

# Worldview Communication by Ritual Counsellors

## An Explorative Multiple Case Study on Funeral Rituals

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### Summary

This contribution explores the question how ritual counsellors shape their hermeneutical-communicative role and how they use worldview communication in the preparation and performance of a funeral. Data were collected from a group of six ritual counsellors with a questionnaire and a group interview. The data were interpreted through the lens of three hermeneutical models. I come to the conclusion that respondents are aware of worldview aspects of their work, while they differ in the role they take. Some are more guides, others more witnesses. The role of priestess which some of the counsellors adopt deviates from the available professional theory. More reflection is needed to develop such a theory about worldview communication outside the church.

### Keywords

Worldview communication, ritual counsellors, hermeneutics, secular funerals

### Introduction

The profession of ritual counsellor emerged in the Netherlands about thirty years ago, and has become an established feature in Dutch society.<sup>1</sup> Ritual counsellors offer their services independently of a church or ecclesiastical institution and deliver to anyone who calls on them and pays their fees. These self-employed entrepreneurs might give courses on philosophy of life, offer personal sessions in spiritual guidance and/or help people shape rituals. At this moment, designing rituals seems to be their main source of income and the steadiest kind among these rituals is the funeral. The ritual counsellors provide important services in secularized countries where people who do not want to make use of a religious service are left on their own to create a funeral ritual. Ritual counsellors can help in situations when there is no one available in the family to take the lead to create a fitting and personal ceremony.

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1) André Mulder, “Hermeneutiek en dodenliturgie met en zonder kerk,” in *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 25 (2009): 109-124; André Mulder & Angela Stooft, “Ritual Counsellors’ Value Tensions in Profiling. A Pilot Study Using Organizational Constellations,” in *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 37 (2021): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.21827/YRLS.37.1-21>.

The phenomenon of a secular funeral ritual means that, in an area in which the church previously held a near-total monopoly in the Netherlands, other players have entered the field. Whereas the interpretation of death in the funeral rituals had previously been expressed with language and symbolic acts from the Christian tradition, ritual counsellors work without formal ties to this or any other tradition. They do not represent an institution, religion or philosophical movement, but solely represent themselves and work with the convictions, stories and experiences they retrieve from their clients.

Also in other countries in Europe, for example in Great-Brittain and Switzerland, a similar profession has been established which is called the civil funeral celebrant.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest traces of the profession are found in Australia, where civil celebrants received legal recognition in 1973 which gave them the opportunity to perform marriage ceremonies that are ‘dignified, meaningful and memorable’.<sup>3</sup> The International College of Celebrancy was founded in 1995. America followed in 2001, inspired and trained by Australian colleagues, with the establishment of the Celebrant Foundation and Institute in 2001.<sup>4</sup>

As it is not yet a legally protected profession in the Netherlands, anyone can call themselves a ritual counsellor with or without any specific education. However, the sector has been moving towards professionalization with a professional organization for ritual counsellors, LBVR (launched in 2004), and training institute *Het Moment* (2002), followed by another training institute *Gaandeweg* (2015). Also in Great-Britain The Institute of Civil Funerals was founded in 2004 and fosters the highest standards of civil funerals celebrancy, according to their website.<sup>5</sup> In Switzerland there the Ashoka Association was established, which specializes in crafting secular rituals, and also provided a practical guide.<sup>6</sup>

In this contribution I explore worldview aspects in the funeral practice of ritual counsellors. The relevance of this theme seems obvious: where rituals are conducted outside the pathways of organized traditions, many questions need to be answered concerning goals, content, form, language and symbolic acts in the funeral ritual. Who decides about these elements when no tradition is available, or when all traditions are available? And what are the guiding perspectives for ritual counsellors that could motivate their choices?

2) <https://www.iocf.org.uk/about-civil-funerals/>; [www.ashoka.ch](http://www.ashoka.ch). Accessed October 11, 2023.

3) <https://www.celebrants.org.au/>; <https://iccdiplomas.com/>. Accessed October 11, 2023.

4) <https://www.celebrantinstitute.org/>. Accessed October 11, 2023; Garces-Foley & Holcomb do not refer to this development in American funerals in their article from 2006: Kathleen Garces-Foley & Justin S. Holcomb, “Contemporary American Funerals Personalizing Tradition,” in *Death and Religion in a Changing World*, K. Garces-Foley (ed.) (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 207-227. This may follow from their observation that families prefer to personalize the funeral traditions they are already familiar with, rather than create an entirely new kind of death ritual, p. 219.

5) <https://www.iocf.org.uk/about-civil-funerals/>. Accessed October 11, 2023.

6) Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, *Crafting secular ritual. A practical guide* (London/Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017).

In religious worldview traditions, there are guidelines, perspectives on life and death, key elements in language and core symbols and acts: the goal of a funeral is known. Despite differences in adaptation between cultures, regions and local practices, these are identity markers for the religion at hand.

Looking at secular worldview traditions in Europe, the availability of funeral guidelines and perspectives is also clear. When I turn to former East Germany, for instance, it could be argued that Marxist funerals were shaped by liturgical and homiletical ground rules.<sup>7</sup> There is a script for the ceremony and interpretative schemes are provided for the biography of the deceased that will be used in the eulogy. For example, a central element in the evaluation of a human life is that person's contribution to the wellbeing of others. These guiding principles are active even now, more than thirty years after *Die Wende*.

Another example of secular rituals within a worldview tradition are humanistic funerals. They have a philosophical background that determines the goals and content of humanistic burials and cremations. For example, when I look at the language used in humanistic ceremonies, metaphors like 'a man is a world on his own', 'living is walking on a road and leaving tracks', or 'living is playing in a self-designed theatre' seem appropriate.<sup>8</sup>

Traditions, secular or religious, offer interpretive frameworks. When people are unaffiliated to a secular or religious tradition, what then are overarching views and ritual structures that address death and the meaning of life in a way that is relevant for more than one person or family?<sup>9</sup> How are these questions addressed by ritual counsellors who offer their services to people outside organized worldview traditions?

A theoretical exploration of some guidelines from handbooks for 'free' or secular rituals shows that these professionals mainly adopt a people-oriented approach.<sup>10</sup> They aim to design an authentic ritual that meets the needs, views and experiences of bereaved families. The way in which the ritual is created differs per author. Each person defines their own areas of emphasis, with one working more product-driven, a second more inductive and a third focusing on constructing a personal symbol for the life of the deceased.

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7) Jan Hermelink, "Die weltliche Bestattung und ihre kirchliche Konkurrenz: Überlegungen zur Kasualpraxis in Ostdeutschland," in *Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie* 39 (2000): 65-86.

8) Joachim Kahl, "Philosophische Überlegungen zur Begründung einer weltlichhumanistischen Bestattungs- und Trauerkultur," in *Humanistische Bestattungskultur*, Hrsg. H. Grosschop (Aschaffenburg: Alibri Verlag, 2010), 99-110; [http://www.kahl-marburg.privat.t-online.de/Kahl\\_Bestattungskultur.pdf](http://www.kahl-marburg.privat.t-online.de/Kahl_Bestattungskultur.pdf). Accessed March 4, 2023.

9) Kathleen Garces-Foley, "Funerals of the Unaffiliated," *Omega* 46 (2002/2003): 4: 287-302, <https://doi.org/10.2190/P8AR-4AHN-8Q3K-VY76>.

10) Mulder, *Hermeneutiek en dodenliturgie*, 117-121.

In some early publications an elaborated reflection on how worldview contributes to these rituals is almost completely absent.<sup>11</sup> Recent publications pay more attention to the subject. Gordon-Lennox promotes sensitivity for the values and the ritual identity of the person at the center of the ceremony.<sup>12</sup> Wojtkowiak pays attention to ritual identity, worldview orientation and core values in her framework for professional ritual making.<sup>13</sup> Especially, in the case of dying, death and mourning, celebrants should speak about the beliefs of the client or the group with regard to the afterlife according to Wojtkowiak.<sup>14</sup>

## 1 Perspective and question

I define the activity of ritual counsellors as hermeneutic-communicative action, which is communication about meaning embedded in philosophical traditions and sources.<sup>15</sup> It does not matter whether this embedding is formalized by an institution. Meaning-making can always be seen as a human construct in which transcendent frameworks are used and worldview sources are consciously or unconsciously called upon. These sources can take the form of a text from the Bible, a poem, novel, film or life story, and so on.

When I compare the work of the ritual counsellor in a non-church funeral with the work of a pastor at a church funeral, I see a significant difference. At a church funeral the relatives and the church pastor are in the same meaning-giving context, namely that of the Christian tradition. In their conversation about the meaning of death and the way in which the farewell service can be fulfilled, they are guided by concepts from the Christian tradition, or at least in dialogue with that tradition. Of course, there may be differences in how closely the bereaved (and also the pastor) are connected to Christianity and how they experience concepts and rituals as meaningful. Often sources from this tradition will be combined with other worldview sources. Also, there is a diversity in interpretation and appropriation of convictions and rituals. In addition, there is a difference in the ways in which pastors fulfil their role. Sometimes it will be the role of a guide who opens up new meanings for relatives,

11) Mulder, *Hermeneutiek en dodenliturgie*, 117-121.

12) Gordon-Lennox, *Crafting secular ritual* uses a *Questionnaire on ritual identity* and advises to search for *Core values* that can be used in the celebration (chapter 5).

13) Joanna Wojtkowiak, "Ritual (Re)design. Towards a Framework for Professional Ritual Making in Postsecular Contexts," in *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 38 (2022): 108-123, <https://doi.org/10.21827/YRLS.38.108-123>.

14) Joanna Wojtkowiak, "Leren ritualiseren. Hoe (her)ontwerp je rituelen?," in *Met lichaam en geest. De rituele competentie van geestelijk verzorgers*, S. Körver, E. Olsman & S. Rosie (red.) (Utrecht: Eburon, 2021), 112-121, here p. 116.

15) André Mulder, "Werken met diepgang: Een introductie," in *Werken met diepgang. Levensbeschouwelijke communicatie in de praktijk van onderwijs, zorg en kerk*, A. Mulder & H. Snoek (eds.) (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2012), 15-45.

drawing from the tradition. On other occasions, it will be the role of an interpreter who uses words from tradition to bring to light the experiences and views of the bereaved families. A final possible role is that of the preacher, in which the message about God is central.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the hermeneutic context is more or less defined by the Christian tradition in which the relatives and the pastor position themselves. The request for a Christian funeral service activates this repertoire.

In a funeral led by a ritual counsellor the worldview situation is more open. There is beforehand no shared religious or philosophical frame of reference that can be relied on. People outside the church (but often also within the church) shape their worldview identity with the help of various sources. These sources may be linked to a religious or philosophical tradition (for example, a journal entry by Anselm Grün that is inspiring to someone), but more often this is not the case. For example, a person may be inspired by nature, or by a work of literature that has been life-defining, or by Dutch folksongs. And sometimes people combine different sources and traditions, by taking elements from them and integrating them into their life. Some are inspired by Buddhism and Christianity, or Christianity and humanism. Clearly, in situations involving next of kin who consciously choose to request a service from a ritual counsellor outside the church, the worldview situation can be rather complex.

I know from previous research that ritual counsellors are free spirits, open to all kinds of spirituality, and liberal-minded.<sup>17</sup> They do not represent a Christian institution, even though many theologians who work as ritual counsellors do still have a personal connection with Christianity. Therefore, the hermeneutical conversation about the meaning of death and life in the context of the deceased, as well as the organization of the funeral itself, takes place in a field of tension between various philosophical, religious and non-religious sources. This poses major hermeneutical challenges for these professionals. How can they understand and serve their clients from a worldview perspective? And how do they position themselves? Do they think they must be neutral and express only the worldview information retrieved from the clients? Or do they have a kind of message that they find helpful to convey to the bereaved?

Empirical research on the views and practices of ritual counsellors has been limited. I know from our own previous quantitative research among 24 ritual counsellors that respondents viewed themselves primarily as coaches for mourning families, not as preachers of the gospel – which is a people-oriented self-definition. When it comes to the valuation of the importance of their own meaning-making system (worldview, religion) in their work, they had an average score of 4.29 on a scale of 1-5. They do not take a ‘neutral’ or ‘general’ standpoint. Ritual counsellors are driven by their own philosophy, worldview, religion or spirituality; the question is how this drive influences their attitude and actions towards their clients. Even so, ritual counsellors acknowledge that it is important to take their clients’ worldview or

16) Mulder, *Hermeneutiek en dodenliturgie*, 112-117.

17) Angela Stoof, Teus van de Lagemaat, André Mulder & Leo van der Tuin, *Pionieren met Passie. Reli-ondernemers In Bedrijf. Rapportage van een landelijk onderzoek naar het profiel, de passie en de professionaliteit van zelfstandig ondernemende theologen en religiewetenschappers* (Zwolle: Windesheim, 2011).



religion into account. The survey question ‘In my work, I take the worldview of the client into account’ received an average score of 4.79.<sup>18</sup> I concluded that ritual counsellors have a strong sense of the significance of their own worldview. They seem to find their clients’ meaning-making system even more significant.

In what follows, I present the design and results of an initial exploratory study in this field. I am looking for answers to the question of how these professionals shape their hermeneutical-communicative role and how they use worldview communication in the preparation and performance of a funeral.

## 2 Design and method

Case studies are indicated when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are being asked, instead of ‘what’, ‘where’, and ‘how many’ questions. Individuals can be considered as a case and usually small populations are used. Multiple sources of data are collected.<sup>19</sup> For this project we designed a two-step, qualitative case study consisting of six cases of ritual counsellors.<sup>20</sup> We used a questionnaire and a group interview as data sources. After a phase of analysis and respondent feedback, we constructed a case study report for each participant about their handling of worldview in this context. We compared these reports in a cross case comparison looking for similarities and differences.

### 2.1 Participants

A total of six ritual counsellors participated in the study. We used convenience sampling, which is a non-purposive strategy to get access to the most easy accessible subjects, because of the exploratory character of this research, and to save time.<sup>21</sup> We approached a network of ritual counsellors in the Nijmegen region to which we already had access, and which was prepared to cooperate in a qualitative study. This network consisted of seven women, six of whom participated in the study. Their age averaged 49, with the youngest being 34 and the oldest 60. All practice the profession of ritual counsellor as self-employed entrepreneurs, and have been working in that capacity for a period ranging from one to nine years. Five out of six participants have completed a degree at BA level (including theology, nursing and art academy) and one at MA level (psychology).

18) Data about this subpopulation of ritual counsellors are extracted from our report about religious entrepreneurs: Stoof, Van de Lagemaat, Mulder & Van der Tuin, *Pionieren met Passie*.

19) David E. Gray, *Doing research in the real world* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), 265-272.

20) Data collection and analysis as well as the preparation of earlier drafts of this article were the result of a collaboration with Dr. Angela Stoof, former member of the Windesheim research group of the author. Dr. Stoof is currently a transition psychologist at De Milde Organisatie, [www.demildeorganisatie.nl](http://www.demildeorganisatie.nl).

21) Gray, *Doing research in the real world*, 223.

- ♦ Three out of six participants have received additional training for ritual counselling from *Het Moment*. The participants call themselves ritual counsellors, ceremony counsellors or counsellors for funeral services.
- ♦ In terms of worldview position, the respondents form a wide-ranging, heterogeneous group. None of them view themselves as belonging to a particular philosophical or religious tradition, although some express some affinity with Christianity and/or Buddhism.
- ♦ Respondent 1 defines herself as solo-religious, raised in the Christian tradition and taking the freedom to define her ‘being in the world’ in her own way.
- ♦ Respondent 2 calls herself spiritual, always looking for meaning and connection between above and beyond, aiming at doing good.
- ♦ Respondent 3 calls herself a spiritual believer, experiencing a strong connection with the Divine, both inside and outside herself.
- ♦ Respondent 4 uses all kinds of words that demonstrate her belief in some transcendent power that cannot be described in words. She can connect to this power, without the aid of the church. She needs to be in contact with other open and confident people, pursuing personal development with critical discernment and taking responsibility for fostering a humane world.
- ♦ Respondent 5 calls herself a spiritual, religious believer. Raised in the Christian tradition, she kept some of it and dropped other elements along her way. She grew into a belief in reincarnation and Persian mysticism.
- ♦ Respondent 6 says that all life experiences are sources that shape her worldview. She feels connected to an encompassing energy that permeates everything. From this source, she tries to live with compassion and love.

## 2.2 Instruments

In the first step of the study, we used a questionnaire. This consisted of 25 open questions, grouped around two core themes:

- The worldview aspects of supervising funerals (questions included “To what extent is attention for the worldview of your ‘customers’ important in your work?” and “Do you use worldview sources in your work, and if so: which sources?”)
- The self-defined worldview of the ritual counsellor (questions included “Could you say what gives meaning to your life?”; “To what extent is religion/belief/worldview important to you personally? Please explain.”)

The questions are inspired by preliminary research into hermeneutics and funeral liturgy, with or without a church involvement.<sup>22</sup> We were curious about professional self-definition and its possible rela-

22) Mulder, *Hermeneutiek en dodenliturgie*.

tionships with the worldview of the respondents. Based on an initial analysis of the answers to the survey questions, we compiled a topic list for a group interview. This list contains discussion points where the counsellors differed in their answers and points of unclarity arising from the first round of analysis. These points required more in-depth information, which was obtained in a group interview. Examples include: the meaning of the term ‘ritual counsellor’; the roles that are adopted while guiding the bereaved; and the criteria that are used in choosing sources for the ceremony.

## 2.3 Procedure

In the first stage of the study, participants received the questionnaire by email. It was accompanied by a short introduction to the study, and respondents were encouraged to take all the space they needed to answer the questions. There was no limit for the number of words. The completed questionnaires were returned to the researcher by email. The second stage of the study consisted of conducting a group interview with all participants, who were treated as a focus group. The basis for the conversation was the topic list that we had compiled. The conversation took place in an informal, low-key setting and was recorded in its entirety with a voice recorder. Afterwards, the interview transcript was sent to the participants, with the request to check the text for accuracy and offering the option to make additions. The result was approved by all respondents. Three respondents provided brief additions to the material.

## 2.4 Theoretical tools and analysis

Lacking conceptual frameworks from previous research, we entered the practice of ritual counsellors with several sensitizing heuristic concepts taken from other fields of hermeneutical-communicative practice, specifically religious education and pastoral care. From religious education, we took the Witness, Specialist, Moderator model (WSM model);<sup>23</sup> and from pastoral theory we adopted the concepts of interpreter and guide.<sup>24</sup> From both domains, we used the three hermeneutic models of deductive, inductive and abductive hermeneutics.<sup>25</sup>

23) The WSM model comes from Didier Pollefeyt, *Reader Course Didactics (A0950). Religious Education*, <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/uploads/image/prvftp/A0950Reader.pdf>. Accessed April 6, 2023. See also André Mulder & Bas van den Berg, *Learning for life. An imaginative approach to worldview education in the context of diversity* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 37-57.

24) Ruud Ganzevoort & Jan Visser, *Zorg voor het verhaal. Achtergrond, methode en inhoud van pastorale begeleiding* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2007), 96-98.

25) For pastoral hermeneutics, see Ganzevoort & Visser, *Zorg voor het verhaal*, 207-215. For learning theory, see Chris Hermans, “Abductive Hermeneutics: A Pragmatic Key to the Learning Paradox,” in Herman Lombaerts & Didier Pollefeyt (eds.), *Hermeneutics and Religious Education* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 73-88. See also Didier Pollefeyt, “The difference of alterity. A religious pedagogy for an interreligious and interideological world,” in Johan de Tavenier, Joseph Selling, Johan Verstraeten & Paul Schotsmans (eds.),



I briefly explain these theoretical perspectives, each of which indicates in its own way how the professionals shape their relationship to worldview in a hermeneutical-communicative way.

The WSM model distinguishes three roles for communication about and from traditions in the context of education: witness, specialist and moderator. The *witness* speaks, lives and acts from their own philosophical identity and shares their views in an open manner. The *specialist* is someone with up-to-date scientific knowledge about religious and non-religious worldviews who shares this knowledge with others in a critical and constructive manner. The *moderator* mainly plays a maieutic role, by encouraging others to think and communicate about worldview from their own personal views and experiences.

Drawing on pastoral theory, *interpreter* and *guide* indicate two roles in a hermeneutical-communicative process of coaching people on existential questions. The interpreter articulates and imagines what people are occupied with, and uses stories from religious traditions to enhance their self-understanding. The guide, on the other hand, mainly unlocks new meanings from tradition and adapts them to people's own stories in order to create clarity.

Empirical research and literature on pastoral care and religious pedagogy bring to the fore the different *hermeneutical models* that can be adopted in hermeneutics. A deductive approach takes its starting point from and sets its main goal in communicating the truth, taken from tradition, and applying it to the life stories of the people involved. An inductive approach takes its starting point from and sets its main goal in communicating the views and experiences of people involved. A third approach, which falls somewhere in between these two positions, is called the abductive approach. This approach tries to prevent pastoral care or religious education from becoming a sort of abstract lecture without a serious connection to the real situation of the people involved. On the other hand, the abductive approach tries to avoid a situation in which pastoral care or religious education remains restricted to the stories of the people involved, in which horizons are not broadened in a meaningful way and no new perspectives are added to the understanding of the situation. In this third approach, the pastor correlates tradition and situation creatively in such a way as to shed new light on the experiences and interpretations of the mourners.

We performed the analysis of the data collected in the questionnaires in three steps. In the first step, the answers to the open questions were divided into fragments. A new fragment started whenever a respondent touched on a new topic in a certain answer. Additionally, we assigned a label or keyword to key fragments. This first step in the analysis was carried out separately by both researchers.<sup>26</sup> In the second step, we drew up a case study report per respondent on the basis of the labels: a concise summary of the individuality of the respondent as well as her view of her own work and the worldview expressed therein. In this summary, where relevant, we have also discussed the respon-

*Theological Ethics in Dialogue. Festschrift Roger Burggraeve* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 305-330.

26) Hsiu-Fang Hsieh & Sarah E. Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," in *Qualitative Health Research* 15 (9) (2005): 1277-1288, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>.

dent's approach in the light of the three theoretical models mentioned above.

Our interpretation always considered the entirety of a particular respondent's answers.

The case study reports were first prepared by one researcher, and then verified by the second researcher. In the third step, we used the group interview transcript and the three personal additions to the transcript to enrich the individual reports.

The fourth step was taken jointly by both researchers and consisted of a comparison of the six case study reports in order to map the cross-links. Eye-catching themes were identified based not only on similarities or differences, but also on saliency, based on the strongest labels and on a discussion between the researchers.

The group interview report was analyzed in a summative content analysis in which we identified key words and interpreted them in their context.<sup>27</sup> In a first round we analyzed the statements on an individual level comparing them in an iterative process with the findings in the case study reports. In this way we were able to enrich the report by adding new elements or applying nuances. In the second round we summarized the shared convictions of the group.

## 2.5 Reliability

The reliability of the analyses received ample attention during our research. To this end, we applied method triangulation (comparison of analysis results with the interview report – validated by the participants), researcher triangulation (separate analyses by two researchers) and discipline triangulation (the analyses were carried out by researchers with different backgrounds: theology and psychology). Respondent validation and enrichment were part of the process.

## 3 Results of the study

The research yielded six case study reports that are considered the individual answers to the question how worldview communication is put to practice into the work of the ritual counsellor. Before I illuminate similarities and differences from our findings, I present two examples of the case reports.

### 3.1 Case reports

#### Case report of Respondent 1

Respondent 1 (R1) is a 50-year-old ritual counsellor and grief counsellor. She holds a bachelor's degree in theology, has her roots in the Christian tradition, and calls herself 'solo religious', because she likes to

27) SeHsiu-Fang Hsieh & Sarah E. Shannone, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research* 15 (9) (2005): 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>.

shape her own religious identity and is not bound by a tradition. Her focus on people characterizes her worldview.

### Profession

R1 is first and foremost a counsellor of people. She uses the word guide to define herself and to identify her main task. She has a strong desire to be close to people, to support them and in this way to contribute to a beautiful farewell service in a guidance process. She loves this work. What she strives for is that all those involved – both the deceased and their next of kin – are treated with proper respect. People must be seen and known, and feel a sense of connection with the farewell service. In order to be able to support each other in this way, it is necessary that the counsellor and the relatives really meet each other and establish a relationship in which they understand their feelings very well. Authenticity and attention to the essential – what is real – are important goals in a farewell ceremony. Her hope is that the people in the service can say goodbye to the deceased and derive strength, support and comfort from the ceremony to move on.

### Worldview communication

Both for herself and with a view to the work of counselling people, R1 believes that worldview is important. It plays a role in her work when, in the preparatory interview for the funeral, she explicitly asks how the deceased viewed life, what was important to the deceased, and what ideas the deceased and their next of kin held about death. She incorporates that worldview information in the service. She sometimes finds it difficult to translate what she heard in the process of preparation into a form (words/images) for the farewell service. She uses various sources (texts, poetry, songs) and is guided in her choice by the question of whether the source is aligned with or serves as an expression of the concerns and priorities of those involved. A core concept in her worldview is that people are allowed to be present, exactly as they are. There is no room for condemning or judging others.

Her personal worldview (nurtured by the Christian tradition) provides criteria for her work and attitude: openness and service to the story of the bereaved, giving them space to be present. She uses the worldview of the bereaved in two ways in the context of the farewell service. The first way is to express what occupies people: a maieutic approach. By asking questions and digging deeper, she makes people aware of meanings and invites people to put them into words. She uses these words in the ceremony. It is in line with her objective with the funeral, that people should be known and seen. That is why she mainly looks for the personal meanings that the relatives find important, and for the words and phrases they use to reflect their experiences with this death.

The second way is to interpret people's experiences and views using existing poems, songs and texts. In this approach, she does not use people's own words, but applies the principle of correlation, striving to achieve recognition among the bereaved. In choosing a source, she tunes in to the stories she has heard from the people and gives them back in another form. Her sources are not limited to one worldview tradition.

### Relationship with the theoretical models

In her working method, she combines inductive and abductive methods. Her method is inductive when she carefully listens to the stories told by the bereaved and writes down words and expressions

provided by her clients. It is abductive when she expresses these experiences in words from poems or songs and, in doing so, gives them broader meaning.

R1 is primarily and foremost an interpreter of life stories. She interprets them against a background of multiple worldview sources and traditions. She is also occasionally a guide when she says that sometimes she not only wants to connect with the meanings of the bereaved, but also to supplement them. When that happens, she contributes stories or expressions not from the bereaved themselves, but from other sources with which they might identify.

If we look at her practice through the lens of the WSM model, we see that she is mainly a moderator: someone who consciously starts the conversation about worldview because she considers it extremely valuable.

In the worldview communication of R1, we see a consistency between her own worldview identity, her own perspective on her role and her working method. It's all about people and the articulation of their beliefs and experiences, which she uses as building blocks for the funeral. She is subservient to the people she works with in her attitude and actions.

## Case report of Respondent 2

Respondent 2 (R2) is a woman who is 47 years old. She studied naturopathy and was trained as a ritual counsellor at *Het Moment*. After her Catholic upbringing, she developed a broad spiritual interest and gained knowledge of various worldview traditions. She feels a strong affinity with Buddhism and anthroposophy. Her worldview is characterized by respect for nature, harming no one, pursuing the good, being responsible for your actions and a sense of God in which Love and Light arise from the all-encompassing cosmic source of creative energy.

### Profession

Driven by a desire to support people in giving meaning at difficult moments in life, R2 works as a ritual counsellor. She sees herself as a coach and guide who wants to bring people encouragement, acceptance and inspiration. To this end, she talks to relatives about the deceased and their experiences with that person. She has noticed that she enjoys doing this, and finds this work fulfilling. She aims to achieve acceptance of the situation by the bereaved families and to provide content for the farewell ceremony that gives them comfort and strength. She wants bereaved families to find ways to deal with their grief and loss and to receive a fresh perspective for the future. The funeral has a transformative function: through the ceremony, the relatives have hopefully experienced a change in their feelings towards and their vision of the deceased. The private is transcended.

### Worldview communication

From her own personal perspective, worldview is always an issue. However, she has noticed, in the process of guidance towards the moment of the funeral, that the next of kin gradually also become aware of worldview elements. Sometimes people want to say goodbye to the deceased within a certain

religious framework, for example Protestant, Catholic, general spiritual, or incorporating New Age or Buddhist elements. In the preliminary interview, she asks the families about worldview themes such as the beliefs of the deceased, the whereabouts of the deceased after dying, and the emotions of the bereaved around life and death. She has observed that the conversation is often colored by worldview. From this conversational material, she tries to extract elements for the farewell ceremony in music and text. In this context, she mainly looks for coherence and beauty.

Her personal worldview, rooted in a Catholic upbringing, is a bricolage of Buddhism and anthroposophy in particular.

Worldview fulfils a function with regard to the deceased as well with regard to the next of kin. Within her worldview, the deceased is transferred to a new reality, and the bereaved receive new perspectives and inner space as they have the opportunity to let go of the deceased within this perspective of a new reality. They receive comfort and strength. R2 would like to use her vision of life for the benefit of the bereaved.

In addition, she sees herself as adopting a priestly (Dutch: *priesterlijke*) role with regard to the deceased, guiding them into a new reality.

### Relationship with the theoretical models

In her work, R2 tries to take the worldview of the bereaved as her starting point. She seeks connection with the bereaved and the deceased, and she succeeds (she believes) because she speaks the 'language of the heart'. Operating on the basis of her own worldview and hoping that others will benefit from it, she comes up with a ceremony based on what the bereaved convey to her. She tries to interpret this input with the help of texts and sources from various spiritual traditions and movements. These texts and sources (taken from films, nature, etc.) are also the texts and sources that inspire her personally.

She works abductively within her own philosophical framework. In particular, she acts as a guide when she chooses the lyrics and music to give the bereaved the inner space. To the bereaved, her worldview provides a source of comfort and strength.

Within the WSM model, she is mainly a witness in the way that she speaks about worldview aspects. By asking questions on a deeper level, she helps relatives become more aware of the worldview aspects of saying goodbye. In order to help the bereaved in their process, she seeks texts from her own worldview sources that elevate the situation above the individual level and place it in a broader perspective. She hopes to give the relatives inspiration and encouragement to move forward.

R2 wants to serve people. However, because she mainly works within her own worldview, despite her broad spiritual orientation, a tension can arise between the practice of hermeneutical abduction and wanting to be a witness. When the urge to witness prevails, abduction turns into deduction.

After constructing the six case study reports, we came to the conclusion that the theoretical framework drawn from hermeneutical communication (guide and interpreter; WSM model; induction/deduction/abduction) helped us to understand the practices of the ritual counsellors on a technical and



methodological level. Using the three heuristic tools, we were able to discern differences and similarities between the six respondents, and observed that there were more similarities than differences. Differences were found, for example, in the way in which they describe their personal motivation for pursuing the profession of ritual counsellor: ‘being close to people’ (R1); ‘meaning something to people’ (R2), ‘an inner calling to fulfil a priestly role’ (R3), ‘the conviction that the ritual gap in our time and culture has to be bridged’ (R4), ‘passion’ (R5) and ‘the uniqueness of people’ (R6).

The ideals that these women are trying to embrace by working in this field are sometimes also phrased in different ways, which reveal the personal value system of the ritual counsellors within the context of their own worldview:

- R1 “authenticity, empowering people, supporting them, facilitating an encounter, addressing what really matters”.
- R2 “expressing the core of your own self; using my qualities and philosophy of life to serve others; helping people to accept their situation and make something of it so they can feel empowered and comforted; offering a perspective on the future and tools to cope with suffering. Motto: the connection of love and friendship never vanishes”
- R3 “authenticity, service, keeping in touch with what is sacred to me”
- R4 “using rituals to connect people to the world around them and to the transcending world, because this ‘unity’ can bring the world fulfilment, love, happiness, and the completion of life’s lessons”
- R5 “the transferal of love, light, power and comfort”
- R6 “I hope to contribute to a personal farewell ceremony that, when it is prepared and performed in cooperation with the next of kin, fosters the mourning process”

The case study reports provided a rich picture per respondent.

## 3.2 Cross case comparison

Based on a comparative analysis of the six case study reports, I conclude that the way in which ritual counsellors define and perform their work is very similar overall. I address the aspects of counselling, the authentic ritual, the good ritual, worldview, and the priestly role.

### 3.2.1 Counselling people

The ritual counsellors see themselves as *guides* in helping people say goodbye. The interpretation of their role is based on their interpretation of what people need when they say farewell to the deceased. The primary self-definition of the respondents is that they want to guide people in saying goodbye to the deceased. The funeral ritual, as a comforting moment in a sometimes painful process plays an important though not always a main role in this situation, as a comforting moment in a sometimes pain-

ful process.<sup>28</sup> Some ritual counsellors mention the conversations about the deceased and designing the funeral as equally important.

These professionals want to help and assist people. The uniqueness of illuminating and revealing the deceased and wanting to be close to people in a difficult situation are mentioned as drivers for this work.

### 3.2.2 Striving for an authentic ritual: working from the heart

The ritual counsellors seem to be in agreement regarding the primary purpose of the guidance they provide. We refer to this as the search for an *authentic ritual*. These professionals put themselves at the service of the bereaved and the deceased. All look for a suitable ritual that comforts the bereaved.

A similarity that becomes apparent is that all ritual counsellors look for *authenticity* in the ritual. This authenticity has two dimensions: the ritual is appropriate to the views and experiences of the deceased and their next of kin, and it is aligned with the ritual counsellor's own views. It must be possible for her to lead with integrity. So far, none of them have encountered a situation in which the wishes and expectations of the next of kin were so different from their professional standards that a limit was reached or boundaries had to be crossed.

In connecting with the next of kin and deceased, techniques as asking questions, polling, observing and attuning are used. Listening to people is paramount. Our research showed that it is not about the interpretation of the ritual counsellor, but rather about the interpretation of the next of kin. Some ritual counsellors refer to attuning with the bereaved as working *from the heart*. With this expression, they point to a deep intuitive kind of knowing, which relies not on what the ritual counsellor has conceptually heard in conversations with the bereaved, but on what they perceive first-hand and feel in that interaction. It is relevant here to consider the distinction that De Wit makes in contemplative psychology between conceptual and perceptual knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Perceptual knowledge is then the affective and intuitive way of getting to know the interlocutors. A ritual counsellor gains a sense of what is good in this situation by connecting with the deceased and their next of kin, interacting from the heart.

### 3.2.3 Creating a good ritual

The ritual counsellors want to design a 'good' farewell ritual, and that 'good' is ultimately defined by the bereaved. Nevertheless, they mix criteria according to their own subjective personal standards. The respondents use expressions such as:

- ♦ respectful
- ♦ that people feel recognized

28) According to two respondents, the term 'ritual counsellor' places too much emphasis on the farewell service. They usually call themselves 'accompanists at farewell' (Dutch: *begeleiders bij afscheid*). In the meantime, the term 'ritual counsellor' has become such an established concept in the funeral world that it can no longer be ignored.

29) Han F. de Wit, *Contemplatieve psychologie* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1987).

- ♦ that relatives recognize the deceased in the service
- ♦ that the service is truthful, warm and human
- ♦ being personal
- ♦ doing justice to relatives and the deceased
- ♦ building a sound ritual structure (beginning, middle, end)
- ♦ appropriate to the life lived and its meaning
- ♦ with aesthetic quality (beauty)
- ♦ radiating tranquility

These criteria seem to be interconnected with the goals of the funeral, as formulated and shared by all the respondents:

- ♦ treating the relatives with appropriate respect in their grief
- ♦ commemorating the deceased in conformity with the stories told by their next of kin
- ♦ facilitating a farewell in which those present can experience comfort and support

### 3.2.4 Worldview: saliency, sources and strategies

There is a consensus on the great importance of the role that worldview plays in the process of shaping the funeral. Five out of six consider this role important or very important. The group interview showed that this topic has hardly been discussed within the profession. After the interview, the respondents indicated that they found it a very meaningful conversation that made them aware of things that are not normally discussed.

The ritual counsellors explicitly address worldview in the preparatory talks with the next of kin. In addition, they all mention that worldview plays a role in the way the service is shaped, in the texts that are used, the music that is chosen, and the rituals that are performed.

In the conversation about death and views about an afterlife, the worldview dimension is explicitly discussed. Of course, the question of meaning is often raised in the context of talking about illness and suffering. Ritual counsellors consciously look for this philosophical depth in order to optimally attune to where people stand in life. They indicate that they are not necessarily concerned with a religious interpretation, but with views on life, death and life after death (when mentioned). All respondents are strongly aware of their own worldview, which gives them powerful motivation to do this work. As one ritual counsellor puts it, “It’s the core of what I do and who I am.” (R3)

The ritual counsellors use a wide variety of religious and non-religious worldview sources in the course of their work. While a few write texts themselves that mainly arise from their contact with the relatives and their personal contemplative reflection on those interviews, others use poems, myths and songs. In addition to Christianity, they also tap into other traditions such as Hinduism, Sufism, Buddhism, Islam, humanism, anthroposophy, Taoism, Wicca and combinations thereof, drawing on diverse sources to imbue the ritual with meaning. In doing so, these professionals work eclectically from a sense of what is needed in each situation.

The way in which worldview is ultimately expressed differs from one ritual counsellor to another. Some are mainly interpreters, others mainly guides, and some combine these hermeneutical roles. One is mainly a specialist, another is a moderator, a third is a witness.

Given their people-oriented approach, these ritual facilitators work mainly inductively or abductively. If the ritual counsellor has a stronger desire to incorporate their own worldview framework, the role of witness will become more prominent and a tension in our data arises between inductive/abductive and deductive. The question is whether they are aware of this tension. For example, a ritual counsellor's ideal of "bringing comfort, love and strength" results in a desire to express this in some way in the funeral. Another ritual counsellor sees an aspect of her role in "providing people with tools to handle suffering." A third seeks "to express how the deceased lives on." These ritual counsellors define the situation around death in terms of their own views (*witness*), and at the same time they share the conviction that the views of relatives should be the leading factor.

### 3.2.5 Transcendence and the priestly role

Despite the choice of a secular work setting, four of the six ritual counsellors talk about transcendence. In the role of a *guide*, one wants to lead and connect relatives to meanings that transcend their private situation, offer them perspective, comfort them and, for example, help them to let go of the deceased. Another wants to offer a fresh perspective on the situation, a suprapersonal view, which helps the relatives make the transition to a life without the deceased. Connecting people to 'Love', to 'their destiny', are expressions that the respondents use to verbally express the transcendent dimension in their work. It is precisely with this dimension that they hope to touch the bereaved and help to transfer the deceased to the realm of death.

Some respondents experience in their intuitive search for words for a deeper understanding of the situation that words are 'given' to them, in some sense. They receive them more than that they create them.

The dimension of the transcendent emerges even more strongly when these ritual counsellors talk about their role towards the deceased. The deceased must be handed over to a 'new reality'. In their own words, respondents explain: "A farewell service should, in my opinion, convey to the deceased: it's all right, you can go now; that it is possible to surrender" (R3); "Helping the deceased (in any way) to come to terms with themselves / their lives on earth and to finish it. To then be able to start their 'next phase'" (R4)." The deceased is transferred to the "mystery of death" (R6).

The respondents associate the transcendent element with a role that differs from guide or interpreter. In the group interview, the word "priestly" was used in connection to some actions and attitudes. They mean that it is priestly to connect people to the transcendent world; that it is priestly to ritually lead the deceased into the mystery of death; that it is priestly to offer people words about that other world between heaven and earth in a situation in which their own words fall short; that it is priestly to approach the bereaved from an attitude of peace and serenity and to take the lead in the farewell service.

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study firstly confirm the available theory that I discussed above. The people-oriented approach and the search for an authentic ritual are confirmed as important goals in the work of this profession. The criteria for a good funeral mentioned here also reflect those from literature. For example, when I focus on publications in the Netherlands, which is the context of this research project, I extract criteria from publications of *Het Moment*, the oldest and largest training institute.<sup>30</sup> I summarize the parts that focus on reflection on worldview aspects, and distil the following key convictions:

- Ritual counsellors try to provide a personal ritual that has meaning for those who are present;
- The funeral is oriented towards the bereaved, who are off balance at one or more of the human levels. The next of kin are actively involved in the construction and realization of the ceremony;
- The ritual focusses on the unique meaning of life and personality of the deceased, from the perspective of the bereaved, as expressed in their words and symbols;
- The meaning of life and death is presented in line with the beliefs of the next of kin.

Secondly, also in line with a lack of literature on this topic, our study confirms that there has been little in-depth reflection in the profession on worldview interaction outside the established religious institutions. The question of how to deal with your own worldview in relation to the worldviews of others, and the question of what your goal is of involving transcendent elements or worldview sources have not yet been sufficiently and consciously addressed. This is striking precisely because these ritual counsellors are entering a new field of activity outside the established churches. This presents challenges for theology and worldview training institutes to provide relevant coursework that would support this profession.

A third element that I want to emphasize is that some of these professionals (and the majority in this group of respondents) do not adopt a strictly secular approach in their work, but rather look for transcendent elements. They see it as an integral part of their role to connect both the bereaved and the deceased with the transcending world. This can be regarded as a religious dimension. Since this profession often involves interaction with bereaved who are unaffiliated with any church tradition, the ritual counsellors face the challenge to look for the right words, consulting all kinds of sources in order to hermeneutically match the language of the bereaved.

Fourth, some ritual counsellors choose the word ‘priestly’ to describe their own role. Their interpretation of this role certainly has parallels with the role of the Roman Catholic priest in the funeral ritual. After all, for ages the priest’s role was not solely or primarily aimed at comforting the bereaved by assuring them of faith in the resurrection, but above all at praying for the deceased and commending them to the mercy of God (*commendatio*). To this end, a whole range of ritual acts (making the sign of

30) Hermien Embsen & Ton Overtoom, *Hoe zou jij het willen? Persoonlijk afscheid nemen van een dierbare* (Kampen: Ten Have, 2007); Ton Overtoom, *Ritueel, symbool en rouw* (Kampen: Van Warven, 2022).



the cross, worship, sprinkling holy water, prayers) were performed. Before Vatican II, these ritual acts oriented to the deceased were the priest's core task at the funeral. After Vatican II the ritual can be seen as a double rite of passage: for the deceased and for the bereaved.<sup>31</sup> I find it striking that this term 'priestly' is chosen outside of the ecclesiastical context. For some ritual counsellors, there is probably a sense of vocation at play here that is rooted in their own spirituality. It is their desire to bring people through rituals into contact with something or Someone that or who transcends everyday reality.

Fifth, in this priestly role, ritual counsellors are not only *confirmatory* about what is happening or what people might be expecting. Whether a funeral is church-affiliated or not, it is already a major thing when the ceremony includes references to what people go through and presents a perspective on the concrete situation of death, no matter how wide-ranging or painful. If the ritual counsellor is no longer speaking as a representative of some religious authority, she might come empty-handed, simply naming and affirming whatever presents itself. The ritual counsellors in the study, however, share the opinion that they are supposed to contribute something to the situation. They therefore also work *transformatively*, in the hope that people can let go of the deceased, for example by bringing a message of universal connection or ongoing love. And – to some – there is also the hope that the deceased can let go of their earthly bonds through the ritual. In this way they bring in aspects of their own worldview into the ceremony. This practice contradicts basic starting points in the field. For example, the IOCF states that a civil funeral is “driven by the wishes, beliefs and values of the deceased and their family, not by the beliefs and ideology of the person conducting the funeral”.<sup>32</sup>

The transformation of the next of kin was also mentioned in the professional literature that I mentioned earlier.<sup>33</sup> The founders of *Het Moment* developed a theory about the personal symbol. In short:

- The personal symbol, which characterizes the deceased, forms the heart of the ceremony and the farewell process, and can be an image, a metaphor or an object. The personal symbol is directly linked to the theme of the funeral;
- The personal symbol delivers an important message to the heart of the bereaved: that the deceased still lives on in some sense and is connected to the next of kin in a new way. The bereaved experience a transformation during the ceremony through confrontation with the personal symbol. Instead of being focused on memories, they can orient on the future, in which the deceased occupies a meaningful place/role;
- The ritual counsellor plays a key role in discovering, interpreting and explaining the personal symbol.

31) Gerard Lukken, “Een barmhartige kerk. Spanningsvelden in de uitvaartliturgie,” in *Jaarboek voor Liturgie-onderzoek* 21 (2005): 159-194, here 176/177.

32) <https://www.iocf.org.uk/about-civil-funerals/>. Accessed October 11, 2023.

33) Embsen & Overtom, *Hoe zou jij het willen?*; Overtom, *Ritueel, symbool en rouw*.

Following this theory, the personal symbol should be a core element in the ceremony and the process of guiding the next of kin. The moment of experiencing the personal symbol is the instrument to generate this inner change for the bereaved: “This can be interpreted as the turning point, the transformation, the moment of change, a change in thought, to obtain new insight, a change of heart, the new birth.”<sup>34</sup> In the data from our study, the expression ‘personal symbol’ is used only once in a sideline. It would appear that the approach adopted by these ritual counsellors does not conform to this professional theory. On the other hand, the transformation of the deceased is not mentioned in the professional theory of *Het Moment*, although that concept receives strong support from our respondents.

All the ritual counsellors in our study – and the majority of people in this profession in the Netherlands – are women. In this role that they themselves have described as ‘priestly’, these new priestesses pose new questions for reflection and research. One of the most important is how to arrive at a professional theory of hermeneutical communication in this setting. On what do they base themselves in their self-definition and working methods? How do they justify their priestly role and their work with transcendent elements?

Furthermore, I am interested in how these professionals use worldview resources. How is the connection established between what the ritual counsellor perceives and hears, and the source that is used to interpret or guide what they perceived? How do they connect the mundane with the transcendent?

Finally, what safeguards can be put in place to provide qualitative guarantees in working with this basic sacrality surrounding the funeral?<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Ritual counselling is a relatively new profession that appears in several secularizing countries in the world. It started as an alternative that broke the monopoly on funerals of the churches and also as a counterweight to minimal and impersonal ceremonies of funeral companies. Ritual counselling can be seen as a practice that tries to humanize funerals by personalizing them. In shaping funerals that are appropriate to the worldview makeup of the bereaved, ritual counsellors fulfil an important role in helping grieving families in their mourning process. The lack of reflection on worldview elements in this profession needs to be addressed in order to construct a strong professional theory. This theory should respond to the lack of consensus about transformative goals of the funeral and also to the lack of consensus about the contribution of the own worldview of the ritual counsellors in constructing ceremonies.

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34) Overtoom, *Ritueel, symbool en rouw*, 133.

35) For the concept Paul Post, “Ritual Studies,” in Birgit Weyel, Wilhelm Gräb, Emmanuel Lartey & Cas Wepener (eds.), *International Handbook of Practical Theology* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 743-760, here 756/7.

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