The Development of Non-Religious Pastoral Support in the UK

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Abstract: In UK society today, over half of the adult population identify as ‘non-religious’. Of those, about three quarters describe themselves as very or extremely non-religious. The ‘non-religious’ can be seen not merely as those without religion but as people with seriously and sincerely held non-religious beliefs. Responding to this situation, Humanists UK set up the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network to meet the need for non-religious pastoral care. In healthcare and prisons, they have trained hundreds of volunteers to offer an active listening service based on a humanistic Carl Rogers approach, conduct ceremonies, improve education, and provide advocacy, all grounded in non-religious worldviews. Those completing an appropriate Master’s degree have been successfully recruited by the National Health Service into paid professional roles. However, the Prison Service and Armed Forces still restrict such recruitment to people with religious beliefs. Further progress will be enhanced by using more respectful and inclusive language (rather than ‘nones’ and ‘chaplaincy’), promoting equality in recruitment, and adopting a person-centred approach where service users determine their pastoral and spiritual care priorities.

Keywords: pastoral; non-religious; humanist; chaplaincy; prisons; armed forces; healthcare

1. Introduction

This paper examines the development of non-religious pastoral care in the UK over the past decade. About a decade ago, Humanists UK started to explore providing non-religious pastoral support in institutions. The institutions covered in this paper are healthcare, prisons, and the armed forces, which are the areas that have seen the greatest activity to date.

Changes in society, particularly in relation to religious and non-religious affiliations, beliefs, and behaviours, are explored, together with the responses of the institutions and Humanists UK to these changes. The development of the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network (NRPSN) is described, and current non-religious pastoral care practices are illustrated. Finally, future developments are discussed.

This paper is written from a non-religious and humanist perspective. The ‘non-religious’ are seen not as people without a religion but as people with sincerely and seriously held non-religious beliefs, with their beliefs, values, and lived experiences being part of their non-religious worldview.

The views expressed are those of the authors, not necessarily those of Humanists UK or the NRPSN.

2. Changes in Society

The development of non-religious pastoral support is, in part, a response to changes in society in the UK. Reputable surveys have shown a long-term growth in the number of people ticking the no religion box, which is now at over half of the UK population (Kelley 2019; YouGov 2020, p. 301). Since younger people are more likely to identify as non-religious, this trend is likely to continue. However, ticking a box in a survey may not say much about a person’s behaviour or beliefs. In terms of behaviour, attendance of places of worship and infant baptism numbers have fallen significantly over a long period (Church of England 2019). On average, fewer than 1% of the population attend the Church of England’s services.
of England on a Sunday, with a third of those being aged 70 or over. Meanwhile, today most people say that they would prefer a non-religious funeral rather than a religious one (Avalon 2019). In Scotland, where humanist weddings are legal, they outnumber Christian marriages (Guardian 2020). Evidence of substantial changes in behaviour.

Beliefs are also changing. In 2016, based on a YouGov survey, Professor Woodhead said that ‘only a minority of nones are committed atheists’ (Woodhead 2016). Last year, YouGov repeated the survey for Theos, a religious think tank. It found that only about one percent of the people ticking the non-religious box said that they probably or certainly believed in the existence of gods or divine beings (YouGov 2020, pp. 305–6)—a tiny proportion. Putting that in context, the survey also found that 18% of people ticking the Christian box said that they probably or certainly did not believe in a God or a higher power, representing nearly one in five. Whilst such surveys ask people to self-identify as affiliating with a specific category (e.g., Muslim, Christian, not religious), it should be noted that people within a category may vary significantly in terms of their behaviour or beliefs. For example, in the above survey, 53% of people identifying as Christian believed in life after death, but 17% did not. A total of 62% of people identifying as not religious did not believe in life after death, but 8% did. Furthermore, 24% of people identifying as Christian said they never prayed, but 8% of people identifying as not religious said they did pray (YouGov 2020, pp. 309–42). All this shows that people have a wide spectrum of beliefs that may not always align with any specific categorisation and that beliefs overlap categories. This also suggests that beliefs are changing and becoming more personalised.

Perceptions of those who tick the non-religious box have also changed. In 1994, Davie, in her book Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging, argued that people identifying as non-religious were rejecting established religious bodies such as the Church of England (Davie 1994). However, they were not rejecting their religious beliefs and were still vicariously religious, meaning that religion was not in decline. By 2005, Heelas and Woodhead had accepted that religion was in decline but asserted that the gap left was being replaced by more holistic spiritual beliefs (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The concept of people holding meaningful non-religious beliefs and values was not explored, and this was reflected in the language used. People with a non-religious worldview were described as ‘nones’ or of ‘no faith’. By 2019, Bruce and Voas could find little evidence to support the view that religious sentiment or need had not declined or that it was just being expressed as spirituality (Bruce and Voas 2019). They noted that the research carried out by Heelas and Woodhead in a small English town showed that less than 2% of the population engaged in what might be described as spiritual activities such as yoga, meditation, and alternative therapies. Indeed, it was found that half of the people involved in these activities took part to benefit their physical or mental health rather than for a deeper spiritual purpose.

Bruce and Voas based many of their comments on the findings of the well-respected British Social Attitudes Survey of 2018. When those who ticked the no-religion box were questioned about their level of non-religiosity, just 5% described themselves as religious, refuting the argument that most were ‘believing but not belonging’ (Table 1). It is worth noting that 17%, or nearly a fifth, describe themselves as neither religious nor non-religious. We will examine what this may mean later.

Table 1. Self-assessed religiosity of those who do not identify with a religion.

| Describing Oneself as ... | 1998 | 2008 | 2018 |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|
| Religious (very/extreme/somewhat) | 12   | 8    | 5    |
| Neither religious nor non-religious | 34   | 22   | 17   |
| Non-religious (very/extr/somewhat) | 49   | 64   | 73   |

Crucially, nearly three quarters described themselves as very/extreme/somewhat non-religious and 58% as very/extremely non-religious. This suggests that most hold their
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non-religiosity strongly and seriously. Some may seriously believe that this is the one life we have. Some may strongly believe that the theory of evolution gives a good account of our origins and refer to this instead of the accounts of creation in sacred texts. For some, their worldview may not encompass the concept of hell. Rather, they may seriously hold the belief that their moral behaviour should be based on an understanding of our shared humanity, reason, empathy, and compassion.

3. Institutional Responses

Despite the decline in religious observance and public spending cuts, the response of institutions has been to support their chaplaincy departments, increasing the number of chaplains in prisons and the National Health Service (NHS) (Savage 2019). However, the role of chaplains has changed. The limited published information suggests that, in general, only a small fraction of a chaplain’s time is spent on specifically religious activities such as conducting worship, prayer, sacraments, etc. (Scottish Government 2009). Pastoral care has increased in importance, often becoming the chaplain’s primary role. Todd and Tipton (2011) found that, in prisons, ‘All constituencies (chaplains, prisoners and prison officers) identified the primary role of the chaplain as being pastoral’. This was confirmed by Dearnley (2016): ‘At the heart of prison chaplaincy is the understanding that chaplains are there pastorally for prisoners and staff of all faiths and none’. By 2016, whilst the armed forces chaplain’s role remained the delivery of ‘all souls ministry’ to those of all faiths and those of none, it now included pastoral care for service personnel and their families.

These quotations not only show the change in emphasis towards pastoral care provision but also an acceptance that ‘nones’ should receive this care. In 2003, NHS Chaplaincy guidance recommended that ‘Adequate arrangements are made . . . appropriate to the needs, background and tradition of all patients and staff, including those of no specified faith’ (Department of Health 2003). However, in the above reports and guidance, there is absolutely no acknowledgment that people with non-religious beliefs and worldviews should provide such care alongside chaplains. This is one of the reasons why high levels of inequality still exist.

In 2010, the UK passed the Equalities Act. This act makes it ‘unlawful to discriminate against someone because of religion or belief, or because of a lack a religion or belief’ (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2017). The term ‘lack of religion’ is in many ways unsatisfactory, but it is the legal term with which we have to work. This law does not define what it means by ‘lack of religion or belief’, but government guidance says that ‘People are . . . protected from being discriminated against because of lack of religion or belief, so they cannot be treated less favourably because they do not follow a certain religion or have no religion or belief at all’ (Government Equalities Office n.d.). Hence, people should not be discriminated against in employment and the provision of services because they have no religion. It is law that people with no religion should have the same opportunities to access appropriate pastoral and spiritual care as religious people. Similarly, people who are not religious should have the same opportunities to provide that care. They do not.

3.1. Armed Forces

Between October 2012 and April 2020, the proportion of non-religious regular military personnel rose from 15.5% to 31.1% (National Statistics 2020). They are already the second biggest belief group after Christians. This growth is expected to continue because the armed forces tend to recruit younger people. There have been humanist pastoral carers in the Netherlands’ armed forces for 55 years. The Belgians and Norwegians make similar provisions. Recently, the Australian Navy reformed its provision by employing non-religious pastoral carers (Humanists Victoria 2020). Despite all this, the Ministry of Defence still does not employ any non-religious pastoral carers in commissioned roles. They have recognised that ‘nones’ would benefit from pastoral support but, over a decade after the Equalities Act was passed, this recognition has not extended to the recruitment and
training of commissioned non-religious pastoral carers. As part of an integrated review of the armed forces, Defence Humanists have asked the Ministry of Defence to commission an independent review of pastoral support for the armed forces (Defence Humanists 2020). A public response is awaited.

3.2. Prisons

In 2019, HM Prison Service employed 474 chaplains to provide faith and pastoral care in prisons; all were religious (Hansard 2019). Nearly a third of prisoners in England and Wales identify as ‘no religion’, again representing the second biggest belief group after Christians (House of Commons Library 2020). Despite this, the Prison Service still does not employ any non-religious pastoral carers. However, following a successful pilot program in HMP Winchester, non-religious pastoral carers are allowed to provide support on a voluntary basis. They are now working alongside their chaplaincy colleagues in about 20% of prisons across England and Wales (Humanists UK 2020).

3.3. Healthcare

In 2015, NHS England produced chaplaincy guidelines that, for the first time, referred to ‘non-religious pastoral and spiritual care providers’ (NHS England 2015), representing a very significant development. However, with a few exceptions, NHS Trusts have made little progress in providing adequate non-religious pastoral support. In 2019, the Network for Pastoral, Spiritual, and Religious Care in Health (NPSRCH) reported the results of their monitoring of NHS ‘chaplaincy’ recruitment ads. They found that Anglican/Free Church members could apply for 85% of jobs, those with non-Christian beliefs could apply for 47%, and those with non-religious beliefs could apply for just 21% of the available posts (NPSRCH 2019, p. 54). They also surveyed 99 NHS Acute Trusts in England and found that 94% of paid hours worked by chaplains were undertaken by Christians; in contrast, only 0.1% of paid hours were undertaken by those with a nonreligious belief system. Similarly, 94% of chaplains’ visits were to Christian patients.

All the above indicates that chaplaincy has remained essentially religious and overwhelmingly Christian, with little pressure from institutions or chaplaincy bodies to make significant changes. The inappropriate use of language is still common; people with a non-religious worldview are often referred to as ‘nones’; in prisons, they are commonly recorded as ‘nils’ (Ministry of Justice 2016).

4. The Response of Humanists UK

It was against this background of social change and inequality that Humanists UK (2021a), a charity that aims to support non-religious people, asked itself if there was a need for non-religious pastoral support. They knew that many people appreciated the provision of humanist funerals because they were in keeping with their own beliefs and worldviews. The Humanistisch Verbond of the Netherlands and the Universiteit voor Humanistiek, Utrecht, gave their valuable support. YouGov, a respected polling company, asked 4000 UK adults what religion or belief a chaplain could be (Humanists UK 2017).² Figure 1 shows that most people saw chaplains as Christian and only Christian.
They then asked the following question:

[S]ome prisons, hospitals and universities are now introducing trained non-religious pastoral support providers who can give the same help to non-religious people as chaplains give to religious people. Please imagine you were either in or visiting someone at a hospital, prison or university and there was both a chaplaincy service and a non-religious pastoral support service available . . . If you felt unhappy, distressed or concerned, how likely or unlikely do you think you would be to access support from each of the following? Please select one option:

– A chaplain.
– A non-religious pastoral support provider.

Figure 2, for all respondents, shows that 41% said that they were fairly or very likely to access such care from a non-religious pastoral carer, while 36% said they were fairly or very likely to access care from a chaplain.

Interestingly, nearly 40% of people identifying as religious said that they were likely/very likely to access care from a non-religious pastoral carer. However, as Figure 3 shows, the responses from people who did not regard themselves as belonging to any particular religion were very different.

While 45% of people identifying as non-religious were likely to access care from a non-religious pastoral support provider, almost three quarters of such people were unlikely to want to access support from a chaplain, with most stating that they were very unlikely to. These findings have important implications. They suggest that there would be a significant demand for non-religious pastoral support from people with religious beliefs as well as from those with non-religious beliefs. However, they also show that most non-religious people do not want to receive support from a chaplain, meaning that the provision of non-religious pastoral support would be essential to ensure that institutions can meet the needs of everyone, irrespective of their religion or belief. Another implication was that calling a department a ‘chaplaincy’ would create an unsurmountable barrier preventing those with non-religious beliefs from accessing the care and support they needed. ‘Pastoral and spiritual care’ is a more inclusive description.
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This survey did not indicate why people identifying as non-religious did not want to see a chaplain. One explanation could be that non-religious people wanted pastoral support from someone with their own worldview, just as they might want a non-religious funeral in keeping with their own worldview. Certainly, there are times when a Christian may want to speak with a like-minded chaplain or a Muslim with a like-minded imam. In the same way, a person with a non-religious worldview may want to speak to a like-minded non-religious pastoral carer. Since bringing a worldview was an important part of non-religious pastoral support, Humanists UK felt that it was appropriate for them to help develop that provision.

They founded the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network (NRPSN), which developed an induction/training course, accreditation, Code of Conduct, CPD, etc., leading to the training of hundreds of non-religious pastoral carers for volunteering in hospitals, hospices, and prisons (NRPSN 2021). In cooperation with the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling (2019), a master’s course in existential and humanist pastoral care was established, providing a professional entry route to paid posts. In 2016, a non-religious pastoral carer was employed by the NHS for the first time, and in 2018 a humanist was appointed to head a Trust’s chaplaincy and pastoral support team (Humanists UK 2016; The Times 2018). There are now about 12 non-religious pastoral carers in paid posts. This represents a huge change from 2015, when appointments were restricted to religious people.

Figure 2. Likelihood of accessing care, all respondents.

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Figure 3. Likelihood of accessing care, non-religious respondents.

The Ministry of Justice, which has responsibility for prisons, has stated that it is forming a new Faith and Belief Advisory Committee to replace its Chaplaincy Council and that it is looking forward to welcoming a new Humanist/Non-Religious Adviser who will play a part in this committee for the first time. Defence Humanists are engaging with the Ministry of Defence with a view to appointing non-religious pastoral carers on the same basis as fully commissioned chaplains.

When asked if he supported the development of non-religious pastoral care, the Archbishop of Canterbury replied “The short answer is yes I do. When some members of the Church say it’s terrible, I say it’s not terrible, it’s a good thing” (Lambeth Palace 2020).

All these are signs that institutions and religious bodies are increasingly recognising the benefits of providing non-religious pastoral support.

5. Non-Religious Pastoral Support Practice

In the UK, chaplains and non-religious pastoral carers are not employed and do not act as professional counsellors. However, humanistic Carl Rogers counselling approaches may inform non-religious pastoral care practice (Rogers 2004). Active listening is a vital part of non-religious pastoral support practice. This is a type of listening that rarely occurs in our everyday lives. Listening to a person gives them the opportunity to be heard, and, importantly, to feel that they are being heard. This, in itself, can be therapeutic and very supportive. It is person centred, where a person’s wellbeing is supported by creating conditions of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy. Rogers describes congruence as having a relationship that is genuine and without barriers, recognising the feelings and attitudes occurring at that moment. This means accepting a person as someone of unconditional self-worth. In humanist terms, this could be referred to as recognising our common humanity. Empathy is where one can sense the feelings and personal meanings
that someone is experiencing, or perceiving them from the inside. This is different to
cognitively understanding someone, and it is different from having compassion.

Importantly, the domain of listening may focus on existential questions and existential
themes: how did I get into this situation, how can I make sense of it, why me, how can I find
peace of mind, what do I have to live for, who am I? It is in areas such as these that bringing
a particular worldview can be beneficial. For example, at a time of bereavement, for
Christians, the realisation that a loving God gives life and takes it back can be comforting.
Additionally, for many people who believe that this is the one life we have, the idea of
absolute finality can be a comfort and relief.

Suitably accredited non-religious pastoral carers conduct non-religious funerals,
memorials, weddings, and baby namings. They act as advocates on behalf of those with
non-religious beliefs; help with education—for example, by improving non-religious lit-
eracy; and work collaboratively with religious colleagues. Again, these activities are
grounded in non-religious worldviews. For example, the worldview of many humanists
may find the source of meaning, goodness, and truth in humanity, our experiences, and
what we mean to each other rather than in some external source such as a God or supernatu-
ral higher power. Non-religious pastoral carers are expected to be able to clearly articulate
their worldview, evidence their worldview in their lived experience, and demonstrate
its application during their training and subsequent practice. It is recognised that many
chaplains of religious faith also provide care, support, rituals, and advocacy using the same
person-centred and related approaches. However, they do so from the perspective of their
own religious worldview. Non-religious pastoral carers have much to learn from them.

6. Further Developments

Whilst there has been significant progress, non-religious pastoral support provision in
the UK remains in its infancy. To make further progress, some attitudes and practices will
have to change or develop.

6.1. Attitudes

A necessary starting point is to understand the term non-religion. Lois Lee in Recogniz-
izing the Non-Religious (Lee 2015) writes that one concept of ‘non-religion’ is merely
describing, for whatever reason, something as ‘not religious’ or as lacking religion. This
is a term with no independent meaning and no satisfactory dictionary definition. From
her extensive research on people identifying as non-religious, she has proposed a different
concept where the term ‘non-religion’ ‘... is used to indicate not the absence of something
(religion) but the presence of something (else), characterized, at least in the first place, by
its relation to religion but nevertheless distinct from it’ (p. 32). Importantly, ‘non-religion
becomes a term used to identify a substantive characteristic, a quality that is real and
existing in the world’ (p. 33). For some, a substantive characteristic would be a set of beliefs
and values. These beliefs and values may give purpose and meaning to individuals’ lives
and provide the foundation for their moral standards and behaviour, things that are very
real to them.

Many non-religious people may want to have a humanist funeral. These are plainly
non-religious in nature and content, with many clear distinctions from their religious
equivalents. However, there are also many aspects that are common to both, not least the
care of the bereaved. Just as there are a range of religious worldviews, so too are there
a range of non-religious worldviews. For some people, these views may be strong and
coherent enough for them to self-identify as extremely religious or extremely non-religious.
For some, this may not be the case and they may self-identify as neither religious nor non-
religious. People with extremely religious and non-religious beliefs may have profound
disagreements on, for example, the existence of divine beings or life after death, yet, at the
same time, profoundly agree on other aspects. For example, most humanists think that
empathy and compassion can help make the world a better place, which is a view held
by most religious people. Having this common view can help develop common practice
in the delivery of pastoral care. In this context, treating people with different worldviews with dignity and respect is vital.

People with non-religious worldviews should be afforded the same dignity and respect as those with religious worldviews. This means they should have access to pastoral and spiritual support appropriate to that worldview and that people with non-religious worldviews should be able to provide that support.

Hence, departments providing pastoral and spiritual support need to be just as explicit about non-religious pastoral carers being available as they are about chaplains, rabbis, imams, etc., being available. Language that could be seen to demean those with a sincere non-religious worldview should be avoided. This could include referring to these people as ‘nones’, ‘nuls’, ‘unbelievers’, ‘of no faith’, ‘of no particular faith’, etc. Whilst a chaplain may consider a phrase such as ‘Our Chaplaincy Department is here for all faiths and none’ to be welcoming and inclusive, a person with sincerely held non-religious beliefs may find being referred to as a ‘none’ as demeaning. This certainly does not portray an attitude of dignity and respect. Equally important, they may read this as saying that support is only available from people with religious beliefs and conclude that like-minded non-religious pastoral care is not available. Alternatively, referring to ‘people with religious beliefs and people with non-religious beliefs’ treats both groups of people with dignity and respect; it is more inviting and inclusive. A statement such as ‘We have a fully inclusive team of people with religious and with non-religious beliefs to help meet everyone’s pastoral and spiritual care needs’ may be more effective. Of course, such a statement would indicate that the institution had adequate non-religious pastoral support in their team, and most do not.

6.2. Recruitment, Training, and Development

The Armed Forces and HM Prison Service still need to update their policies and practices to encourage the recruitment of non-religious pastoral carers. In the field of healthcare, there is excellent recruitment advice, but evidence shows that it will be necessary for human resources, equality, and senior management to become more proactive to make sure that advice is followed (NPSRCH 2018). There are promising signs that these changes will take place.

The NPSRCH (2019, p. 62) conducted an excellent review of professional entry training, finding that the vast majority of academic courses had Christian theological foundations. Whilst people with non-Christian and non-religious beliefs could enrol, they may find doing so unappealing. Other courses, including the NSPC course, are specific to a particular worldview. Other countries have taken a different approach, with core training being common for people of all worldviews whilst still grounding actual practice in that person’s particular worldview. This approach may well promote greater equality and is something the UK should consider.

6.3. Communications

People can only access the pastoral and spiritual care they need if they have a good understanding of the support offered. As shown earlier, using the term Chaplaincy Department in the UK may well prove to be an insurmountable barrier preventing people with non-religious beliefs from accessing the care they need. This is recognised through the term Spiritual Care Department, which is seen as more inclusive whilst retaining strong religious associations. However, it excludes those who do not identify as spiritual—in other words, half the UK’s population (Westminster Faith Debates 2013). In contrast, the term ‘Pastoral and Spiritual Care Department’ is much more inclusive.

These department names do not adequately describe what non-religious pastoral carers or chaplains actually do. To be effective, the care and support offered needs to be properly described using language that service users can readily understand. Service users should play a key part in determining this language.
6.4. Person-Centred Care

Person-centred care should be primarily based on what service users, rather than service providers, say their needs and wishes are. This means that more research into understanding those needs—for example, through surveys—is necessary. Service users should then have the autonomy to decide which services and provider they want. This contrasts with a spiritual assessment approach, where a lead chaplain may assess the person’s (spiritual) needs and the lead chaplain will then determine how they are met.

Advances in all these areas will help us to develop a stronger, fairer, and more effective pastoral and spiritual care service.

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Notes

1. There are similar differences within and between non-Christian religious affiliations. Numbers do not add up to 100% because of do not knows, etc.

2. The total sample size was 4085 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken on 28–29 July 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all British adults (aged 18+). Respondents could tick as many boxes as they liked, so the total exceeds 100%.

3. To get a further understanding of people’s non-religious beliefs listen to Humanists UK (2021b) ‘What I Believe’ podcasts, Available online: https://humanism.org.uk/what-i-believe/ (accessed on 2 July 2021).

4. Only 25% describe themselves as ‘spiritual’ or ‘spiritual and religious’.

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