

WHAT LAYER ARE WE ON?

CONVERSATIONAL HERMENEUTICS IN CHAPLAINCY AND PASTORAL CARE

Theo van Leeuwen



Eburon
Utrecht 2025

This publication is made possible by the support of:

Stichting Aanpakken
Stichting Fonds Legaat Ad Pias Causas
Stichting Zonneweelde
Stichting Volkskracht

ISBN 978-94-6301-534-9

Eburon Academic Publishers, Utrecht, The Netherlands
www.eburon.nl

Cover image: Peter Selhorst, Arkel. Oil on canvas, 2015
Cover design: Textcetera, The Hague
Photography: Carly Wessels

© 2025 T.T. van Leeuwen. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing from the proprietor.

Contents

Introduction	9
Chapter 1	
Setting the stage	13
1.1 Demarcation of the area of research	13
1.2 Philosophical perspectives: Hermeneutics in competence and communication	16
1.3 Sociological perspective: a society in change	24
1.4 Professional perspectives: Responses from the professional field	27
1.5 Educational perspectives and differing definitions	31
1.6 Research questions and research design	36
Chapter 2	
Educating chaplains – opinions of lecturers on hermeneutic competence	41
2.1 Design of the inquiry and method	41
2.2 Results	43
2.3 Conclusions and discussion	53
2.4 In summary: follow-up questions	58
Chapter 3	
Theoretical framework	59
3.1 Philosophical – theological perspective on interpretation and understanding	59
3.1.1 Understanding oneself – interpretation and identity	60
3.1.2 The other in the process of interpretation	64
3.1.3 Self-expression: interruption and testimony	71
3.2 Psychological – communicative perspective	76
3.2.1 Conversation theories	76

3.2.2	Imagination, symbol and metaphor	82
3.3	Existential themes as the content of hermeneutic communication	89
3.4	Pastoral – theological perspective: Back and forth, hermeneutical movements in pastoral and spiritual care	94
3.4.1	Historical developments	95
3.4.2	Hermeneutic roles	99
3.4.3	Hermeneutic-narrative approach	100
3.5	Conclusion	103

Chapter 4

Design and method to study the conversation practice of chaplains 105

4.1	Case studies	106
4.2	Sampling	109
4.2.1	Purposive sampling	109
4.2.2	Participation	110
4.3	Data	114
4.4	Analysis	117
4.4.1	Analysis of conversation practices	118
4.4.2	Analysis of reflections	122
4.4.3	Analysis of views	123
4.5	Quality aspects	124
4.5.1	Validity, construct validity	125
4.5.2	External validity	126
4.5.3	Reliability	127
4.5.4	Other aspects concerning validity and reliability	127
4.6	Ethics	128
4.7	The researcher	130

Chapter 5

Results: exemplary analysis of Case Ingrid 135

5.1	Conversation practice Ingrid	135
5.1.1	Process: The development of the conversation and conversation technique	136

5.1.2	Content: Themes and connections between experiences, themes and sources	151
5.1.3	Other conversations: process and themes	153
5.2	Reflections of the chaplain on the conversations	162
5.3	Views on profession and hermeneutic communication.	165
5.3.1	Personal views on her profession	165
5.3.2	Hermeneutic communication in her personal view on the profession	166
5.3.3	Plurality	167
5.3.4	Own Tradition	168
5.4	Researcher's observations and provisional conclusions	170
5.4.1	Conversation practice	170
5.4.2	The chaplain's reflections on the conversations with patients	178
5.4.3	Views on the profession, hermeneutic communication and its operationalisation	179
5.4.4	Provisional conclusion	181

Chapter 6

	Results from the other cases	185
6.1	Portraits	185
6.1.1	Case Tineke: In the driver's seat	185
6.1.2	Case Marvin: Theological expertise	189
6.1.3	Case David: Sweet and waiting	194
6.1.4	Case Anne: Affirmative, imaginative and playful	198
6.2	Practice	202
6.2.1	Contribution of professional listening skills	203
6.2.2	Connecting experiences and sources	209
6.2.3	Contribution of the conversation partners	217
6.2.4	Themes, sources and connections	222
6.2.5	Plurality and the chaplain's tradition	226
6.2.6	Opportunities	228
6.3	Reflections	234
6.4	Professional views	236
6.5	Contributions from the verbatim cases	239
6.6	Provisional conclusion	240

Chapter 7

Conclusions and recommendations	243
7.1 Answering the main research question and conclusion	243
Conclusion	248
7.2 Bringing together the research topics: synthesis and discussion	249
7.2.1 Conclusions in relation to the views of lecturers	249
7.2.2 Conclusions in relation to theory	252
7.2.3 Conclusions in relation to the professional standard	255
7.2.4 Conclusions in relation to definitions of hermeneutic competence	258
7.2.5 Conclusions in relation to literature	260
7.2.6 Contributions of this study to theory, practice and training	263
7.3 Reflections and further research	264
7.4 What layer are we on? Recommendations	268
Summary in Dutch	275
Acknowledgements	287
Bibliography	289
Appendices	301
Curriculum Vitae	319

Introduction

A group of theology students in their senior year has gathered in the lecture hall for one of the final courses in their curriculum. The course is called: 'Working hermeneutically on existential themes'. By means of verbatim reports they reflect on their pastoral counselling and their guidance practice with regard to worldview questions.

One of the students reports a conversation with an older woman. In the last year she has been hospitalized several times and has now been told that the prognosis is bad. She's restless, anxious underneath. She shows no evidence of a religious conviction. The chaplain in training adequately counsels the woman's feelings, but the conversation also goes around in circles. The conversation ends in biographical data, how long she has lived in the city, and where exactly. 'On the other side of the water,' she says. The chaplain in training reacts, 'Oh, so you always have to go around that end, across the bridge?' 'Yes,' the woman answers, 'and that bridge is getting longer and longer.' 'I can imagine,' the chaplain responds. 'You have less and less energy.'

The student evaluates the conversation and says she is looking for a biblical image that could comfort or encourage the woman. When asked why she would want to do so, she answers that that is the assignment, working hermeneutically? In addition, she says: 'That is the tradition I represent in this contact.' In the group a discussion arises about the meaning of 'working hermeneutically'.

'Why should you look for a biblical image?' one of the other students asks. 'Why not just ask what might give her strength in her current situation?' 'Yes,' another adds, 'maybe she has her own, non-biblical image. You don't really know anything about her worldview or religious background yet.' 'Does it have to be about images?' a third says. 'Isn't working hermeneutically a lot more like helping her to look at her own life and also at what is going on now and what it means to her?' A fourth adds: 'Talking about meaning, what would it actually mean that she says that the bridge is getting longer and longer?'

The present research project examines form and content of hermeneutic communication between chaplains of Protestant-Christian tradition and patients, in settings of a general hospital and in the context of contemporary Dutch society with its religious plurality. It also examines the hermeneutic competence that enables such hermeneutic communication.

Reasons for the present study: the state of the problem

Most protestant, or protestant related institutions for theological education in the Netherlands understand hermeneutic competence as one of the main competences, or even the core competence of spiritual care and chaplaincy. It is hermeneutic competence that enables hermeneutic communication. That corresponds with the professional standard of the Dutch association of spiritual caregivers (VGVZ) and its description of hermeneutic competence as one of the specific competences for a chaplain or spiritual caregiver (VGVZ, 2010, 2015).

The first reason for the present study is the difficulties of theological students to put hermeneutic competence into practice. Not rarely students ask, at the end of their study, how to do 'it' and what exactly 'it' is? They become confused by different uses of the word 'hermeneutic' in different disciplines of theology and by the terms used in definitions. Also they are trying to understand how to relate their own religious identity, their affiliation, to the work they have chosen to do. It is not easy for them to operationalise the definition of the term.

Matters get more complicated, and that forms a second reason for this study, when one takes a closer look at the descriptions of hermeneutic competence provided by various protestant or protestant related educational institutions in the Netherlands and the differences between them. The definitions that were in use at the time the study began, were all written in the period 2005 – 2012. In that period the professional organisation also spoke of 'diagnostic and hermeneutic competence' as a necessary competence to perform the core task of the spiritual caregiver (VGVZ, 2010). The VGVZ definition contains aspects that are at odds with the definitions of the educational institutions. In chapter 1.5 I will look at the differences in detail. But there is also a common characteristic in all of the definitions: hermeneutic competence addresses the relation between people's current experiences on the one hand and meaningful sources and traditions on the other.

The words 'sources' and 'traditions' lead to a third reason to start this inquiry. Since the 1960s, major societal changes have taken place in Western Europe. The Netherlands developed from a more or less mono-cultural into a multi-cultural and multi-religious society (Doolaard, 2006; Van de Donk et al., 2006). Simultaneously, organised religion seems to become increasingly replaced by individual spirituality, composed from several traditions and sources (De Hart, 2013; De Hart et al., 2011). What does that plurality with a multitude of sources and traditions mean for the encounter between chaplains and their conversation partners? How does the chaplain relate to his or her own tradition? Does it play any role and if so, what is that role?

These three observations: the difficulty of students to operationalise hermeneutic competence and shape hermeneutic communication, differences between definitions of hermeneutic competence and changes in society with regard to worldview, are the three reasons that led to this study on hermeneutic competence and hermeneutic communication.

Outline

The study is structured as follows. In the first chapter, I take stock of the research field. That begins with a demarcation, situating hermeneutic competence in a broad and differentiated field (1.1). I then introduce a number of perspectives that illuminate the theme of the study: philosophical (1.2), sociological (1.3), professional (1.4) and educational (1.5). The chapter concludes with a formulation of the research questions and the research design (1.6).

The second chapter is the report of an initial, exploratory survey among lecturers from a number of theological institutions about their views on the operationalisation of hermeneutic competence and the way in which form and content is given to hermeneutic communication. The results of that survey yield questions that can be explored in practice.

In chapter three, I explore what theoretical concepts can be helpful in bringing hermeneutic communication into focus. From three angles, I describe processes of interpretation, understanding and communication and the roles the chaplain takes in those processes. First, I discuss a philosophical-theological perspective (3.1), with the help of the hermeneutic theory of Ricoeur. Here, I focus on the process of interpretation and self-understanding. I also address the matter of understanding the other, guided by Moyaert's theory of interreligious dialogue, also based on Ricoeur. Finally, I address the elements of interruption, self-disclosure and witnessing. Second, I adopt a psychological-communicative angle. Understanding hermeneutic communication requires not only a psychological-communicative conversational model but also a model that specifically addresses existential themes. I use models by Lang and Van der Molen and by Hartmann, respectively. This section also focuses on imagery, symbols and metaphors as specific expressions of meaning and existence.

As a step towards the third angle, section 3.3 offers a brief exploration of some of the content of hermeneutic communication. Both from the field of work and from theory, it becomes clear that interpretation and understanding in the context of chaplaincy deal with questions of life. These can be approached and described from different viewpoints. I ultimately opt for a categorisation from existential psychology. The third perspective is pastoral-theological (3.4). After sketching historical

developments of pastoral theology, I describe different hermeneutic roles in different pastoral models. I then turn to the hermeneutic-narrative approach.

In the fourth chapter, I introduce the examination of the conversational practice of Protestant Christian chaplains. I elaborate on the research design and method: a multiple, embedded case study of seven cases. Sampling, data collection and analysis are discussed, as well as quality aspects and ethics. I conclude the chapter with a reflection on my own background and development and the role it plays in my research. Chapters five and six present the results of empirical research on the conversational practices of Protestant Christian chaplains in general hospitals. Chaplains were interviewed on their views of the profession and on hermeneutic communication. They also reflect on the transcriptions of their recorded conversations. In the seventh chapter, I draw conclusions, discuss them and offer recommendations for practice, training and further research.

In the introduction I described the reasons for initiating this study: questions from students, differing definitions of hermeneutic competence, changes in society with regard to worldview and the role the spiritual caregiver's own worldview plays. Together, these reasons sketch the contours of the research area. The first section of this chapter offers a number of considerations in response to those motivating reasons. Hermeneutic competence is derived from training practices within a broad spectrum of theological professional practices. In order to do justice to the reasons for this study and adequately examine them, a funnel is needed in order to demarcate the field of investigation. In the second section, I will briefly address the central concepts of hermeneutics, hermeneutic competence and hermeneutic communication from philosophical perspectives. In order to connect the concept of hermeneutics with the practice of spiritual caregivers, I elaborate on the concepts of existential themes, meaning and worldview. The third section offers a sociological perspective. It addresses the societal changes concerning meaning, religion and worldview during recent decades. The fourth section addresses professional perspectives. It sketches the foundation of and developments within the Dutch professional association of spiritual caregivers in relation to increasing religious and worldview plurality and the developments in the practice of chaplains. The fifth section provides an educational perspective. It offers a description of where chaplains are trained for their profession and addresses the issue of the difference in definitions of theological institutions and the professional field with regard to hermeneutic competence. In the sixth section I will state the research questions and sketch the research design.

1.1 Demarcation of the area of research

The questions students pose concern the meaning of the term hermeneutic competence and its operationalisation in practice. By the professional field hermeneutic competence is regarded as a main characteristic of their future professional practice. That provides an important motivation for conducting empirical research. The

theory of hermeneutics is extensive, but the focus on the professional's actions is limited and a shared description of the competence is lacking. In that situation a qualitative study is indicated (Gray, 2014, pp. 160-162). There is a need to see how hermeneutic theory is understood by practitioners and operationalised in practice. Such an empirical qualitative research approach provides an opportunity to clarify or add to existing theory on the basis of practical experience. A number of considerations, however, are important for the precise formulation of the research context and the demarcation of the area of research.

The first consideration concerns terminology. In speaking about hermeneutic competence, it is important to bear two things in mind. First, from an educational point of view, a competence relates to a 'cluster of related knowledge, skills and attitudes that affects an important part of a person's task (role or responsibility)' (Cluitmans et al., 2002, p. 7). With the help of that cluster, the professional contributes to, in this case, a certain form of communication, which we here call hermeneutic communication. Below, the term is described in more detail in terms of content. Secondly, communication relates to a process between different actors. So it is not only the professional who 'conducts' (initiates, sustains, executes) or owns the hermeneutic communication. It is just as interesting to see what role the conversation partner plays in the communication. The data must therefore be of such a nature that it provides insight into the actions of both the professional and the conversation partner.

The second consideration concerns the precise definition of that part of the work of a pastor, spiritual caregiver or chaplain to which the term hermeneutic communication can refer. Theological institutions describe several competences for the professional profiles for which they provide education. That indicates that hermeneutic competence relates to part of the professional's practice domain. It is important to clarify to what aspects of the professional contact the term 'hermeneutic' refers. After all, conversation partners do not explicitly ask for hermeneutics in contacts with a caregiver, nor does the caregiver use the term with the conversation partner. We will see that there are reasons to apply hermeneutic competence and hermeneutic communication to that particular part of the work that deals with questions of life and meaning (1.2).

That leads to an important (third) consideration for the location of the research. We need a research context in which questions of life and meaning are addressed or are close to the surface. Significant experiences, of happiness or of disturbance, often cause questions about views on life and meaning (Anbeek, 2016; Jacobs, 2020). In such situations people need to renew their understanding of life. A hospitalization is a situation in which the daily course of life is interrupted. It is conceivable that

the context of a general hospital would be a good place to investigate the practice of hermeneutic communication by chaplains and spiritual caregivers.

A fourth consideration is the further demarcation of that practice. In general, spiritual caregivers and chaplains have a multitude of tasks. These include not only direct client contact, but also contributions to ethical decision-making, training other disciplines and advising on policy issues. Also, in the direct counselling of clients they make use of various methods. Conversations on meaning and worldview is one of them. Of course, guidance in meaning and worldview issues also includes forms of communication of a non-verbal nature, ritual and celebration. Hermeneutic communication thus takes shape in many forms of guidance and other tasks. This study, however, focuses on the guidance by means of conversation.

There are several reasons to focus on individual conversation practice within this spectrum of activities. It is in conversation, in one-to-one contacts between spiritual caregiver and conversation partner, that hermeneutic communication as support for meaning comes most clearly into view. Celebrations have a collective character, which makes it more difficult to see in what way the celebration is supportive of the processes of understanding and support of meaning of individual participants. Ethical decision making has an explicitly defined and, in comparison to hermeneutic communication, also a limiting purpose. Clinical classes are directed to other professions with their own goals. Individual conversations seem the most accessible for observing hermeneutic practice. Language also plays an important role in that. The use of language makes it possible to analyse conversations in a similar way as is done in the hermeneutic process of understanding written texts, traditionally the domain of hermeneutics.

A fifth consideration concerns the relation between hermeneutic competence and plurality. The definitions refer to traditions and sources, but whose traditions and sources are meant by that? And what does contemporary religious and worldview plurality mean for hermeneutic communication and competence? A general hospital is not only a place where questions of life are close to the surface, but also a place where people of all ages and backgrounds can suddenly find themselves. Although there may be local differences, it is probably a place where people of various beliefs or worldview convictions are to be found.

The final consideration concerns the caregiver's own religious or spiritual tradition. Students also wrestle with the question how much room, as well as which function, if any, their own religious or spiritual identity may have in contacts with their conversation partners. That calls, in the context of a demarcated, exploratory study, for a closer look at the practice of spiritual caregivers of a particular tradition with a considerable hermeneutic tradition as that of Protestantism (Walton, 2013).

In this research I choose, exemplary, Protestant spiritual caregivers with a formal commitment to and an endorsement from a Protestant church. From here on I will refer to them by the term chaplain.¹

Terminology

This study focuses on the operationalisation of a competence that has been defined in various terms. In the following sections and chapters the key terms will be further elaborated upon. At this point, only a preliminary working definition of the competence can be provided. To that end, I draw upon hermeneutics as the theory of interpretation and understanding. The history of hermeneutics shows a development from interpreting and understanding texts to interpreting and understanding existence itself. On the basis of that process of understanding, a view of life, that is, a world-view is formed. The interpretation and understanding of existence itself becomes urgent when profound experiences (in which existential themes are recognisable) are involved. Life has to be ‘considered’ anew. In that process, previous sources and traditions of meaning play an important role.

In order to maintain direction and focus, I used a working definition from the start of the study: hermeneutic competence is the ability to engage in communication about experiences in the light of meaningful sources and traditions. I call that communication hermeneutic because it involves the attempt to interpret and understand those experiences and those sources. In the next chapter I will further explain what I mean by the terms ‘existential themes’, ‘meaning’ and ‘worldview’.

1.2 Philosophical perspectives: Hermeneutics in competence and communication

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics in the broadest sense of the word is about ‘tracing and clarifying meaning’ (Walton, 2014, p. 14, n27). In the philosophy of science, hermeneutics is the section of epistemology concerned with interpreting and understanding human utterances (Van den Bersselaar, 2003). Its focus is meaning (Baronov, 2004, p. 113). The term has a long history. For detailed overviews of the historical development

¹ On terminology and differences in terms between Dutch and English language areas, I refer to chapter 1.4. The choice for Protestant chaplains I will explain in detail in chapter 4.2.1.

I refer to Jeanrond (2000), Ganzevoort & Visser (2007), De Knijff (1980) and Caputo (2018). I will here highlight several relevant issues.

The term 'hermeneutics' is derived from the mythological figure Hermes, the messenger, who conveys the intention of the gods to mankind. The messages were often in the form of riddles and not immediately accessible. The messenger therefore had to explain the messages and make them understandable to the recipients. Hermes forms, so to say, the connection between the human world and what is beyond. This is less innocent and servant-like than it seems. Hermes is also the protector of travellers, those who are on the road, but also the protector of thieves. He is a trickster, a prankster, who also deliberately wrong-foots, challenges and creates shifts. The back-and-forth movement, the linking of one and the other and deriving meaning from it, has remained the central idea of the word hermeneutics throughout the centuries. And Hermes' disruptive, deconstructive nature recurs in radical and postmodern hermeneutics (Caputo, 2018).

For a long time hermeneutics mainly provided rules for explaining texts. 'Throughout the Reformation and into the Enlightenment, Europeans were obsessed with a collection of ancient texts that were commonly considered to provide the essential cultural-intellectual foundation of Western civilization. Those works included the Bible and various classical works from Greek and Roman antiquity.' The methods developed for the interpretation of these texts, became the basic framework for hermeneutics (Baronov, 2004, p. 113).

After the Enlightenment and with the rise of the natural sciences, it became necessary for the humanities to distinguish themselves from those rapidly emerging disciplines in view of the question what different kinds of knowledge both approaches generate. Hermeneutics provided an important framework for this.

Jeanrond, in his overview of historical developments, points to Schleiermacher, with whom the development of modern hermeneutics is generally situated (Jeanrond, 2002, p. 44). For Schleiermacher, the written text was central, in line with what was customary. The text remains the standard for understanding. The reader must therefore empathise with the circumstances and situation of the author in order to discover the overall meaning of the text. But Schleiermacher adds a subjective aspect. There can also be a personal understanding of the text. He calls that a divinatory moment. The text reveals itself in its meaning to the reader in a private way. Only then does the reader, together with the author, really participate in the subject of the text.

Dilthey, building upon the work of Schleiermacher, proposes a distinction between a scientific, positivistic way of thinking, which provides an explanation

of phenomena and the humanities, with its hermeneutic way of thinking, that does not provide explanations, but an understanding of phenomena. Both forms, both approaches, yield knowledge, but each of a very different nature. Although, Dilthey's distinction has been criticized, aspects of the distinction have been integrated in later concepts of hermeneutics. Gerkin (1984) sees traces of this in the work of Ricoeur in the concepts of the language of force and the language of meaning.

Another 'move' is made by Dilthey, in keeping with the work of Schleiermacher. Whereas Schleiermacher introduces a subjective understanding into hermeneutical theory, Dilthey goes on to say that, if the subjectivity of the reader plays a significant role, then the understanding of human experience is also historically and contextually determined. That means that history itself can also be the object of the process of understanding.

It is Gadamer (1965) who points to the forming effect of history. We do not approach texts, the reality around us, from a blank perspective, but from our own understanding. A horizon of understanding has already formed itself within us. What matters then is the coming together of 'two horizons, that of the text and that of the reader' (Jeanrond, 2002, p. 65).

A number of lines, that is, the inclusion of subjective understanding, the broadening of perspective from texts to history and the importance of including personal, historical and contextual formation in the process of understanding, all come together in Ricoeur's work. He holds them together in a dialectic tension. For him, texts are 'language expressions aimed at giving (or attributing) meaning' (Ganzevoort & Visser, 2007, p. 104). The process of interpretation involves both an initial naive approach to texts, in which pre-understanding is fully involved, and a critical distance (distancing) from the text, with ample space for a critical scientific approach, before it can come to a real appropriation (Moyaert, 2011b). In this, the lines of explanation in the sciences and of understanding in the humanities are connected. Ricoeur's views on the process of interpretation will be discussed further in chapter 3.

According to Ricoeur, there is an analogy between written text, spoken text and human action: all are meaningful expressions. 'All three have an influence that transcends the moment, all have unintended consequences as well as intended ones, all create a world and all are open to reinterpretation' (Capps, 1984). The parallels open the way to approach human action hermeneutically as well. With this, another shift is made. In addition to a doctrine about understanding texts, hermeneutics also becomes an approach for understanding existence itself: 'existential

hermeneutics' (Ganzevoort & Visser, 2007, p. 106; Jeanrond, 2002). Again and again, people seek to understand their reality and who they are. They seek to interpret what happens to them, understand how they relate to others and discover what they are getting themselves into. It is in response to the major questions of life that we try to find meaning. In that process of searching for meaning, we do not start from zero. We stand in a biographical and historical context and live in a world full of different interpretations, stories of meaning, traditions, religions, in short: worldviews, all dealing with existential questions.

Existential themes

Life can be so full that we are hardly aware of meaning. At the most we experience our life as 'having meaning' when we like doing something. That can change when we experience events that happen to us, that deeply touch us and interrupt the natural course of everyday life. They might be experiences of deep wonder and happiness, or experiences of horror and despair. All of a sudden existential themes or existential questions can appear. There are various formulations for those questions such as: questions of life, questions of existence, moral questions or 'slow questions' (Kunneman, 2000). They are 'questions about illness, suffering and death, but also about love, fidelity and care in relationships, or violence, infidelity and indifference in relationships' (p. 73). In a way, the questions are timeless, or perhaps better: questions of all times, that in changing contexts need to be rethought again and again on a personal level. They are questions of sense and meaning, of value, of deterrence, of beauty. Attempts have been made in various disciplines (philosophical, theological and psychological) to categorise the existential themes and questions. That will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 3.3. In any case, they are questions, themes and experiences of a specific nature. They cannot be solved with purpose-means rationality (Kunneman, 2009) nor can they be answered in a logical-argumentative sense. A different language is needed to grasp some of what is difficult to put into words. The language of metaphor and of story, the language of dream, vision and fantasy, and also of playfulness and humour is more suitable (Kunneman, 2000; Mulder, 2012).

Meaning

It is inherent to humankind to reflect and consider. We are able, to a certain extent, to perceive life, to have an awareness of the past, of the present and to have thoughts about the future. Gradually we develop a view on who we are and what happens to us. In this way we attribute meaning to our existence. Thus, meaning is a fundamental characteristic of being human, an anthropological fact (Smit, 2015).

Smaling and Alma define meaning as ‘a personal relationship to the world in which one’s own life is placed within a broader framework of coherent meanings, in which purposefulness, value, connectedness and transcendence are experienced, together with competence and recognition, so that feelings of motivation and well-being are also experienced’ (Smaling & Alma, 2010, p. 23).² Literature distinguishes between everyday meaning and existential meaning (Mulder, 2012).³ The way in which we fill a day in such a way that we experience it as pleasant or useful is such a form of everyday meaning, which is not or hardly consciously perceived. However, there is no hard distinction between everyday meaning and existential meaning. Although hardly conscious to us in everyday life, the decisions we have to make and the choices that we make, stem from transcending norms and values, which in turn can be related to each other in a network of meanings and can be linked to traditions and sources (Mulder, 2012, p. 34). These frameworks play an important role in existential meaning. We call such an overarching framework of coherent meanings a worldview. They help us to interpret reality around us and ourselves in that reality. They provide answers or help us to relate to the existential questions reality presents.

Worldview

Frameworks of meaning are sometimes clearly recognisable in society: they take on form in institutions. They shape the identity of movements and organisations, such as humanism, socialism, liberalism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam. The examples show that a further distinction can be made within institutional worldviews: religious and non-religious. But sometimes they are less recognisable, less clearly organised. It is common to speak of non-institutional worldviews, which can also be distinguished into religious and non-religious variants. To non-institutional, religious forms belong (e.g.) the *Ietsisme* (Somethingism)⁴, new spirituality, the

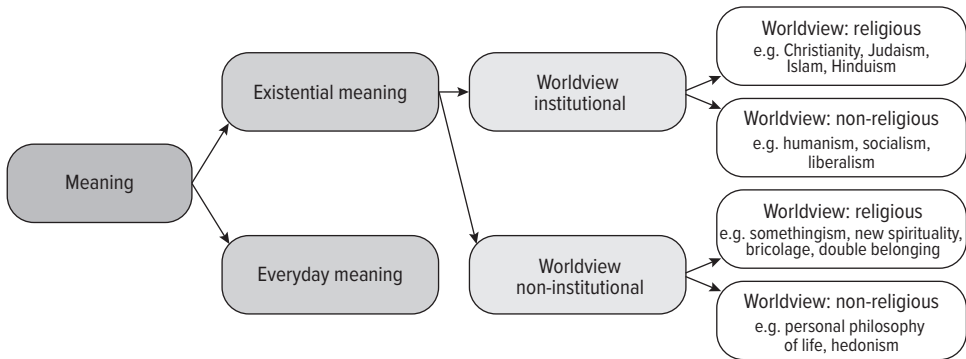
2 Smaling and Alma’s definition of meaning is very similar to the consensus definition of spirituality, from the European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC) of 2010: ‘Spirituality is the dynamic dimension of human life that relates to the way persons (individual and community) experience, express and or seek meaning, purpose and transcendence, and the way they connect to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, to the significant and / or the sacred.’ (Van der Leer, 2020, pp. 71,72).

3 Different terms are used, e.g.: everyday meaning and ultimate meaning (Ter Borg.) or ‘meaning in’ and ‘meaning of’ (Lans v.d.), both cited by Van der Leer (2020).

4 *Ietsisme* is to be translated as ‘believing in ‘something’. At the beginning of this century the term was first coined by Ronald Plasterk, a Dutch politician and former secretary of education and home (Biezeveld et al., 2006, p. 7). See also: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=somethingism> (23.03.2024)

development of one’s own worldview, be it by taking elements from several religions and fitting them into a personal construct (bricolage) (Zondervan, 2008)⁵ or by committing oneself to more than one worldviews at the same time (Multiple Religious Belonging) (Berghuis, 2019). Non-institutional, non-religious worldviews are more individual in character. See figure 1.

Figure 1
Meaning in relation to kinds of worldview.



Note: adapted from *Werken met diepgang* (p. 35), by A. Mulder, Uitgeverij Meinema

Institutional worldviews in particular have for centuries produced patterns and systems that have helped to answer the questions of who we are, who we want to be and how we should be. They formed and form an essential element of our identity (Van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2018). They provide standards and patterns of behaviour. But with the diminished influence of such institutions, there is more room for individuality. Roles are no longer fixed and the question of who we are must be answered in a distinct way. That roles are no longer fixed also means that identity is not fixed, but constantly evolving. In chapter 3 the evolving nature of identity is further explored. We express our identity, both in the actions we perform, in the underlying choices, and in the story we tell about ourselves (Ganzevoort & Visser, 2007). In that story our meaning is included; in our story one can hear how we relate to the world and to what happens to us in it.

5 The term is from French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and was first used in his book *The Savage Mind*, in 1966.