) had exceeded the focus on professional skills. Because chaplaincy is a Master's degree, students are educated to think analytically, reason logically, conduct and interpret research, and be able to read highly theoretical and specialist literature in different languages. At the same time, they have to master practical chaplaincy skills such as performing rituals, leading group discussions, or training healthcare professionals in ethics. Students sometimes find themselves in a place of work with much theoretical skill but little clue about how actually to relate to individuals or other professionals. Other students easily acquire practical skills but have a hard time fulfilling the academic requirements.

In our future vision, the Master's course is built around interprofessional academic learning communities (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007) at the intersection of professional health and social care practices – including chaplaincy – and higher educational institutions. The World Health Organization (WHO) proposes that the purpose of interprofessional learning is to develop collaborative practice through which health workers from

11. This question also turned out to be a main topic in a study on the training of healthcare chaplains conducted by Cadge et al. (2019) in the United States.

different professional backgrounds work together with patients, families, carers, and communities to deliver the highest quality of care (WHO, 2010). Within these learning communities, students, lecturers, researchers, and professionals collaborate in hybrid activities including research and consultancy assignments, work field activities, internships, or student-led support centers or enterprises. They provide the opportunity to conduct academic practice-oriented research that contributes to both the professional development of humanist chaplains as well as the development of practice-based evidence of processes and outcomes of chaplaincy, thereby adding to the professionalization agenda. However, there are some considerable barriers in higher education to interprofessional learning that should be taken into account, and good examples from other Master's courses could be used to overcome these (Gilbert, 2005).

The second issue concerns the tendency to regard the development of the personal worldviewing competence as “unscientific” and, therefore, as not belonging in a university course. On the other hand, the Humanist Association in the Netherlands stresses the importance of educating humanist chaplains in stable and secure humanist worldviews, specifically stressing this aspect in relation to the professionalism of humanist chaplains. Taking both positions into account, we would argue that universities need to make their values and value debates explicit, and to educate students to become critical academic professionals (Brookfield, 1987; Nixon, 2008). The task of our university – and this is in line with the humanist principle to develop an autonomous viewpoint and take responsibility for it (van Praag, 1978) – is to first and foremost encourage students to critically relate to humanism, as well as to other worldviewing traditions, such as Islam, feminism, Buddhism, or green activism. This also means that students are not automatically endorsed as humanist chaplains after they graduate; they can then seek an endorsement of their choosing, be that humanist or more generic.

The ability to critically reflect on worldviewing traditions and to relate to plural beliefs is referred to as dialogical professionalism (Jacobs, 2010; Vloet et al., 2012). It encompasses the ability to deal with moral uncertainty, diversity, and complexity. It also manifests itself in an openness to listen and observe, and a flexibility and potential to collaborate with and learn from others (Edwards, 2010; Jacobs, 2010), which is needed in interprofessional learning as well. It requires a normative competency that is related to, but differs from, the moral competency that is required to help persons in situations of ethical dilemmas. Its aim is not to answer questions or to solve dilemmas (although this can happen), but to engage with the complexity and ambiguity of feelings, views, experiences, conditions, and actions involved. This dialogical competency is a unique feature of humanism, and

of a chaplaincy curriculum that allows a “split” identity for chaplains, to use Zock’s (2008) words. Therefore, we would prefer to transcend the divide between the academic, professional, and personal worldviewing competencies and speak of a “dialogical” identity, in order to envisage a chaplaincy course that allows for plural beliefs, and in which the professionalism of chaplains is not separate from but includes the articulation of one’s own fluid beliefs and values, stemming from humanism and other worldviews. This professionalism implies an ongoing critical dialogue with the self and others on what matters deeply to persons and their lives, including their own (Jacobs, 2010). It makes chaplains unique in supporting existential needs, and it is a necessary characteristic of chaplaincy in a plural belief society.

Conclusion

Contemporary society requires not only to make more visible what chaplains do, but also to develop forms of professional co-operation in which the knowledge and skills of chaplains are utilized in responding to complex issues. New forms of co-operation at the intersection of education, research, and professional practice can give an impulse to the further development of the profession as well as to the visibility and profile of chaplaincy in society, extending beyond individual support practices. In this article, the focus has been on humanist chaplaincy and the Master’s course for humanist chaplains offered in the Netherlands, and the associated context of healthcare. However, the cultural and societal changes affect other areas of work and denominations as well, and the curricular visions put forward here may have a broader relevance.

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