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Ladies and gentlemen,

## Introduction

In the Netherlands, three weeks ago, news on religion started to be dominated by the story of the refusal of a Roman-Catholic funeral. The peaceful village of Liempde was awakened by the news that the parish priest, Norbert van der Sluis, rejected the request for a funeral service because the deceased passed away after euthanasia.



N. van der Sluis, priest  
of the Liempde parish



Despite the pain the priest caused towards the mourning family he said he had to act in concordance with his conscience, following church rules. Some of the inhabitants were shocked, by the rigid behaviour of the priest, others applauded the clear and pious stand he took. The family and friends of the deceased found the parish priest of Sint-Oedenrode, a neighbouring village at a distance of 7 kilometres, willing to comply at their wishes. Discussion on church rules, euthanasia and a merciful pastoral attitude continues until today. The priest has been given two weeks of rest by the bishop. The auxiliary Bishop came to speak with the parish and its council to re-establish the peace.

This example signals some aspects of the complexity of the funeral practices in the Netherlands. It shows diversity in the positions taken by lay-Catholics on the role of the church confronted with euthanasia and the funeral-policy involved. It also shows that opinions differ amongst Catholics as to what is the most important in situations like this: people or principles, the orientation towards tradition or towards the individual. From the point of view of the clergy Liempde shows us an inner-denominational diversity as well. The same church rule leads to opposite behaviour of the priests. Said otherwise: within one religious tradition interpretations of liturgical situations differ.

The family, although disappointed, turned to an other priest, because the deceased was a devout Catholic and a church funeral applied. Would it have been otherwise, for example if the deceased was not a churchgoer, the family could have turned to a ritual coach.

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### Ritual coaches: an emerging profession

- Decline in number of church funerals:
  - 60% of all funerals in 1990
  - 52% of all funerals in 2002
  - 38% of all funerals in 2009 (est.)
- Increasing number of companies
- Institutionalisation
- Names: ritual coach; ritual guide; ceremony maker; funerary speaker



But what is a ritual coach?

The churches monopoly on funerary rites in the Netherlands is buried in the past. A growing number of people – believers or non-believers, church members or non-church members – choose an alternative for a church funeral. The number of church funerals is declining, from 60% of all funerals in 1990, to 56% in 2002 and to approximately 38% in 2009.<sup>1</sup> We cannot estimate the share of funerals conducted by ritual coaches at the moment. But what we do see is an increasing number of companies, run by self-employed ritual coaches. In addition, we

observe a kind of institutionalisation in this area. There is a well known educational program which prepares for this profession and also a professional organisation is in formation, counting 36 members.<sup>2</sup>

Since a few decennia ritual coaches or guides, ceremony makers or funerary speakers – several names circulate – are filling the gap between church funerals and complete secular funerals. Our impressions lead to the conjecture that there are approximately 100 to 150 of these companies. The emergence of this group of new professionals adds new colours to the funerary and liturgical landscape in the Netherlands.

Windesheim  **Products and features**

- Services at major life events (birth; marriage/divorce; death)
  - Rituals of transition (companies; schools; churches)
  - Rituals of commemoration (families; communicaties; funeral companies)
- Features:
- Commercial
  - Not bound to tradition or institution (form/content)
  - Not bound to specific buildings



The most important product of a ritual coach is a service or ritual at a major life event such as birth, marriage, divorce or death. They also provide other rituals, for companies and families at moments of transition or commemoration. Conducting funerals however is by far the most important task for most of the ritual coaches. In case of a funeral, ritual coaches are responsible for the form and content of a funeral service and sometimes of a wake. They co-operate with funeral companies, which provide the material aspect of a funeral (like transport of the corpse, flowers, catering at a reception, tombstones, music, burial and cremations).

Windesheim 



The ritual coaches are free to construct a ritual of any kind. They can use any kind of location to hold the service, and we have seen funeral services at the sea shore, in the woods, in cafés, funeral parlours, or at people's homes. These ritual coaches are free to use symbols and symbolic acts as they please. Of course, they do so in close contact with the mourners, who hire ritual coaches to render this service.

## 1. The central problem



### Central problem for this paper

*How does the communication of traditions take place in the work of ritual coaches, on the open field of attribution of meaning to major life events outside the frame of reference of churches and other religious institutions?*



This paper addresses the question *how the communication of traditions takes place in the work of these ritual coaches, on the open field of attribution of meaning to major life events outside the frame of reference of churches and other religious institutions.*

Working in a field of death and dying ritual coaches express meaning in the rituals they provide, the words they speak, their gestures, the symbols they choose. It is a way of enacting meaning, embedded in traditions and other sources of meaning.

By traditions we mean conceptions and behavioural patterns handed over from history by institutions, countries, cities, families and so on which are clothed with authority.

These traditions can be of a religious kind, but this is not necessarily the case. In our society people construct meaning systems with building blocks from all kinds of sources, like literature, television programs, soap series, family traditions and so on. Often there is some incorporation of Christian values but this tradition is no longer the only or dominant tradition. People have patchwork identities, because they copy and paste modules from different sources and traditions to create their own religious identity. Sometimes they feel deeply connected to two traditions at the same time (double belonging) (Zondervan 2008; De Hart 2011).

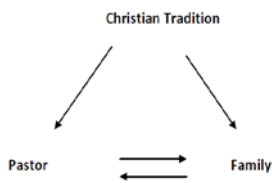
The death of a beloved person elicits strong emotions and existential questions from the mourners. When priests and ministers in the Christian church conduct funeral rituals they approach these emotions and questions within a Christian frame of reference. They use words, symbols and rites from the Christian tradition to give meaning to death and grief in order to support the transition of the deceased as well of the people who stay behind. They link the

message of the gospel to the experiences and situation of the deceased and the mourners. Pastors expect families to accept or at least show respect for this religious interpretation of death in the funeral.

Priest and ministers work within the frame of reference of a single tradition. Although this tradition offers the possibility of multiple interpretations – as we saw in the case of Liempde- these professionals work within clear boundaries and the mourners, attending a church funeral know that this is the case. There is one horizon, one meaning system, despite all the plurality in its application. Tradition supplies models for the funeral service, tradition supplies content. Certain buildings and symbols are involved. A Christian funeral will circle around the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. There will be readings from Scripture, there will be prayers. There is common ground (see model 1).



MODEL 1 Church funeral and the communication of meaning



Empirical research and literature on pastoral care brings to the fore the different hermeneutical models pastors adopt in their work (Quartier 2007; Mulder 2009; Van Knippenberg en Nauta 1994; Ganzevoort & Visser 2007). With the word hermeneutical we indicate that communication of meaning between individuals and groups always is embedded in the traditions they internalised or with which they were surrounded (Ganzevoort 2007).

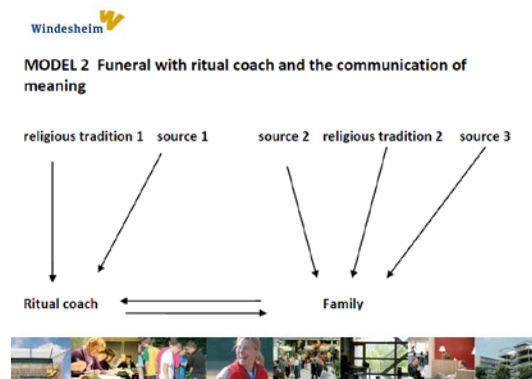
The hermeneutical models show deductive, inductive and abductive approaches to funeral liturgy. A deductive approach takes its starting point and sets its main goal in the communication of the tradition, connecting elements to the life stories of the people involved. An inductive approach takes its starting point and sets its main goal in communicating the views and experiences of the deceased and the mourners, connecting them to elements of the Christian message. A third approach, somewhere in between these two positions is called the abductive approach. This approach tries to prevent pastoral care from becoming a sort of preaching without a serious connection to the real situation of the people involved. On the other hand the abductive approach tries to avoid that pastoral care becomes a way of superficial conversing, 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 that new light is shed on the

experiences and interpretations of the mourners.

So far we were speaking of the representation of the Christian tradition in church funerals.

Ritual coaches, however, are not representing any tradition or any institution.

They are into the business of attributing meaning to major life events on a free market. They are not bound by dogma's, church rules- on euthanasia for example -, ritual form and content, sacred buildings and so on. Their clients can have a self constructed religious profile, that demonstrates that they affiliate to ideas and practices from different religious or non-religious traditions.



The communication about meaning of death takes place in a complex situation of multiple sources and religious traditions which supply meaning. The positions of the ritual coach and the clients can differ significantly. There is no shared point of reference as it comes to attributing meaning to death. People can be inspired by aspects or elements from one or more religious traditions, but also by non-religious sources.

An example: The ritual coach may be inspired by the humanistic tradition and orient herself with novels and philosophical literature. A client may be of Roman-catholic upbringing and, although not being a churchgoer, still be inspired by the ten commandments. He may also find some inspiration in Zen and meditation.

We can now narrow down the question how communication of traditions takes place to the question whether the deductive, inductive or abductive approaches are transferred to the



## 2. The empirical data

Windesheim  Two exploratory empirical studies

Project reli-entrepreneurs	Project ritual-coaches
- 24 ritual coaches (n=66)	- 6 ritual coaches
- Background: theological/religious studies	- Background: several
- Online-survey	- Questionnaire and focus group interview
- Quantitative and qualitative	- Qualitative
- Desire, motives, products, profits, world view, ...	- World view, communication of traditions and sources



We present results from two research projects. The first project, an inter-university-project of three universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands, investigates the work, attitudes and profits of a group of, 'Reli-entrepreneurs'.<sup>3</sup> These entrepreneurs are all former students at universities in theology, religious studies and world views, who started their own company. We used an online survey to collect data on topics such as work, clients, income, desire, motives, church belonging, goals, satisfaction, competence and hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> The respondents were approached by the universities at which they graduated, by organisations of professionals in ritual coaching and spiritual guidance, and via snowball sampling. The aim was to retrieve a thick description of this group of theological professionals in order to supply the universities with information to update their programs.

Where the whole group consists of 66 businessman – and women, we selected a group of 24 ritual coaches out off this population. This group is not representative for the entire population of ritual coaches. However, the data are very interesting being the first set of data with information about this new group of professionals.

The second research project was conducted by our own research group. 6 ritual coaches, chosen from private networks of the researchers, received a questionnaire with open questions, mainly about the handling of sources and traditions. The aim was to provide a first description of the views and acts of these ritual coaches regarding communication of traditions outside the church. After analysis of the results a focus group interview followed to clear up some issues. Finally the results of the respondents were compared with each other.

This qualitative approach provided a more detailed view on the communication of traditions and the roles adopted by the 6 respondents.

The 24 ritual coaches out of the first project, 25% male, 75% female, have an average age of 54 years. So our population is predominantly female. Where the world of funerals was often

perceived as a male universe this fact seems to support a tendency to an increasing share of women in this branche.

All respondents graduated at bachelors- or masters level. Where in project 1 all respondents were theologians or scientists in religious studies, the second project broadened the scope of educational backgrounds to health care, psychology, arts and social sciences.

### Empirical findings quantitative: Motives

In the first project we presented items on a five point Likert scale. Let us start with the motives. What do these free and independent entrepreneurs want to realise in their companies?

The most important motives of content for the foundation of my company at that time	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
To mean something to people	23	3	5	4,52	,593
To spend as much time on clients as I want	23	1	5	4,00	1,348
To have a job in which the attribution of meaning and spirituality is the core business	24	1	5	4,33	,963
To have a meaningful job	24	3	5	4,42	,654
Working from the heart	23	2	5	4,57	,728
This work is a calling for me	23	1	5	3,70	1,295
To contribute to the proclamation of the gospel	23	1	5	2,22	1,413
To witness my faith	22	1	5	2,91	1,477

Note: The scale ranges from 1 to 5 ("totally disagree" to "totally agree"). High scores indicate a high level of agreement with statements.

These items received the strongest agreement: 'I wanted to work from the heart' (4,57) ; 'I wanted to mean something to people' (4,52); 'I wanted to have a meaningful job' (4,42); 'I wanted to have a job in which attribution of meaning and spirituality was the core business' (4,33).

The ritual coaches want to help people especially in situations which pose the question of meaning. They sometimes feel that they have to do this, experiencing, it as a kind of vocation or calling (mean agreement rate 3,7 – however with strong standard deviation). In their attitude they want to connect with people warmly ("from the heart").

Items concerning transmitting of traditions such as 'witnessing of the faith' or 'proclaiming the gospel' received no agreement. The latter was moderately rejected (2,22).

We posed three questions on the relationship work- world view. The first questions was which role world view has in their work.

**Table 6: Role of world view**

We want to know which role world view has in your work as reli-entre-preneur	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
My own world view has an important role in my work	24	3	5	4,29	,690
In my work I take the world view of my client into account	24	4	5	4,79	,415
Often I have clients with a world view different from mine	24	3	5	3,96	,690
Clients choose me because of my world view	24	2	5	3,50	,885
Foremost, I look at myself as a professional Christian helper	23	1	5	2,83	1,370
Foremost, I look at myself as a general professional helper	21	1	5	3,14	1,062
Foremost, I look at myself as a professional spiritual helper	23	2	5	3,96	1,107

Note: The scale ranges from 1 to 5 ("totally disagree" to "totally agree"). High scores indicate a high level of agreement with statements.

When it comes to the level of agreement with the importance of their own meaning system (world view, religion) in their work an average of 4,29 is reached. The ritual coaches do not take a 'neutral' or 'general' standpoint. There is a moderate agreement with the term 'spiritual coach' (mean 3,96), a light rejection of the term Christian professional helper and a light approval of general professional helper. Ritual coaches are driven by their own philosophy, world view, religion or spirituality and the question is how this drive influences their attitude and acts towards their clients. Nevertheless ritual coaches recognize that it is even more important to take the world view of the clients into account. This item received a 4,79 average! (Almost no Standard deviation!)

A second question was: How do they experience their work in relation to their own world view?

**Table 7: Experience of work related to own world view**

We want to know how you experience your work with regard to your own world view	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I feel I answer my calling	24	1	5	3,88	1,154
I feel I am witnessing my faith	22	1	5	2,73	1,486
I feel that something of God's love is brought to light through my work	24	1	5	3,83	1,090
I feel that I mediate some light and love through my work	24	2	5	4,25	,737
I experience conflicts between the world view of my clients and mine	23	1	5	2,13	1,254
I love to work with attribution of meaning and spirituality	24	3	5	4,54	,588

Note: The scale ranges from 1 to 5 ("totally disagree" to "totally agree"). High scores indicate a high level of agreement with statements.

The ritual coaches see themselves as people who bring something good to the world. We could call them mediators of love. When this love is described as God's love there is a moderate agreement (3,83); in more general terms there is a strong agreement (4,25). Again we see a light rejection of 'witnessing my faith' (2.73).

The ritual coaches have to work with clients with a different world view from time to time. In their view this does not lead to serious conflicts.

A concluding question on this theme in our first project was: how do these professional helpers evaluate the aspect of handling world view as successful?

**Table 8: Criteria of success regarding world view**

In my view I am successful	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
When I work from my heart	23	3	5	4,57	,590
When I bring light and love into society	23	1	5	3,74	1,096
When I can put attribution of meaning and spirituality at the heart of my work	23	2	5	4,17	,834
When I follow my calling	23	1	5	3,83	1,114
When I witness my faith	22	1	5	2,55	1,184
When I contribute to the proclamation of the gospel	23	1	5	2,26	1,251
When something of God's love becomes visible through my work	23	1	5	3,74	1,137

Note: The scale ranges from 1 to 5 ("totally disagree" to "totally agree"). High scores indicate a high level of agreement with statements.

These data confirm what we have found so far: working from the heart is seen as the most valued criterion for success when it comes to world view (4,57 with low standard deviation). Neither the proclamation of the gospel, nor the witnessing of faith is a criterion of success. Following their own heart (and for some their vocation) they want to mediate love and light to the world. This time there is no difference in approval rate between 'God's love' or love in general. Both receive moderate approval.

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### Summary quantitative results (conclusions)



#### Quantitative results (1)

- High importance of world view professional
- Highest importance of taking world view of the client into account
- Connecting to people 'from the heart'
- Working with attribution of meaning and spirituality
- Love-bringers; sometimes: bringers of Gods love
- Spiritual professionals



When we wrap the data of these three charts up we can say that the average ritual coach is oriented towards the clients and their meaning systems. The ritual coaches want to connect to the clients and work with questions concerning world view and spirituality. They want to incorporate the world view of their clients in the process.

They do not want to preach or witness religion and do not affiliate with Christianity at the first place. Nevertheless they have an orientation towards spirituality and see themselves as witnesses of love, or sometimes of God's love.



## Quantitative results (2)

- Not: witnessing faith
- Not: proclaiming the gospel
- Not: Christian professional or general professional
- Not: conflicts on the level of world views
- Points to inductive or abductive approaches



These results point in the direction of an inductive or abductive approach and not of a deductive approach.

## Empirical findings, qualitative

Table 9: Goal of using worldview sources in ritual coaching

'To give the mourners a feeling of 'I am ok!'

'To hand the deceased over to a new reality; to give to the mourners some new perspectives and inner space'

'To create an atmosphere in which the deceased can feel: it is good, I can go now; I want to touch the mourners and give them a sense of connection with someone or something that is bigger/higher than themselves'

'To attribute meaning to the world around us and give people some tools'

'The answers provide elements which make this funeral more personal; they sometimes lead to a personal symbol or theme'.

Our second project confirms the conclusion that attention has to be paid to the world view of the clients. It is, in the opinion of the respondents, an important dimension in the coaching process during the days between the passing and the funeral. Especially in the conversations which prepare for the funeral the issue of world view of the deceased and the family is brought into the conversation. They all claim that a ritual (in words, music, gestures, symbols) has to be

adjusted to their views and experiences. A ritual has to 'fit'. That is why they ask questions about the meaning of life, the values and goals in the life of the deceased, the views on afterlife and so on. Construing a ritual is a process of fine-tuning, in form as well in content. As they meet clients with different spiritual or religious backgrounds the ritual coaches use different kinds of sources: secular or religious poetry, songbooks, stories, bible verses, mythology, fairy tales, Celtic sources, Buddhist texts.

What goals do they pursue when they use these sources? Here are some answers (see Table 9). These answers suggest the possibility of a threefold orientation: towards the family (the mourners), towards the ritual and, surprisingly, towards the deceased.



#### Qualitative results (1)

- Confirmation of orientation on the world view of the client to create a personal ritual
- Also orientation on the ritual and the deceased
- Approaches: inductive, abductive and deductive



Ritual coaches find it very important to pay attention to meaning systems in their work. Themselves they base their work on beliefs about death, afterlife, the human person, a transcendent world and so on. The funeral has to be personal, and the families have to be able to recognise their views and experiences in the ritual.

Some work primarily inductive with a clear goal of bringing to light the values, views and experiences of the family and the deceased. They can be connected to clear sources or identifiable traditions but sometimes they are not. The own convictions of the ritual coaches are not necessarily to be articulated.

Others take the abductive position. These ritual coaches take their own world view as the point of reference to deepen or widen the horizons of meaning from the clients in order to comfort them and to enable them to say goodbye. Depending on their kind of world view (religious/non-religious, more outlined or fuzzy) the ritual coach will put sources into play.

## Qualitative results (2)

- Abductive approaches are visible in two varieties:
  - Within the worldview and with the use of traditions and sources from the ritual coach
  - Within a myriad of traditions and sources
- Deductive approach is also discernable in the case a strong responsibility is felt towards the transition of the deceased and for the 'bringing of light and love'



But within this abductive perspective there is also the position of the usage of a myriad of sources, not necessarily inspiring the ritual coach, in order to widen the perspectives on life and death from the mourners.

In the field of sometimes competing world views the ritual coaches want to be client oriented in delivering their services. One amongst them, however, focuses also on the ritual and its functions and has – in this group of 6 ritual coaches – a light tendency to ritual orientedness. This respondent stresses her task of transmitting light and love to the deceased as well to the mourners. This leads sometimes to a deductive approach.

To our surprise we found in four cases that the responsibility of the ritual coach comprised also the well-being of the deceased. For instance in a silent prayer a ritual coach expresses her task regarding the fate of the deceased. We call this the 'priestly function'.

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## Concluding remarks on the empirical data

We can conclude as follows.

## Conclusion (1)

- Communication of traditions also takes places in non-church funerals
- Is highly valued by ritual coaches
- Stands in the context of client-orientation
- The three approaches (inductive, abductive and deductive) also function in this field
  - Approaches are not exclusive



All the data support a strong client-orientation. Within this point of view ritual coaches regard traditions important in the interviews they have in preparation for the funeral. They have an inclination to an inductive or an abductive approach. The abductivity is reached with regard to the world view of the ritual coach, or within traditions of which the ritual coach expects a

deepening function toward the family with regard to life and death. In some cases they combine an inductive with an abductive approach.

The quantitative data showed little room for a deductive approach, but this perspective cannot totally be excluded. Although not bound to an institution or a particular tradition a ritual coach with strong convictions about death, afterlife and the function of the ritual can try to witness her faith.

In the data deductivity seems to parallel ritual orientedness.

We discovered in four cases that ritual coaches outside the church feel a responsibility in respect to the transition of the deceased.

### 3. Discussion



#### Discussion

- Further research is necessary
  - Quantitative: confirmation of data; spread of the models adopted
  - Qualitative: more details on the 'how' of the communication of traditions; combination of approaches
- The priestly function
- The concept 'Working from the heart'
- Competence in hermeneutical communication



To test the validity of our conclusions in regard to the two projects further research is required. Our quantitative results (project 1) only apply to the population investigated. We like to see if they hold in a representative sample.

The qualitative results should be tested quantitatively and be deepened in further research. We like to know the spread of the three hermeneutical approaches in the total population of ritual coaches. And we especially like to know more about the neo-deductivity.

Regarding the concept of a priestly role, we want to deepen this concept in more detail. What concepts do ritual coaches use to motivate and legitimise this role? Is there a relationship with the concept of vocation? And how do they communicate this role to their clients? What concepts of afterlife are in play which support these actions? And how do they communicate this function with families?

We need to explore the concept 'working from the heart': does it resemble 'empathy' and 'authenticity' or do the coaches mean something else?

In conclusion we like to know what competencies can be described as it comes to the communication of traditions outside the realm of the churches. What abilities do theological and non-theological trained professionals need to possess to work in a responsible way with these three models of communication?



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<sup>1</sup> KASKI Kerncijfers van de kerkgenootschappen die deelnemen aan de actie 'Kerkbalans 2011' (J. Kregting).

<sup>2</sup> [www.hetmoment.nu](http://www.hetmoment.nu); [www.lbvrb.nl](http://www.lbvrb.nl) (25-8-2011).

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<sup>4</sup> Publication of the basic concepts, research design, methods and results are forthcoming. The research report will be available November 2011.