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**Opportunities and Challenges for Humanist Counselling in Berlin**

A study on behalf of the Humanist Academy Berlin-Brandenburg

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## ABSTRACT

### Background & Aim

Although equal treatment of religions and world-view organisations is prescribed by the German constitution, humanist counselling analogous to pastoral care has not been established yet, although this is considered desirable by the Humanistischer Verband. In order to enable a next step in the introduction of humanist counselling in Berlin, this study aims at answering the following questions:

- 1) what is humanist counselling and what sets it apart from related forms of counselling?
- 2) what have been the efforts so far at establishing it?
- 3) what are possible starting points for a new try to institute humanist counselling?

### Method

This study draws on literature research as well as on interviews with experts related to the Humanistischer Verband Deutschland.

Results: Possible fields in which humanist counselling could be of use are briefly presented, together with a summary of the activities that the *Humanistischer Verband* has already undertaken in the past.

This study clearly poses questions that should be considered when the process of establishing humanist counselling as a profession is started: firstly, more information is needed on how former projects were set up and why they were discontinued. Furthermore, the concept of humanist counselling should be clarified (including the German name and the sharpening of its focus) and organisational questions should be answered. Finally, there are strategic questions that need a decision before positioning humanist counselling within the broader area of social services and institutions in Germany.

### Conclusion

Establishing humanist counselling as a recognised profession is a demanding enterprise. What is missing is a structure binding the existing expertise and experiences together and making decisions as to where to go next.

Keywords: humanism, pastoral care, chaplaincy, humanist chaplaincy, humanist counselling, humanist practice

### **Zusammenfassung**

Das vorliegende Paper befasst sich mit der Situation humanistischer Seelsorge in Deutschland, mit Schwerpunkt auf Berlin. Obwohl Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften den Religionen in Deutschland rechtlich gleichgestellt sind, gibt es noch keine institutionalisierte humanistische Seelsorge in den traditionellen Feldern der (kirchlichen) Seelsorge, wie z.B. in Krankenhäusern, Gefängnissen und dem Militär. Der Humanistische Verband Deutschland als Weltanschauungsgemeinschaft würde es begrüßen, wenn humanistische Seelsorge in Deutschland als institutionalisiertes Berufsfeld Fuß fassen würde. Bisher gab es einige kleinere Versuche, die aber nicht zu durchschlagendem Erfolg geführt haben. Mittels Literaturrecherche und Interviews mit Expert\*innen aus dem Umfeld des Humanistischen Verbandes gibt dieses Paper eine Orientierungshilfe für zukünftige Bemühungen, humanistische Seelsorge organisiert anzubieten.

Dies umfasst folgende Fragen:

- 1) Was ist humanistische Seelsorge und was unterscheidet sie von verwandten Berufsfeldern?
- 2) Welche Anstrengungen wurden bisher unternommen, humanistische Seelsorge zu etablieren?
- 3) Wo liegen mögliche neue Anknüpfungspunkte für einen nächsten Versuch?

In Abgrenzung zu philosophischer und psychologischer Beratung sowie zu kirchlicher Seelsorge wird humanistische Seelsorge umschrieben als gekennzeichnet durch eine explizit nicht-konfessionelle Haltung der Seelsorgerin, einen Fokus auf existenzielle

Fragen, eine Skepsis gegenüber `Wahrheit` und die humanistische Vorstellung, dass der Mensch alle nötigen Fähigkeiten, um ein gutes Leben zu führen, in sich trägt und damit unabhängig von einer göttlichen Entität ist.

Es wird ein knapper Überblick gegeben über in den Einsatzfeldern Krankenhaus, Hospiz, Gefängnis, Militär und individuelle Seelsorge bereits gestarteten (und zum Teil wieder eingestellte) Bemühungen, dort mit humanistischer Seelsorge Fuß zu fassen.

Zusammenfassend ist die Etablierung humanistischer Seelsorge eine anspruchsvolle Unternehmung. Dieses Paper benennt viele der Voraussetzungen. Diese befinden sich im Feld der Erfahrungssicherung, im Bereich konzeptuell-definitorischer Fragen – wie definieren wir humanistische Seelsorge, welche Haltung steht dahinter und welchen Namen wählen wir, wer soll angesprochen werden etc. Des Weiteren geht es darum, organisatorische Fragen zu klären (Ehrenamt/Hauptamt, Ausbildung etc.) und strategische Entscheidungen zu treffen, inklusive Fragen der Finanzierung eines möglichen Pilotprojektes und der Positionierung innerhalb der deutschen psychosozialen Versorgungslandschaft.

Abschließend kann gesagt werden, dass es bereits einiges an Wissen und Erfahrung zu humanistischer Seelsorge in Deutschland gibt. Nun gilt es, diese zusammenzubringen und Entscheidungen zu treffen, wie sie genutzt werden sollen. Erfahrungen aus Belgien und den Niederlanden können – unter Berücksichtigung unterschiedlicher gesetzlicher und gesellschaftlicher Kontexte – hierbei als Inspiration dienen.

Schlüsselwörter: Humanismus, Seelsorge, humanistische Seelsorge, humanistische Beratung, humanistische Lebensberatung, humanistische Praxis

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Berlin, just like in the rest of Germany, churches offer pastoral care in public institutions whereas humanist associations have not had this possibility so far. Although equal treatment of religions and world-view organisations<sup>1</sup> is prescribed by the German constitution (“Grundgesetz”), this has not happened yet.

The *Humanistischer Verband Deutschland*, one of the bigger humanist associations in Germany would appreciate if humanists could make use of humanist counselling in hospitals, prisons, in emergencies or the military.<sup>2</sup> There have been attempts to set this service up, but these have not been successful so far.

In order to make another try, a few conditions have to be met – answers have to be found to the following questions:

- 1) What is *humanist* counselling and what sets it apart?
- 2) What have been the efforts so far?
- 3) Where are possible starting points for a new try to institute humanist counselling?

These are the questions that this study is going to answer, aiming at enabling a next step in the introduction of humanist counselling in Berlin.

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<sup>1</sup> We here use this term for the German „Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften“.

<sup>2</sup> See here for its mission: <https://humanistisch.de/x/hvd-bundesverband/inhalte/humanistisches-selbstverstaendnis>, accessed January 28<sup>th</sup> 2019.

## 2. WHAT IS HUMANIST COUNSELLING?

This study aims at describing the current situation of humanist counselling in Berlin and exploring possibilities for its future development and growth. The first chapter discusses what humanist counselling is and could be and what place it takes within Humanism and humanist practice. Furthermore, humanist counselling is compared to related practices such as religious, psychological and philosophical counselling and its unique characteristics are described. As a first step, we will take a short look at Humanism, the founding world-view behind humanist counselling.

### *2.1 HUMANISM*

Humanist counselling is based on Humanism as a world-view and system of ethics. In it, a focus on humanity, human dignity and human rights is central (Humanistisches Selbstverständnis, 2015). Humanism draws on sources from ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the processes of secularisation and developed strands in the fields of pedagogy and psychology (Cancik, 2016). In addition to firmly held beliefs about humanity, encompassing the stance that all humans are equipped with equal rights, equal freedom, rational capacities and above all equal human dignity, Humanism also emphasises the possibility (and obligation) for humans to use their own rational capacities and come to their own conclusions. Discussion and debate, the capacity to empathise and take other people's perspectives are highly valued.

As opposed to Christianity, Humanism expects human beings to find meaning within their earthly lives, without the expectation of an afterlife or a relationship to a transcendent entity.



## 2.2 HUMANIST COUNSELLING

As of today, humanist counselling as a practice is not widely spread in Germany. The few distinct definitions are therefore mostly based on a theoretical perspective rather than on practical experience.

Humanist counselling is a humanist practice offered by people with humanist, non-denominational values (Humanistische Beratung, 2014) that aims at assisting people in the experience that their life is meaningful (Schöppner, 2016; 374). It means counselling based on a Humanist view on life and providing advice to people in situations of crisis of meaning, life problems or mental problems (Heinrichs, 2017; 152), thereby believing that people can cope with a lot of struggles based on their own human resources (Humanistische Beratung).

Helmut Becker-Behn, offering 'humanistische Lebensberatung' headed by the *Humanistischer Verband* in North Rhine-Westphalia, describes it as follows, using the words of Belgian humanist counsellor Ulrike Dausel: 'an encounter from person to person, listening openly and without bias, offering a free space to talk but also to be silent' (Geschäftsstelle Humanistischer Verband).

In this quote, the free space of the encounter is emphasized, in which feelings, thoughts, doubts, dreams or things that are difficult to express can appear. The counsellor is present without expectations and (time) pressure and helps to 'bring the flow of life back into motion' (ibid.). Becker-Behn further describes himself as a person with a humanist world-view and as able to refrain from judging prematurely when listening to somebody's story.

Gita Neumann (2018), former employee of the *Humanistischer Verband Berlin-Brandenburg* for the division on patients' provisions, makes a difference between *humanistische (Lebens-)Beratung* on the one hand and *humanistische Seelsorge* on the other hand. The former, she associates with counselling concerning a specific problem

or situation, such as an advisory service for unintended pregnancies<sup>3</sup> or advice on patients' provisions. These situations require a counsellor with knowledge on legislation concerning the matter. She also has to have experience with possible questions arising around the subject and to know other institutions that offer further care or services. Based on this knowledge and experience, the counsellor can help the client find a solution for the question at hand.

The latter, *humanistische Seelsorge*, is a much more open concept, much less focused on looking for and finding a ('simple') solution for people in a specific life situation. Instead, it is rather analogue to pastoral care, focussing on the existential dimension of whatever 'problem' the client is facing. Describing some contacts she has with people within the *Humanistischer Verband*, who have sought her out for counselling, Neumann mentions the quality of the relationship as a crucial characteristic trait. This means that the counsellor should be there with the other person and also be able to give comfort. In order to build this relationship, Neumann states that it is necessary to take her time for each person, focussing the conversation on the matter that is at hand and being there until something changes in the way the person experiences the situation, in the sense that 'for now, it is somewhat better than before' (Neumann).

Christian Lisker, a former Protestant pastor with much experience in pastoral care who is currently working independently and calling himself a humanist, chooses to speak of *humanistische Seelsorge* and defines it as "a specific form of helping practice"<sup>4</sup> set apart from therapy on the one hand and coaching or *Beratung* on the other hand<sup>5</sup>.

Lisker describes humanist counselling as something focused on the relationship between counsellor and client. He argues that humanist counselling consists on the one hand of the usage of methods derived from humanist psychology (client-centred therapy, Gestalt-therapy, systemic approaches)<sup>6</sup> and on the other hand of a humanist

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<sup>3</sup> This, in Germany, is a legally required counselling before termination of pregnancy.

<sup>4</sup> Eigene Übersetzung A.L.: „Eine eigene Gattung helfenden Handelns“ (Lisker, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 2.4 for more on therapy and coaching and the differences between the three practices.

<sup>6</sup> This view is shared by Gita Neumann.

attitude characterised by curiosity, interest, open-mindedness and the awareness that it is not yet clear how the counsellor can be of help to the person opposite her. A question that is not clearly answered yet is whether the humanist and nondenominational perspective of the counsellor should also be non-religious (Neumann & Schöppner, 2018). Further essential factors listed by Lisker are the openness towards all possible world-views and the conviction that the resources and possibilities of people are to be found within themselves, not in any kind of transcendent sphere.

To sum up, humanist counselling is being there in an encounter from person to person, based on a humanist world-view and an open attitude on the side of the counsellor. The methods that are used are derived from humanist psychology and are used in order to enable the client to express herself in relation to existential questions.

### 2.2.1 SEELSORGE OR BERATUNG?

The terms *humanistische (Lebens)Beratung* and *humanistische Seelsorge* have already been introduced. In the German debate, both are used interchangeably in order to refer to humanist counselling. As already mentioned, *humanistische (Lebens-)Beratung* can have a second meaning, though. It can either refer to existential counselling as described above or to advice for certain life situations as the abovementioned advice on patients' provisions. The focus of this study is more on existential counselling.

Both words, *Seelsorge* and *Beratung*, contain a lot of associations that might raise some problems. We will have a look at these now.

## Beratung

*Beratung* is a term that is difficult to translate into English, but in it, there is the word *advice*. As *Berater* is often used for experts in the domains of economy and finances, it can sound quite technical, making one think of a *Berater* as the expert and a client seeking her advice without her specific situation being taken into account.

## Seelsorge

*Seelsorge* is the German word for (religious/Christian) pastoral care. As it contains the word *soul*, it might be contested in humanist circles, because the word *soul* is strongly connected to the idea of an immortal soul given by God that forms the spark of life within humans (Lisker, 2018). What is more, it is strongly associated with the Christian religious practice. Possibly, humanists do not want to be thought of as merely 'imitating' a Christian tradition.

Still, Schöppner (2016) uses the word *Seelsorge* and argues against its common association with a specifically Christian tradition. He explicates that *Seelsorge* has a longer history than Christianity and originates from ancient Greek philosophic practices, *epimeleia tes psychés*, describing care for the self and a good life<sup>7</sup>. Schöppner also draws on notions of a 'worldly' *Seelsorge*, used within psychotherapeutic approaches by Freud and Frankl and also by Börner, a philosopher and educationalist. Both ancient Greek sources and Börner hold *Seelsorge* as something that is directed at the life on earth without the belief in an afterlife.

Lisker, in defence of the word *soul* being used within a humanist context, takes it to refer to the totality of cognitive processes of consciousness. These processes can in some cases also entail a sense for transcendency which is not necessarily connected to a religious belief.

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<sup>7</sup> This view is shared by Mette (2013).

On this ground, he argues that the term *soul* can have different meanings and is as such acceptable for humanist counselling. Furthermore, comparing *Seelsorge* to *Beratung*, Lisker says that *Seelsorge* comprises a notion of human warmth. He argues that this could be an advantage – humanist counselling could benefit from the positive associations with the term and build on those.

In summary, the advantage of *Beratung* is that it is not associated to a Christian tradition and interpretation. As a disadvantage, it may sound rather technical and thereby somewhat remote from an existential orientation and the warmth of a human encounter that humanist counselling strives to offer. *Seelsorge* on the other hand, is strongly associated with Christianity, but can also be built upon a non-religious tradition. The question is whether this connection can be presented convincingly and whether humanists will be able to define their own ‘brand’ of counselling.

### 2.2.2 SPIRITUALITY & TRANSCENDENCE

Churches have had the opportunity to counsel their members in public institutions for a long time, whereas the *Humanistischer Verband* did not. To cover the demand for existential counselling, an alternative for non-Christian people is necessary<sup>8</sup>. One could assume that humanist counselling should per se be non-spiritual as well. Still, things are not that easy. Nowadays, many people do not identify any more with Christian beliefs. Instead, ‘home-made’ world-views arise, mixing religious, spiritual and humanist convictions. This also means that many people do not totally deny spirituality and transcendency. Humanist counselling must thus ask itself if it wants to address only non-religious, atheist people or the wider group of non-confessionally bound people. With this comes the necessity to determine its relation towards

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<sup>8</sup> The same goes for other religious and world-view organisations.

transcendancy and, subsequently, with spirituality as the belief in some transcendent entity. Let's take a closer look at these notions here.

## Spirituality

Spirituality is derived from Latin *spiritus*' meaning breath or spirit. It is connected strongly to Christian religiousness and the Holy Spirit as an intermediary between God and humans (Tünsmeier, 2011; 170). Spirituality became connected to the assumption that there is a dualism of body and mind and that the mind is superior (Mette, 2013; 61). This is problematic given the humanist adherence to a naturalist and science-based world-view, because spirituality in the above sense could result in the assumed supremacy of the transcendent over the natural world. Spirituality has thus been rejected by Humanism.

Although Humanism is set upon estimating scientific observations, the desire to transcend the visible and give meaning to the world and people's own lives, seems to be a basic human capability that humanist counselling should at the very least be aware of.

## A humanist spirituality?

Christian Lisker (2018) thinks that there is no contradiction in calling yourself a humanist and to expect spirituality when talking to people as a humanist counsellor. He even thinks that as a humanist counsellor, one should be open towards people of all world-views. Likewise, Gita Neumann is convinced that limiting the people addressed by humanist counselling to only non-religious people would be too narrow.

What is more, currently, there are people calling for a humanist or atheist spirituality (Tünsmeier, 173; 177). Their claim is that the phenomenon described as spirituality is a deeply human need, especially with respect to the search for a good and

meaningful life. Furthermore, they claim that satisfying this need without resulting to a belief in a transcendent order could be possible – as an immanent transcendency.

As an example, Tünsmeier cites Comte-Sponville who refers to spirituality as those aspects of the mind that can be in touch with ‘the absolute, the infinite, eternity’ (in Tünsmeier, 178; transl.: AL). He argues that this does not have to take a religious form if it is based on an immanent, naturalist world-view and does not assume supernatural powers.

Comte-Sponville and with him Schmidt-Salomon, say that spiritual experience and rational thinking can co-exist and are both necessary to a full life (Tünsmeier, 179). Schmidt-Salomon distinguishes between the way of thinking during a spiritual experience and the way of thinking about the experience afterwards. Building on this distinction, he argues that it is possible to integrate spiritual experiences into one’s life experiences and identity in a rational way after the experience itself is over. What is more, he says that this integration might even help us to confront our life and its struggles more calmly and more humorously (Tünsmeier, 180).

Tünsmeier finally decides on using spirituality with an immanent definition of spirit – subsuming the needs of making sense of life in confrontation with its existential struggles (aging, sickness, failure as a few examples) as a mental process. Citing humanist counsellor Pam Hobbelman and Irvin Yalom, he reminds the reader of those things in life that humans have no influence on. The only way to deal with them is to find a mental attitude to integrate them into one’s life.

Still, Tünsmeier criticises that using the term spirituality leaves too much space for the ‘traditional’ religious interpretation. Also, it sounds as if Tünsmeier’s own definition entails nothing more than cognitive and emotional processes of looking for meaning in life. If so, it is the question if immanent spirituality is more than what can be described in a psychological theory.

### Spirituality in an encounter

Weiherr (2011) names other forms of immanent spirituality. Firstly, he states that spirituality means those things that are of very high value for a person – those things that define the view on a person's life and that bear some sign of something higher or deeper without it being possible to put your finger on it (149). Secondly, he presents spirituality as something that can take place in the encounter between people. Drawing on situations in palliative care, he puts forward the view that in an encounter, a person that might feel alone, lost or repellent through their physical appearance, might be *seen* and accepted, in a way that makes it possible for her to be in touch with herself again and to experience something bigger than the apparent side of life. Weiherr, whose Christian background is shining through quite clearly, speaks of a bigger love and emotion 'transcending the regular' (151).

Even though his view of spirituality bears heavy marks of a religious definition, it might be able to add to a humanist concept of transcendency through the appreciation of transcendent aspects of the human encounter. These, in humanist terms, might for example be captured as the experience of human dignity and connection.

### Self-transcendancy

Mette (2013; 62-63) adds another form of immanent transcendency. Referring to Hans Joas' concept of self-transcendancy, he describes the human desire for a fulfilled life and those situations in which people can create their life and take it into their own hands instead of surrendering to their existential circumstances. These situations, in which people rise above themselves, could either be interpreted in a religious way or not.



To summarise the arguments before, one can say that while traditional Humanism aims at doing without any transcendent references, there are current calls for a humanist, immanent transcendency. Examples of what one could mean by this are given by Weiher who speaks of spirituality in the encounter, and Mette who describes people rising above their own capacities as self-transcendency. The challenge for humanist counselling will be to define and integrate a form of (immanent) transcendency a counsellor could work with – with non-religious and religious people.

### 2.3 COMPARISON WITH RELIGIOUS COUNSELLING

When trying to find out about what sets humanist counselling apart, it is necessary to compare it to a few related practices.

Firstly, this chapter will point out what humanist counselling has in common and where it differs from pastoral care. When speaking of pastoral care, this study means the Christian (and more specifically Catholic and Protestant) tradition of *Seelsorge*. In this paragraph, only the contemporary practice will be discussed. For the history of the word, look at the chapter about the term *Seelsorge*.

Pastoral care is a specific form of support for individuals and groups (Mette, 2013; 62). Klein (2013) mentions three interpretations:

- Care for the soul and its salvation. Now being more focused on the wellbeing of a person in the here and now instead of postponing it unto the afterlife as has been done before – counselling/chaplaincy.
- Care for people in need, considering the wellbeing of their body and soul in the sense of Christian welfare work (*diaconia*).
- Care of pastors for the souls of those in their community.

Lisker says that pastoral care is a form of help given mainly by listening and offering a relationship. This means presence and being there instead of giving advice or solving

problems; doing small everyday things for or with the person, eating together, building community, giving somebody else your time and yourself.

Mette cites Reinhard Feiter who calls pastoral counselling 'communication of hope', implying that counsellors, following the example of Jesus' loving presence, should aim to convey hope upon God's presence, his readiness to forgiveness and his willingness for people to live. Mette emphasises that care for the soul and care for the body or the material needs cannot be separated (ibid., 63).

Pastoral care thus encompasses a helping presence focused on the wellbeing of a person's body and soul.

In pastoral care, God is seen as the cause and medium of counselling (ibid., 66). This is not restricted to pastors and professional counsellors. Pastoral care instead takes place between all faithful people in the activities of the community, be it within a prayer group, care for the sick or the sharing of joy or suffering. Pastoral care in the narrower sense is the counselling given by a professional or volunteer with an education.

Fields in which Christian pastoral care is an established practice in Berlin are: in hospitals, prisons, at airports, bereavement counselling, telephone emergency services, counselling with the federal armed forces, the police, the fire brigade, in case of emergencies, for blind people, for the deaf or hearing impaired, for circus and fairground workers, for motorcyclists (Lisker, C. May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Interview; Evangelische Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz, s.a.) – it seems a sheer endless list. The counsellors in these fields are specialised in specific circumstances of crisis and difficulty, but in general, all people are possible recipients of pastoral care, regardless of their life situation and their religious belief.

## Methods

Nowadays, the methods of pastoral care in the narrower sense of chaplaincy consist for a great part of psychological knowledge and approaches, leaving behind approaches that lean much more on biblical knowledge, admonishment and annunciation of the Gospel and God's grace (Sons, 1995, 149; Klein, 71). Still, rituals or sacraments like prayer, confession, anointing of the sick or the like can play a part in pastoral care.

Sons notes that overall, a holistic approach is taking over, meaning that theological and psychological aspects are both taken into account instead of being seen as excluding each other (149). In short, pastoral care is taking psychotherapeutic insights into consideration.

Still, Sons sees the task of pastoral care mainly in the annunciation of the gospel and forgiveness of sins (184). He seems to relate problems of communication between people to sins in relation to God (185). Sons recognises that psychological laws affect people, but he sees the 'actual' work of pastoral care in the work of God through the gospel (186). Also, Lisker argues that pastoral care still has its grounds in a divine mission to care for all people alike.

## Conclusion

Taking into consideration the previous elaborations, humanist counselling has a lot in common with pastoral care in the narrower sense of chaplaincy, both in methods (derived from psychology) and focus (on the presence of the counsellor; the relationship as central element; on hope and self-actualisation ("Selbstverwirklichung")). It is an open question whether humanist counselling wants to address the other elements of pastoral care (welfare work and care for the souls) as well, e.g. as mentioned above by focusing on companionship and presence instead of purely on the professional conversation.

Differences are to be found firstly in the legitimation of the counselling. Where pastoral care sees God's love for humans and his mission to spread this love as its foundation, humanist counselling is founded in the belief in humanity as a core value of Humanism. It does not involve any transcendent sphere.

Secondly and following from this, both practices are based on a distinct attitude differing from each other. In pastoral care, the principles of Christian faith are the foundation of the counselling relationship. Truth can be revealed by studying the Bible. Lisker describes a possible humanist attitude on the other hand as awareness that humans construct their own reality and life scripts. Hence, there is a certain scepticism concerning absolute 'truth'. Instead of believing in one set reality, Lisker formulates humanist counselling as 'a joint search in the form of a relationship for what is ultimately sustaining in life'. On these convictions, he bases his attitude of openness towards all world-views.

It follows thirdly that humanist counselling would not offer rituals (prayer etc.) that pastoral care can offer.

#### *2.4 COMPARISON WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING*

I have already mentioned that humanist counselling and pastoral care make use of psychological and psychotherapeutic methods when in conversation. If they are doing this, what then sets humanist counselling apart from psychological counselling? Is there anything 'more' to it than the application of psychological methods?

Of course, there is humanist psychology which is built upon the belief in humans' self-actualising and creative capacities – psychological views and methods that are humanist in themselves. Neumann (2018) argues that the application of these approaches should become a defining characteristic of humanist counselling.

Apart from questions about content, attitude and methods, there are of course legal regulations that make a difference for the nature of the professions.

To be a psychologist, it is necessary to study psychology. To become a psychotherapist, it is required to have a completed study of either psychology or medicine, supplemented by a psychotherapy training that takes several years. Based on this training, psychological therapists get a permission to “practice medicine in the field of psychotherapy” (Berufsverband Deutscher Psychologinnen und Psychologen). People that do not have professional training in medicine or psychology can still get a permission to practice psychotherapy in a limited way, they are called *Heilpraktiker für Psychotherapie*.

Opposed to these regulations, anybody can call themselves ‘*Psychologischer Berater*’ regardless of his or her education (ibid.).

Psychotherapy is, as stated in the law, “every occupation that uses scientifically recognised psychotherapeutic methods in order to diagnose, heal or relieve pathological dysfunctions for which psychotherapy is indicated”. The crucial point here is the attention on symptoms that are considered an illness. The law also mentions the difference with psychological activities: “Psychological activities that are about reprocessing and overcoming of social conflicts or about other goals outside medical science are not part of the profession of psychotherapy”<sup>9</sup> (Psychotherapeutengesetz §1 (3)).

The defining characteristic of psychotherapy is thus the focus on curing or relieving symptoms that are thought of as pathological or dysfunctional. What is it that psychological work does?

Following the professional organisation of German psychologists (BDP e.V.), psychological counselling (Beratung) is a ‘process aiming to facilitate psychic skills

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<sup>9</sup> Eigene Übersetzungen A.L.: „Ausübung von Psychotherapie im Sinne dieses Gesetzes ist jede mittels wissenschaftlich anerkannter psychotherapeutischer Verfahren vorgenommene Tätigkeit zur Feststellung, Heilung oder Linderung von Störungen mit Krankheitswert, bei denen Psychotherapie indiziert ist. Im Rahmen einer psychotherapeutischen Behandlung ist eine somatische Abklärung herbeizuführen. Zur Ausübung von Psychotherapie gehören nicht psychologische Tätigkeiten, die die Aufarbeitung und Überwindung sozialer Konflikte oder sonstige Zwecke außerhalb der Heilkunde zum Gegenstand haben.“

and competence (change of thinking patterns and of patterns in the way people feel and act), activate resources and make them accessible, and to reduce hindering factors` (Psychologische Beratung, 2000). Counsellors are supposed to use methods that stem from scientific psychology and describe the goals that guide the process.

This also shows a certain degree of organisation and goal orientation although to a lesser extent than in psychotherapy.

Lisker puts the relationship between therapy, Beratung and pastoral care as follows: 'I start from above: therapy or psychotherapy as a form of helping action that has to do with pathological mental-physical processes that are definable. They need a definition. Then there is *beratendes Handeln*, somewhat enigmatic, it doesn't always let itself be separated from therapy. It is about relationship work, about 'normal', everyday crises and conflicts that do not have to be pathological. And *Seelsorge* for me is even more focused on companionship that works in a different way than *Beratung* because it is even less outcome-orientated.'

## Conclusion

On the whole, while psychological counselling and pastoral and humanist counselling may use the same methods and might look quite similar when analysing a particular conversation, there are clear differences. Whereas psychotherapy seems to be focused on the decrease of illness and psychological counselling on the solving of everyday conflicts, humanist counselling is set upon achieving personal fulfilment by dealing with existential questions regarding the position and sense of human life in the world.

## 2.5 COMPARISON WITH PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING

Since the early 1980's, there is another related field: philosophical counselling (*philosophische Praxis*). Gerd B. Achenbach, who claims to have coined the term, describes it as a possibility for people who have the feeling of being stuck in their lives, or who feel that they are not living the possibilities they have (Achenbach, s.a.). The question leading philosophical counselling is not so much 'what should I do?' as it is 'what am I actually doing?' The counsellor – who is a philosopher by education and has some training in counselling – helps to question and examine the life of the client. As for *how* counsellors are doing this, Achenbach distances himself from strictly following rules or methods. In his opinion, philosophical counselling is not about bringing people onto a predetermined path but about accepting their way of life without commenting on it. As a consequence, the client is not seen as an example of a preset rule, but as a unique individual trying to become the person he or she is.

The professional organisation of philosophical counsellors *Berufsverband für Philosophische Praxis* describes it as a professional philosophical counselling based on a dialogical understanding of philosophy and oriented towards the interest of the client and towards the search for a 'good life' (Berufsverband für Philosophische Praxis, 1.5.18).

### Conclusion

Compared to humanist counselling, counselling philosophers do not seem to take a certain shared view on life that they will explicitly take as a basis for their work. Yet, what they share with humanist counselling (and increasingly with pastoral care) is the openness to accept the client as they are or rather as they would like to become.

Philosophical counselling seems to be limited to conversations in a professional context rather than sharing everyday life sorrows or activities. Sharing this with

humanist counselling, it is not aimed on solving problems, but rather on being there and examining the thoughts, feelings and views that are already there.

## *2.6 UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMANIST COUNSELLING*

Concluding the chapter and thereby the theoretical considerations around the nature of humanist counselling, the characteristics of humanist counselling will now be summarised.

Firstly, some clear differences between humanist counselling and respectively pastoral care, psychological counselling, psychotherapy and philosophical counselling have come to the surface. Specifically, humanist aspects are:

- An explicit non-denominational and humanist perspective of the counsellor
- The focus on situations that pose existential questions regarding the position and sense of human life in the world
- A scepticism towards 'truth'
- The humanist idea of humans as comprising all the needed capacities for a good life within themselves

At the same time, it has become clear that there are several aspects in which humanist counselling has still to decide which direction to take, thereby distancing itself further from some other forms of counselling and coming closer to others. Summing these up, one has to think of:

- The decision if companionship in daily-life activities should also be part of humanist counselling, thereby moving it closer towards pastoral care
- If transcendency as a possible subject of counselling is included in humanist counselling, this would bring humanist counselling closer towards pastoral care. Yet, it might also develop into establishing a more clearly defined



humanist conception of transcendency, provided that there is a profound conception of an immanent transcendency.

### **3. HUMANIST COUNSELLING AT WORK & PAST EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH HUMANIST COUNSELLING**

In this chapter, the 'classic' working areas of pastoral care are presented – assuming that these are roughly the same areas as those fit to setting up humanist counselling. Furthermore, the preliminary work that has been done in each of the fields to set up humanist counselling is described.

#### *3.1 HOSPITALS*

In hospitals, humanist counselling could attend to people in situations of illness and loss of physical functions, loss of independency, being confronted with fear and uncertainty, helplessness or worries about loved ones.

As hospitals are public institutions, patients have the right to get access to spiritual counselling of their own religion or confession (Heinrichs, 2017; 156). This is the case for all public institutions where people stay for a while without the opportunity to be in direct contact to their home and (traditionally speaking) religious community. As non-religious world-view organisations (so called *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften*) have the same constitutional rights as religious organisations, theoretically, there would be the opportunity to offer humanist counselling in hospitals. However, to get there can be a long way. Past endeavours have shown that the same rights do not come into being by themselves. For example, humanists have been confronted with the demand to prove the need for a specifically non-religious or non-confessional counselling (Brade, 2018). Alternatively, institutions have argued that pastoral

counsellors already foresee in the need of counselling for non-religious and non-Christian people as well (Humanistischer Verband Dresden)<sup>10</sup>.

Years ago, there have been talks with a doctor working in a hospital in Berlin (Neumann). However, possibilities to introduce humanist counselling seemed slight as there are already quite a lot of supporting services in hospitals that work in a related field – ranging from visiting volunteers to psychooncologist counselling in comprehensive cancer centres. Also, hospitals seemed cautious as to who to let in.

In Dresden, there has been an attempt to offer humanist counselling in the university medical centre in 2017 (“Humanistische Seelsorge im Strafvollzug”, s.a.). The *Humanistischer Verband* in Dresden has drawn up a concept for humanist counselling both within the hospital and in a prison (Humanistischer Verband Dresden, 2017), planning to send two people as counsellors, both unpaid, one of them being a humanist counsellor educated at the antecedent of the University of Humanistics in Utrecht (Brade, 2018).

Brade further reports that after a talk with a representative of the Ministry of Science and Culture of the Free State of Saxony and one of the directors of the hospital, the offer to institute humanist counselling was declined.

### 3.2 HOSPICES

In hospices, people are confronted with their finiteness and death. This is a situation that is extremely existential in itself. Tünsmeier (2011) argues that there, in the face of death, is the place par excellence for questions of how to deal with spirituality, especially for non-religious people.

The *Humanistischer Verband* in Berlin runs several hospices, including one for children and an intercultural one, some of them for inpatients, some for outpatients

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<sup>10</sup> As the Muslim population in Germany is growing, the same problems arise concerning the existence of Muslim spiritual care.

(Humanistisch.de, s.a.). The guidelines of the WHO state that good palliative care tends to the psychic, physical, social and spiritual dimension of its patients (Sixty-seventh world health assembly)<sup>11</sup>. The websites of all the hospices of the *Humanistischer Verband* confirm that they are dealing with the mental and spiritual aspects of parting and grief. There are volunteers, trained to be able to support the patients themselves and their families<sup>12</sup>.

This means that there are already humanist hospice structures and also efforts to meet the psychosocial and spiritual needs of the patients. However, there is no distinct humanist counselling.

### 3.3 PRISONS

In prisons, possible subjects of humanist counselling could be centred on themes like freedom and constraint. Furthermore, separation of loved ones, guilt and shame might be themes that keep prisoners occupied, and that are fit for humanist counselling.

As already mentioned, the *Humanistischer Verband Dresden* had plans to establish humanist counselling in a prison. However, having received two requests of non-religious inmates for counselling, these could not be met (Brade, 2018). As to the reasons, Michael Brade, chairman of the *Humanistischer Verband Dresden*, says that the required security instructions for the counsellor were postponed by the authorities until the client was not in the institution or not interested any more. Also,

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<sup>11</sup> In line with these guidelines, the humanist hospice *Ludwig Park* in Berlin says to be doing this. <https://humanistisch.de/x/hospiz-ludwigpark/inhalte/leitlinien-unsere-arbeit>, accessed on May 6<sup>th</sup> 2018.

<sup>12</sup> <https://humanistisch.de/x/dongbanja/inhalte/ehrenamtliche-taetigkeit>; <https://humanistisch.de/x/berlinerherz/inhalte/ausbildung-und-bewerbung-ehrenamtlicher-familienbegleiter>; <https://humanistisch.de/x/visite-bb/inhalte/sterbebegleitungsvorbereitungskurs>, all accessed on May 6<sup>th</sup> 2018.

confidentiality of the conversations between humanist counsellor and clients was not guaranteed.

In summary, there is a concept for humanist counselling, but the *Humanistischer Verband* did not reach an agreement with the concerned institutions yet in order to be able to start working.

### 3.4 FEDERAL ARMED FORCES

The question whether humanist counselling should be offered for soldiers in the German Federal Armed Forces is a highly contested one (Schöppner, 2017; Heinrichs, 2017). The troops legally have the right on spiritual counselling of their own world-view (Heinrichs; 151, 155-156). It is highly controversial if humanist counselling within the military would be justified by the individual need for non-denominational counselling (Schöppner) or whether the counsellors would thereby be forced to abandon their humanist values, because they would be working within the official structure of the army which values obedience and sanctions autonomous thinking (Heinrichs).

Nevertheless, there have been small attempts to introduce humanist counselling within the army in Germany, but neither the German Federal Armed Forces nor members of the German parliament (“Deutscher Bundestag”) have been interested.

### 3.5 INDIVIDUAL COUNSELLING

In 2006, the *Humanistischer Verband Berlin-Brandenburg* (HVD-BB) started a project during which several volunteers were qualified as humanist counsellors. 17 people took part in a training programme of around 150 hours, over the course of 18 months (Humanistische Beratung – ein notwendiges Dienstleistungsangebot des HVD-BB?, 2014). After the first months of training, they started counselling individual people.

The project was aimed at non-denominational individuals that took notice of the project via flyers, the HVD-BB website or by word of mouth. However, there were rather few requests by people wanting to be counselled, so the project was abandoned after a few years.

Although the project of 2006 was terminated, Gita Neumann (2018) reports that there are still people seeking her advice in certain circumstances in an unofficial manner. These are people that have known her for several years in her position as 'Referentin Lebenshilfe'. Some of them got to know her through the patients' provisions counselling or the humanist coming of age ceremony (*Jugendfeier*) of their children. After the initial encounter, one kept seeing each other at festivities or other occasions within the HVD. Neumann reports that if an initial contact had been strong in the sense of the conversation going to a deep level or in the sense that she was there at a crucial and emotional moment in the other person's life, this was enough to follow up on another time even after several months or years. She likens this type of relationship to the kind of contact a pastor has to people within her parish.

### 3.6 OTHER SECTORS

Apart from the areas that were described above, a range of other sectors would theoretically be suitable for humanist counselling that cannot be covered here. Among these are nursing homes, the police, emergency counselling and bereavement counselling.

## 4. CHALLENGES AND TASKS

Bearing the theoretical and practical state of affairs in mind, this chapter goes on to identify the possibilities and challenges of humanist counselling in Berlin. These largely take on the form of questions that need answering in order for humanist counselling to be established as a recognised profession.

#### *4.1 FIRST CHALLENGE: COLLECT INFORMATION*

A first step should be to acquire more information. This study could only give a small impression of the important concepts, structures and considerations.

To begin with, it would be possible to learn even more from the first HVD project in 2006. In order to find out more about why this project had to be terminated, Lisker suggests to ask one of the people who took part in it as a volunteer. Possible questions could be: 'What has been your motivation to do this? Where did you start? How did you get the idea to start this formation and why did it fail?'

Furthermore, it could be of help to understand even better the structures of pastoral care in Germany. There was not enough time for this study to clarify how the education, organisation and payment of pastoral counsellors are set up.

#### *4.2 SECOND CHALLENGE: CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS*

Christian Lisker demands that before one starts with a new project initiating humanist counselling, terms and concepts should be clarified. This concerns the questions that have been discussed in the first section of this paper. They will be summarised here:

##### Term/labelling

A decision should be made as to which name should be used for humanist counselling. Humanistische Seelsorge or Humanistische (Lebens)Beratung? Lisker proposes Begleitung as an alternative term for Seelsorge and votes against Beratung.

## Essence

Closely related to the choice for a name, it must be decided what humanist counselling wants to do. Should it aim at advising people in a specific life situation (Beratung) or at counselling in existential situations? The aim should be to explain clearly what humanist counselling is, without falling into the trap that Neumann calls 'Abgrenzeritis' by distancing itself too dogmatically from related practices. Consequently, it might be worthwhile to value the methods and beneficial outcomes of pastoral and worldly services that are already there (Lisker).

## Defining characteristics

Following from the former aspect, the specific characteristics that set humanist counselling apart from other forms of counselling should be formulated with specific attention for what makes it humanist.

## Relationship with transcendency and spirituality

Simultaneously, it should be clearly defined and expressed how humanist counselling relates to transcendency and spirituality. This has consequences for the desired attitude of counsellors and for the decision who to address.

## Who to address

Accordingly, it should be decided if humanist counselling is open to all people, regardless of religious and denominational affiliation.

## Attitude

Both Neumann and Lisker expressed that the attitude is central to what defines humanist counselling as humanist. It follows that the nature of this attitude should be discussed and described.

### Attitude towards related strands of counselling, especially pastoral care

As mentioned before, if humanist counselling is to enter institutions where e.g. pastoral care or other 'competing' forms of counselling are present, it makes a difference for its strategic position what stand humanist counselling takes with respect to them. It makes a difference whether pastoral care is seen as a partnering profession from which one can learn and get inspired, a competitor against which one has to fight or anything in between. A specific case is of course Islamic spiritual counselling which is also starting to develop but has not yet achieved to get the privileges of Christian pastoral care. Lisker advocates an affirmative attitude towards pastoral care done by the churches.

## Rituals

Humanist counselling does not have a stock of rituals that can be used in situations when mere verbal communication is insufficient. Some forms of Humanism even defy rituals as a consequence of defying religion. On the other hand, there are humanist rituals for important life events (coming of age ceremonies, funerals etc.). It might be worthwhile to consider if there would be possibilities for small secular acts or elements that go beyond the immediate cognitive sphere. This has to be considered carefully, as it touches on the question of the view on transcendency.



### 4.3 *THIRD CHALLENGE: ORGANISATIONAL QUESTIONS*

Following the conceptual questions that should be discussed, Neumann and Lisker also name organisational ones that need answering. These touch the following aspects:

#### Legitimizing and legitimated organisation

It has to be considered on whose account humanist counselling would be offered. Would there be something like a 'church' that sends humanist counsellors to do their work? If so, would that be the Humanistischer Verband Berlin-Brandenburg? Or the federal Humanistischer Verband Deutschland? It has to be decided if any other humanist organisations would be included in the process in an 'ecumenical Humanism' (Lisker).

#### Organisational structures

Neumann argues that it is important to set humanist counselling up within a structured organisation in order to establish clear procedures and responsibilities. This is especially relevant when working with volunteers. Questions that have to be answered with respect to this aspect might be the following: who has the first contact with clients? Where does the counselling take place? Who puts counsellor and client together? For how long will the contact last?

#### Volunteer or salaried counsellors

When posing this question, it should be decided who could become a humanist counsellor and what preliminary formation would be required. Lisker suggests people with a therapeutic or counselling formation if the decision was to form a salaried group of counsellors. In case of volunteering counsellors, there should be a

training program. Another option would be to combine both salaried and volunteering counsellors.

## Education

When deciding on professional requirements for future counsellors, the standard of their education as humanist counsellors should be determined. It should be decided whose task it would be to devise the educational program and what would be the contents.

Equally, it is necessary to come to a conclusion whether it should entail knowledge on the specific area where counsellors are going to work. Lisker states that pastoral care formation is exceedingly specialised in the working field (e.g. hospitals). Furthermore, the formation should address the specifically humanist attitude.

### *4.4 AREAS WHERE TO START – STRATEGIC QUESTIONS*

Concerning the decision in which context or institution humanist counselling could best be started, this study is still lacking information. In order to take this decision, further research should be done in the respective working fields. This research should examine the circumstances for counselling, the willingness to try something new in the respective institutions and maybe build on existing networks to get a foot in the door.

## Filling a hiatus

Still, this study found some criteria on how to decide in which life situations humanist counselling would be in its place. As a first one, Lisker points out that one should *fill a hiatus* in the 'provision of care or counselling that is not otherwise staffed with counselling aimed explicitly at non-confessionally bound people'. He warns that in

some fields though, there are non-religious counselling services that are deeply humanist in the way they work. This means that the need for non-religious counselling might already be covered in some areas.

Lisker tries to describe situations in which a humanist counsellor could be of help as situations of existential crises, setting them apart from situations that belong to the realms of the *Krisendienst*<sup>15</sup> that can be 'life-threatening' ones. Existential crises as he describes them arise in hospitals, in prisons, in the armed forces, in sudden emergencies, in situations of bereavement and terminal care/support at the end of life, as for example in hospices. These are institutions or situations where the *Krisendienst* will not be there, but most of the times, a (Christian) spiritual counsellor will. It should then be the right of a person to ask for a non-religious counsellor to be there with her or him.

Public or private sector?

As a second point, the question is whether to introduce humanist counselling in a *public* or the *private realm*. The philosophers organised in the *Berufsverband Philosophische Praxis* seem to have chosen for the private sector and set up their professional organisation to combine their energy, become visible and organise the professionalisation of their occupation. This might be one of the first steps if one chooses to start in the private sector. Lisker however votes to choose the public sector, because there, other counselling options like the *Krisendienst* or therapy are rather hard or impossible to reach.

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<sup>15</sup> A psychological telephone service directed at people with mental health problems, especially in situations of (extreme), life-threatening struggles.

## Institutions

To set something up in the public sector, Lisker then advises to investigate if there are any institutions that are willing to let humanist counsellors in and to provide them with rooms if necessary. Neumann suggests nursing homes, as they are currently in need of good care.

On the other hand, Neumann is also sceptical towards completely new projects. As she has experienced how difficult it can be to find an institution that opens up its doors, her idea is to locate humanist counselling close to something that is already there – e.g. a service of the Humanistischer Verband. As an example, she suggests to train hospice volunteers as humanist counsellors. She also suggests starting small. Possibilities could be focused a bit more practical by offering to visit people (in a hospital, nursing home etc.). Another option would be to respond to new legislation around patients' provisions in nursing homes and build something from there, thereby choosing to be closer to *Beratung*.

## How to connect to clients

Another strategic question concerning the circumstances in which to start humanist counselling is whether it would be a place in which counsellors would 'swarm out' and actively seek out the people or whether it would be a setting where potential clients will come to the counsellor. Lisker doubts whether the second option would work, because he says that in that case, people would have to have an idea of what 'humanist' is and how it could benefit them. His assumption is that people would connect it to atheism and the history of the German Democratic Republic. Humanism might not be associated with acting in a humanist way.

His second argument for an approach that actively seeks out potential clients is that humanist counselling would be set in a niche that is not readily noticed in the German health-care system.

## Funding

Of course, it is an important question how humanist counselling would be paid for. One aspect of the financial question is of course whether counsellors would be salaried or volunteers. See for other consequences of this decision the paragraphs above.

When looking towards pastoral care for orientation regarding the financial structure, this is met with an indistinct answer. Neumann reports that her experiences have shown that there are different arrangements for how salaries of pastoral counsellors are paid. They can even be paid in a joint effort by the church, the employing institution and a foundation. Lisker speaks of unique financial conditions for the churches, having church taxes, donations and the means of big foundations at their disposal.

Comparing this to the means of the telephone emergency services in Berlin, however, Lisker says that the latter, for the biggest part, depends on donations, being supplemented by government grants. This has been an unstable situation for the service, meaning that making plans for the longer term is not always possible. If the initiators of humanist counselling were accepting to run on an unstable financial situation, this might be an example to follow.

Furthermore, Lisker puts forward that there is the possibility to get government grants by the Berlin Senate for services that are meaningful within the health care system of the city.

Another option would be to find other, creative means of generating money. Neumann recounts the story of her former project on patients' provisions that she started from scratch. The money that made the project grow in a slow way came from membership fees, payment for the counselling service and a comparatively small grant.

## 5. INSPIRATION

This paper was devised as a contribution to the international seminar “Humanism and Humanistic Practices in the 21st century” that took place on May 18th 2018 at the University of Humanistics in Utrecht, Netherlands. Some of the thoughts on the situation and challenges of humanist counselling in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany that were discussed there, will be included in this paper as an inspiration and consideration for future developments. They will be complemented by the results of an evaluating meeting at the Humanist Academy in Berlin with Ralf Schöppner, Tina Bär, Gita Neumann, Christian Lisker and Anke Lauke and by thoughts from the panel „Humanistische Seelsorge“ at the *HumanistenTag 2018* in Nürnberg.

These amendments will be loosely listed below, sorted by subject.

### Spirituality and horizontal transcendency

Researchers at the University of Humanistic Studies such as Carmen Schuhmann and Joanna Wojtkowiak do not seem to argue about whether spirituality and immanent transcendency should be considered within humanist counselling. Instead, they seem to take them as self-evident elements of humanist chaplaincy. They base this inclusion, amongst other things, on feminist notions about the dependency of the human being. There is for example the fact that nobody is able to recount their own birth or the fact that certain things in life just happen to us, without us being able to change or influence them (Schuhmann/Wojtkowiak, 2018).

Also, they employ the term ‘horizontal transcendency’ which the former University of Humanistics professor Harry Kunneman borrowed from Luce Irigaray. Similar to Weiher’s description of spirituality in an encounter, but completely free of any religious notion, horizontal transcendency is an ethical and inherently humanist notion of the in-between between two people, based on the recognition that we are finite, imperfect and uncontrollably different from one another.

These theories might be inspiring to the German debate about a humanist spirituality.

### Existential questions

Lisker specified the defining characteristic of humanist counselling as dealing with existential questions. This means questions about guilt, shame, mortality and reconciliation, basically encompassing things that have to do with the human need to be accepted, things that are beyond our control and therefore require the capacity to endure them.

### Public funding systems

At the international seminar, it became apparent that in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, the public funding systems for humanist activities and services are equally outdated. They are still based on the amount of members a world-view organisation has. As the ways of identifying with (world-view) institutions are changing and people tend to build their own belief systems fed by multiple sources, membership numbers do not anymore reflect the number of people using the services of world-view organisations. This is a shared problem in the three countries.

### Membership

Apart from the quest for public funding, the question of how to acquire more members is not adequate of the current situation, although it still plays a role in some peoples' minds and strategies. New ways of addressing people have to be found. Also, on a bigger scale, a new way to determine the amount of public funding should be found. An idea might be to take the number of beneficiaries/participants of a service as an orientation.

## Vertical/horizontal understanding of Humanism

When setting up or offering humanist counselling, it is worth a thought to determine whether one uses a vertical or horizontal understanding of Humanism. This means: is Humanism seen as an autonomous world-view pillar? Or is it seen as a world-view element that can be interwoven and combined with other world-views? This has consequences for the possibilities of interaction with other world-view organisations, because people are either seen as exclusively belonging to one world-view or possible supporters of several world-views.

## Explicitly or implicitly humanist?

Especially relevant to the German situation is the question whether Humanism should be explicit or implicit in humanist practice. Explicit Humanism confronts clients of humanist counselling (and other humanist practices) with a service that offers a declared humanist affiliation. This can have both desired and undesired consequences. Implicit Humanism is less easily visible for clients. This can also have wanted and unwanted effects.

## Common ground with other counsellors?

Another related question is concerned with the view on humanist counselling. It can either be seen as primarily a humanist practice or alternatively as a counselling practice as many others, but on humanist grounds. At the University of Humanistics, humanist counselling is primarily seen as one variety of a single profession – that of *chaplaincy*. Chaplaincy is defined as ‘professional guidance, assistance and consultancy concerning meaning in life and world view’ (Schuhmann). Chaplaincy exists in the form of catholic chaplaincy, Muslim chaplaincy, Protestant, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and humanist chaplaincy, and even as a general chaplaincy which is



not bound to any specific world-view, but has knowledge of dealing with existential and ethical questions.

This is thus a question of identification and defining one's allies and adversaries<sup>14</sup>. This raises the question, if it would be possible and desirable to ally with religious counsellors. In the Netherlands, the ways of working in an institution vary from a confessional approach (each counsellor works with the clients of their world-view) to a territorial approach (each counsellor works with the clients on a certain number of wards or departments for which he or she is responsible; the counsellor of one's own world-view can be spoken to upon request). In Germany, it has to be decided whether humanist counsellors want to distinguish themselves as different from counsellors of other religious affiliations (and, in the same way, of other related disciplines of counselling) or if they want to ally with counsellors of a different background. This is a strategic question that has to be addressed.

### Target group

Who are the people that are addressed? This question was mentioned above. The broad agreement in the above mentioned rounds of talks seems to be the intention to broaden the target group to everybody interested in a distinctly humanist form of counselling. An argument in favour of this approach is the idea to see people as always being in search of their view of the world – and thus not always able to be defined as 'religious', 'atheist' or any other category.

### Seal of Confession

In the Netherlands, conversations between chaplains and their clients are legally protected. The counsellor is a secret-keeper for the client. She or he is not bound by

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<sup>14</sup> This question has been addressed before, in chapter 4.1.

the interest of the institution for which they work<sup>15</sup>. In Germany, pastors have this same right<sup>16</sup>. It should be discussed, if this can be transferred unto humanist counsellors, based on the equal treatment of religions and world-views before the law. In Dresden, the initiators of the project assumed this right for humanist counselling, but it did not seem to be accepted as such by the authorities they dealt with (Brade, 2018).

### Tasks and activities of humanist counsellors

Besides counselling, are there other activities that a humanist counsellor takes on her as well? Should humanist counsellors also be trained as celebrants? Or should the counselling qualification be an extra qualification in addition to the work in a (social) institution such as a kindergarten, a hospice or the like? There are examples from Belgium's *house for humans* where humanist counsellors are also training volunteers, act as celebrants, work in community-building (among others with the aim of confronting loneliness and offering group counselling) and take care of public relations.

### Allies

As a last point of consideration, the question 'who are our allies?', posed by Schuhmann, might give indications as to what direction to take when starting a pilot project.

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<sup>15</sup> This is called *vrijplaats*.

<sup>16</sup> *Beichtgeheimnis* or *Seelsorgegeheimnis*.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the existing defining concepts of humanist counselling. Building on the discourse on Humanism and its relationship towards transcendence and spirituality, it has explored possible consequences for humanist counselling as a practice. Furthermore, similarities and distinctions with psychological, philosophical and pastoral counselling and psychotherapy were identified and the characteristics of humanist counselling were defined as a) an explicitly non-denominational perspective of the counsellor, b) its focus on situations that pose existential questions, c) a scepticism towards 'truth' and d) the humanist idea of men as comprising all the needed capacities for a good life within themselves.

Next, possible fields in which humanist counselling could be of use were briefly presented, together with a summary of the activities that the *Humanistischer Verband* has already undertaken in the past.

In conclusion, establishing humanist counselling as a recognised profession is a demanding enterprise. This study has clearly named questions that should be considered when this process is started. These are the following:

A process of securing insights and experiences concerning ongoing or failed projects is in progress.

One of the central conditions that has to be met is establishing an agreement regarding definitions: what is humanist counselling? How do we want to call it? What makes it unique? How should it treat spirituality and transcendence? Who should be addressed? What should be the methods and attitude of humanist counselling? How should it relate to cognate disciplines? Should it include rituals in its range of methods?

Additionally, an agreement should be found on strategic factors and organisational conditions of humanist counselling: which is the organisation behind all humanist counsellors? How is the work organised? Should counsellors be salaried or volunteers?

What should the formation look like? Where does the counselling take place and will this be in the private or public realm? Where are gaps that could form an opening for humanist counselling to fit in? Does the counsellor come to the client or the other way round? Should a new project be established or should one build upon something already existing?

And of course, the question of funding has to be addressed. It can be questioned if the funding system for Christian pastoral care can set an example here.

There are people in Germany and Berlin who write about humanist counselling, as well as people who have experiences in the actual work and there has already been a training program in Berlin. What is missing is a structure binding all these links together and making decisions as to where to go next. This study has discussed which decisions these should be.

Furthermore, this study has identified practices in Belgium and the Netherlands that can form an inspiration for a pilot project in Berlin. However, different legal and societal contexts should be taken into account.

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