

Hope without Salvation

Anti-religious Optimism among Dutch Young Adults

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Published in: Ganzevoort, R.R. & Mulder, A.C. (eds.) *Weal and woe II. Empirical reflections and theological explorations*. Münster: LIT-Verlag 2008, 18-57.

Introduction

From the perspective of Christian belief and its long history of reflection, the concept of salvation hints at the possibility of a state of wellbeing and wholeness that is sustained by God's aim to bring the good to people (Jonker 1994). Traditionally, the idea of a being part of a message of salvation in the midst of a world dominated by evil used to be an inspiring and guiding concept for an array of tasks within Christian ministry. Church services were meant to be sacred moments in time for anticipating and celebrating the salvation expected and already given. Sermons and education aimed to help parishioners understand the character of salvation and to help them to bring their life styles more in concordance with this sacred state. Although, under the influence of our highly secularised Dutch society, many churches have modernized their message, their Sunday morning services, and their style of education, we can still, theologically speaking, consider salvation (or *Shalom*) and the counter concepts doom and evil to be key concepts of Christian doctrine, central to Christian celebrations.

The fact that Dutch society is both secularized and deinstitutionalized¹ to a large degree implies that there is a growing gap between the minds of people and the classical and fundamental Christian view on what is conceived to be an important condition in human life. There is no simple answer to the question of how Christians should deal with this gap. For ministers especially, this question is not without consequences. On the one hand, they are in essence guided by and committed to classical religious ideas and concepts of which salvation and evil are a part. We can state that their professional and existential identity is tied to these core concepts in a fundamental way. On the other hand, they are communicating from day to day with their parishioners and others who inhabit modern secular culture in which the questions of salvation and evil do not seem

¹ One should take into account that Western societies are not only defined by processes of secularization, but also by processes of desecularization, for example in the shape of charismatic and non-western Christianity. Even here, however, one can witness patterns of deinstitutionalization that effectively mean that the role of the church in society decreases (Ganzevoort 2006).

to be an issue at all. It is not very clear whether and how these worlds should be bridged. Neither restoration of the old concepts, nor abandonment of them is an option. How should and do ministers handle this dilemma? Moreover, it would be helpful to have more information in order to understand this situation in religious communication in a more thorough way. Are we sure that modern people are not at all interested in matters of salvation and evil? How do we know? If the classical theological concepts are not appealing any more, might it be possible that we can detect similar types of meanings embedded in other concepts or practices – such as the broad search for spirituality in our society? And if so, can we recast those in the same classical terms that belong to Christianity or should we deal with them differently at a conceptual level? We need to learn anew how to handle the communication theologically and practically in order to find a concept or practice somehow commensurable with classical concepts of salvation and evil.

Since ministers operate from day to day on an empirical plane and since our questions have to do with a need for information about an empirical situation, we have designed an empirical study whose sometimes surprising results will be reported here.

Main research question

Generally formulated, our main research question is: Can the concepts of salvation and evil be considered to be meaningful for members of contemporary post-Christian society, based on how they themselves construct meaning and cope with difficult situations?

CONDUCTING EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON SALVATION AND EVIL AS THEOLOGIANS

This study is conducted from the viewpoint of descriptive empirical practical theology. Among other things, this means that we do not start with a theological judgement too soon or right at the beginning (see Heitink 1999). Although a theological judgment will be needed and given at some times in the research process, we first want to get as close as possible to the phenomenal worlds of which we hope to reach a better understanding and which we assume to carry their own –albeit implicit – theological layers. In this line of thought, it is only after we have been more or less able to describe the situation in some detail that we will be able to choose which theological frame will be the most suited and helpful. It would be a misunderstanding though to see the enterprise as theological in character only if theological concepts are a guiding framework right from the start. The empirical material that has to do with processes of construction of meaning should be seen as inherently theological in character, whether or not framed in clear theological concepts as such. (Ganzevoort 2006, Luther 1992).

Delineating the topic of research and main guiding assumptions

As practical theologians, we are especially interested in the questions if and how theological symbolic language derives or loses its significance in human affairs². We will make use of insights by Gergen (1994,52) who has labored the notion of the intertwining of the semantics of language and the dynamics and pragmatics of social processes of construction of meaning within communities of language. Following Gergen, we then assume that concrete theological concepts can sometimes function as behavioural “operants” in that they can become linked with cognitions, values, motivations, behaviours of individuals and groups, and so on. For the sake of clarity, we will speak of operant meanings of any concept when we try to capture this empirical phenomenon; we then hint at the way a concept carries significance within the realm of psychological, social or cultural behaviors. We do not assume that these so-called operant meanings will parallel the classical theological meanings and spiritual realities of these same concepts, but we do not rule out the possibility that operant meanings can come quite close. Generally speaking, the range of operant meanings that have become associated with concepts, are bound to a variety of micro-social exchanges and to the ways these are embedded in broader cultural patterns of behaviour and relatedness (Gergen, 1994, 53). With respect to our research, this implies that we may expect subtle or large differences in operant dimensions of meanings of theological concepts when we study them in different social contexts or when we highlight different specific (sub-)cultural patterns in which the concepts are or are not embedded. In the phase of designing our research, then, we need to consider very carefully which types of social and cultural contexts will bear potential for bringing the type of understanding about salvation and evil for which we are looking.

Theological character

What about the broader theological character of conducting this type of research? It is exactly the intricate connection between the operant meaning of concepts and their being embedded in larger cultural processes of meaning making that contributes to this important matter. In the first place, no concept can ever escape from the fundamental principle as described above. One and the same concept - looking at it from a linguistic or semantic level - can carry quite different operant meanings when we examine the pragmatics of relationships and larger networks of meaning within which it is used as a language parameter (Gergen 1994).³ Applied to the primary meanings of classical theological terms,

² From a practical theological viewpoint, we are not interested in studying salvation and evil at a level of what we will call, for convenience's sake, 'fundamental theological understanding, semantics and/ or linguistics'. Other branches of theology will perform that important task and we can benefit from their results. Nor are we interested in the history of these rich symbols or in their place among a larger system of theological concepts.

³ For an example of this principle we can point to the fact that the USA recently elected a black man to be its next president. At a level of denotation, the concept black can be seen as a constant when used in a variety of contexts: this term will in a alike way refer to the color of his skin. At a level of connotation, the

this assumption means that whenever we take a closer look at them (or the way they have been reframed at some point in history) we will be able to detect at least some dimensions of meaning which originated in the dynamics of some cultural process of that time. And it is there that we will find at least some space for redefinitions if we feel the need to actualise such a classical theological concept.

Some readers now may want to argue that in empirical research the intrinsic theological character will elude us by definition. We claim that although even if some (core) dimensions of the meaning of fundamental theological concepts may and will refer to a sacred reality not detected on the plane of empirical reality as such, the mere fact that the knowledge of the reality we are pointing to is captured within parameters of language which themselves are embedded within larger cultural processes of construction of meaning, suffices to account for the type of research we are conducting (Ganzevoort 2005). And because of this, we can also never escape from the task of rethinking and adapting any theological concept when we meet new receivers who live within different cultural frameworks. If we do not, by law and effect the operant message we hope to bring by using the mere concept, will not necessarily be received within the specific register of meanings we want it to. Doing empirical research, then, is one of the possible ways to find out about these shifts in meanings. We hope that it will offer new possibilities to reflect and communicate in more differentiated ways.

Implications of differentiating a concept and its concomitant meaning structures

We also can go one step further. With respect to concepts in general (and applied to theological concepts in particular), we have been separating and somewhat disconnecting the level of use in language and the level of operant roles that language parameters can fulfil within larger cultural processes. Having done that, we can, at least in imagination, explore the possibility that even if a certain concept may not be used linguistically or verbally any more, we may still be able to detect a (cultural) meaning pattern that carries and reflects important dimensions of its once intended meanings.⁴ And again, thinking further along this line, we may consider it to be a real possibility that new or other concepts – viewing this at the level of (symbolic) language – may have taken over the operant roles to enclose similar patterns of making meaning as religious concepts once used to do. We will give some examples of this possibility. Taking a closer look at society's huge efforts regarding institutional mental health care, we can ask if clients may be driven at least partly by utopian longings to become

concept black can vary strongly. In some social contexts the use of 'black' takes on the operant meaning that 'he is one of us' while for others the use of the very same concept 'black' will carry the operant meaning that 'he is not one of us'.

⁴ As an example of this, Gergen (1994) elaborates on the fact that moral practices can run smoothly even if moral language is not spoken. Taking a closer look, he finds that in many cases moral language is used all the more when the moral practice is not working very well.

saved and transformed and changed. We may find then that their motives and emotions resemble the processes of spiritual *metanoia* and rebirth once instigated by parameters of religious language. Studying the narratives of people when they share their stories about the course of their lives, we are able to detect a longing for salvation as a dynamic core in the way their narratives are patterned (Ganzevoort 2004). Or we may look at the worldwide admiration of millions of people for all kinds of celebrities, be they stars in the field of music, heroes in movies or members of royal families. We can ask if this cultural pattern of admiration carries at least some dimensions of meaning making that parallels the religious practices as honouring religious saints or following spiritual teachers.

In our research, then, we will not only tap the mere use of religious language but also search for residual meaning structures that we can consider to parallel at least some of the main dimensions of the classical theological concepts.

Purpose and relevance

The aim of this empirical investigation is to get insight and understanding into the way shifts in meanings have occurred with respect to the way contemporary people deal with salvation and evil, as a starting point for an array of practical theological reflections on the communicative situation of Christians and their internal and external ministry in a secularized world. This is especially relevant for the day-to-day practice of all kinds of Christian educators and spiritual caregivers in a variety of fields like schools, care institutions and churches. By getting a better understanding of the contemporary shifts in processes of meaning making, they can develop new possibilities for a meaningful communication about existential matters. This will help their pupils, clients, parishioners or offspring build more meaningful connections to the perspectives of Christian religiosity and spirituality. In a fruitful dialogue other theological disciplines may also benefit.

Refining the general research question

We are now able to refine our main research question into a range of smaller and more specific ones. Concerning the concepts of salvation and evil and the question of their meaningfulness for members of contemporary post-Christian society, we have designed a type of investigation for finding answers to the following more specific questions.

1 *What traces are we able to find of the use of these concepts at a linguistic level?*

2 *What traces are we able to detect of processes and dynamics of meaning making that we can consider to parallel at least some dimensions of the hitherto theological understanding of the concepts?*

We thus need to formulate more precisely the specific processes of making meaning to which we are trying to relate our understanding of the operant use of the theological concepts under study. Following some of the former types of

research within our research group and creating connections with our larger research programme about salvation and evil within the course of life, we wanted to study whether any of the following factors can be conceived to be of decisive influence.

Stated as questions about their respective influence on the processes of construction of meaning regarding the concepts salvation and evil, we want to study empirically:

3 What role can be attributed to generalized worldviews, be they religious or secular in character?

4 What role can be attributed to views on the course of life as such and do we find metaphors that express these?

5 What role can be attributed to strategies that are used to cope with important experiences in life?

METHOD

Type of research

We used a survey to obtain solid information from a large number of people. In addition, we can characterize our research to a large degree as inductive. No prior empirical research has been undertaken on our specific topic of interest as such. This means that we are not able to start with any assumptions that could be derived from the outcomes of other empirical studies. It is only afterwards that we will be able to build theory and to connect some of the outcomes to research already conducted elsewhere.

Another characteristic that deserves more elaboration has to do with the way we have attempted to measure the religiosity of our respondents in a way that is satisfying to both social scientists and theologians. On the interface of the practical theological and social scientific study of religion, we are tempted by both sides to walk away from the inherent tension of researching the unresearchable. Theologians succumb easily to making statements about a transcendent reality as if we have any knowledge of that; social scientists easily reduce religion to social or psychological categories, leaving out the religious core. In the area in which we are working we try to keep the perspectives together in order to do justice to what we are studying. Our challenge is to study empirically how humans interact with the non-empirical in such a way that the non-empirical is not left out of the picture.

Sketch of the structure and main contents of the questionnaire

Basically, our questionnaire consists of sections that operationalize the five specific research questions we have mentioned above, along with some

controlling variables.⁵ Added to this are some elementary sociographic items (like age, gender, etcetera) that allow us to understand the type of social group with which we are dealing. We will now offer a short description of the main lines of the way we have approached the several areas.⁶

1. Items measuring the use of the concepts salvation and evil within the language respondents use to describe relevant experiences in life

We gain access to this type of information by two sets of questions. One set is formulated in an open mode that allows respondents to answer as spontaneously as possible at that moment. We have asked them what they consider to be the most beautiful and the most difficult experiences in their lives. The other set of items is of a closed character. We offer three short vignettes that contain a story about a real-life situation with a certain type of complication or difficulty that needs to be resolved. The contents of these refer to different circumstances: work, love relationships and health. We ask the respondents to try to identify with the stories.

To both the open and closed questions the same additional questions are added: Would you rate this situation as a positive or a negative one? Would you say this is a case of: good luck, bad luck, blessing, chance, salvation, coincidence, evil? We expect that the answers will reveal at a level close to everyday language if the respondents are inclined to apply the theological concepts we are studying.

2. Items measuring processes and dynamics of meaning making that can be considered to reflect at least some dimensions of the hitherto theological understanding of the concepts

We will gain access to this type of information by three sets of questions.

Tapping dimensions of giving meaning to the vignettes

In an earlier phase of doing field work we concluded that the concept of salvation would be paralleled closely by a meaning structure in which two interpretations come together: an event touches the innermost being of the self, and behind the event some hidden power of a decisive character is at work (Ganzevoort 2004). In accordance with this, we now have added the following two questions to each of the three vignettes. Would a situation like this touch you in your innermost self? Would you presume that a power of a decisive character, such as a supernatural one, is at work behind this situation? If we find positive answers to these questions, we will interpret these as traces of the meaning structure related to salvation and evil, even if the same respondent did not make use of these language parameters when they rated the same vignettes (see above).

Tapping generalized ideology regarding some hidden power or pattern behind events

⁵ The questionnaire is added as a supplement to this article, see p. 50.

⁶ In this article, we offer a selection of the results. One can find a full overview of the outcomes on www.ruardganzevoort.nl/pdf/Wealandwoeresults.pdf.

A prerequisite to applying a religious dimension in a personalized way to a vignette is the condition that a dimension as such be available in an ideology in one way or another. With respect to the possibility of a hidden power with a decisive character, we gained access to this information by presenting 10 theses on suffering and evil that represent five models of theodicy, typical answers to the question of how a good God can be connected to the fact of human suffering. Five of the theses are stated in religious language and five in secular language, expressing respectively the ideas that suffering is interpreted as concealing a hidden meaning, as an impetus for human responsibility, as an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity, the result of one's own mistakes or merely as a fact without any sense or purpose at all.

Tapping behavioural indicators of a meaning structure regarding a hidden power behind events

It often is the case that people in times of need fall back on religious behaviours and rituals they do not otherwise practice any more. With respect to our guiding framework, we interpret the case of religious coping as a sign that people conceive of a hidden power with a decisive character as being at work within their circumstances. To the three vignettes related to work, love relationships and health we have added a series of questions about coping strategies they might apply. Examples of items operationalizing religious (or close to religious) coping are: trusting that there is a larger plan for one's life, feeling that God is drawing one to Him through these difficulties, praying for wisdom, starting to seek counseling and advice within one's faith community, etc. Closely parallel to each of these, similar items have been created in secular language.

3. Items measuring generalized worldviews, religious or secular in character

Information about the generalized worldviews and belief systems of our respondents is a necessary tool for understanding the larger framework within which they come to attribute meaning to events and interpret theological concepts like salvation and evil.

We chose a broad approach and generated items to measure four sets of questions. Because we assume this topic is more or less familiar we will deal with it here only briefly. First, we asked if the respondents considered conceptions, rituals, experiences, ethical consequences and their membership in a faith community to play a role in their philosophy of life. This creates a measure for religious salience [scale 1]. Next, we want to know how they take positions when dealing with themes as immanence and transcendence [part of scale 2]. Another important theme has to do with conceptions of God. We offered them a set of 10 items [part of scale 2]. Finally, we were interested in the question whether respondents were or were not acquainted with certain types of experiences they relate to the domain of the spiritual [scales 3a and 3b]. Items measuring views on the course of life as such, captured by metaphors that give expression to it

From existing literature we collected a list of 12 metaphors and asked respondents to choose three they considered to express their own conceptions

somewhat. Examples of such items are: living one's life is like following a road with many possible choices about what side roads to take, living one's life is like climbing stairs that go higher and higher, living one's life is like hearing a melody, etcetera.

4. Items measuring strategies that are used to cope with experiences in life

A final theme has to do with the influence of coping strategies. Here we enter a truly explorative element in our research, striving to find a relationship between the way people deal with salvation and evil on the one hand and the way they cope with situations in life on the other. In the vast literature on coping strategies we find that these can be categorized along several lines. We focused on two polarities: first if the coping behavior can be characterized as active or passive and, second, if the coping behavior is directed towards changing the emotional state or the unpleasant situation. An example of an item expressing an active mode directed at finding relief for feelings is: sharing one's worry about losing one's job with a friend. A passive strategy related to emotions would be: continuing to worry all the time and finding it hard to think of anything else. One could go on.

The rationale for exploring a link with the religious concepts under study can be formulated as follows. It could be that our respondents habitually prefer an active mode for dealing with events in their lives and, accordingly, we may find then that they perceive it to be impossible to match this with the somewhat more passive attitude of surrendering to the type of good that is given by God. Or, alternatively, we may discover that some respondents find their negative emotions resolved when they open themselves up to the idea that God will supply good things to them in a hidden way in the same situation. So, we can reasonably expect that gaining knowledge about habitual coping strategies may throw light on the way our respondents deal with the themes of salvation and evil.

5. Some remarks about controlling procedures

In order to rule out the possibility that the order of the vignettes creates a so-called response set,⁷ we completely randomized the order of the vignettes. Each of the three vignettes appeared randomly as first, second or third. They were randomly preceded or followed by the others.⁸

Choice of respondents and method of sampling

⁷ This methodological term refers to the fact that persons are often inclined to repeat their answers to the previous questions when working on the following ones. If that is the case, the answers on the later questions do not truly reflect the opinions we hope to obtain.

⁸ We also have explored the issue if specific textual triggers influence the amount of religiosity in the answers of respondents. Two versions of each of the vignettes were created, one of them more or less neutral and one containing a kind of moral or existential clue. These were sent randomly to respondents. The very few small results are not significant in relation to the main questions of this chapter, so that part of our research will not be discussed here any further. Bower in this volume will proceed on the two versions of the vignette referring to health.

Our larger research programme has to do with the theme of salvation and evil during the life span. Reflecting on the question of which specific respondents to choose, we became aware that the age group of young adults in general does not seem to have been studied thoroughly. This specific group, however, will be of decisive influence in the immediate and distant future. The possibility to get to know them somewhat better captured our growing attention and enthusiasm. Next, within this category we estimated that the students of teachers' training colleges probably would be responsive to a sufficient degree. We assumed they would have a certain sensibility and openness for matters concerning living life well and that they could be expected to be willing and able to talk about their ideas –given that they want to pass something on to next generations. We established a connection with religious education teachers at seven Christian teachers' training colleges who were willing to cooperate and to encourage their students to fill in our questionnaire. We assumed that a sufficient part of our respondents would then be more or less acquainted with the Christian belief tradition, whatever value they themselves attach to this tradition at this point in their lives.

OUTCOMES

Response

592 students of Christian teachers' training colleges returned their questionnaires (42%), most of whom were women (85.6%). The fact that we are dealing with gender-specific outcomes demands attention and will be discussed later. The average age was 20.1.

Nearly half of the respondents (42%) indicate they belong to a Christian belief community. Only a marginal 3% say they are very strongly committed, the other 53.8% are not members of any belief community. A substantial proportion of this latter group must therefore have left its former religious background behind, because only 40.7% indicate that they were raised without any form of religion. Those who do mention that they come from a religious background represent Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church equally: 21.5%.

Results regarding traces of linguistic use of the religious concepts salvation and evil

1. Answers to open questions regarding the most beautiful and the most difficult experiences in their lives

Two-thirds answered both questions and a quarter answered only one. For nearly half of the respondents (47%) the most beautiful experience has to do with love relationships, especially with spouses; 28% refer to themselves (education, sports, knowledge of the self, health, faith). With respect to the most difficult experience, 36% refer to death of a relative, 20% to their own situation (often health), 18% to relationships.

About half of the respondents (52%) chose “good luck” to describe their most beautiful experiences; 30% chose “blessing, 11% “coincidence” and 10% “salvation.” Some free choice answers were: “fate,” “wonder” “destination,” “great.” With respect to the most difficult experiences, our respondents did not seem to find our categories useful. About a quarter chose “bad luck,” a small 6% “punishment” and “evil.” About one-third rejected all the categories or indicated a free choice like “unfair,” “fate,” “such is life,” “we can learn from it.” We can conclude that salvation and evil are not at all relevant for the way young adults interpret their life experiences.

2. Answers to vignettes containing a story revealing a certain type of complication or difficulty in circumstances of work, love relationships and health

The interpretations of the three vignettes show a similar pattern. Most frequently our respondents chose “coincidence” or “bad luck,” depending on the specific topic. Blessing and salvation are rarely used and punishment and evil are not at all relevant.

Table 1. Language used to interpret circumstances

	Work	Love	Health
Coincidence (positive)	15.0	28.4	16.2
Good luck	18.4	24.0	9.8
Blessing	3.5	6.4	8.6
Salvation	1.5	3.0	3.7
Coincidence (negative)	15.0	25.2	15.4
Bad luck	28.5	4.4	23.0
Punishment	2.4	0.3	3.0
Evil	3.0	1.2	2.9

3. Semantic patterns related to the use of the words salvation and evil

Because we presented the same categories two times, in relation to both the open questions and the vignettes, we are able – with help of statistics – to explore the repetitive correlations between the eight categories. Thus we were able to explore how and when the words salvation and evil do or do not accompany one or more of the other descriptive categories. We found two clusters, which we have come to describe as *Chance* and *Non-Chance*. The *Chance* Scale consists of sixteen items (alpha 0.83) with the ratings “coincidence (positive and negative)” next to “good luck” and “bad luck.” The contrasting scale is called *Non-Chance* and consists of sixteen items also (alpha 0,85) with the ratings “blessing,” “salvation,” “punishment” and “evil.” All the sentences are basically structured in a similar way: “*Would you call this experience (/situation): coincidence (positive; good luck; ...punishment; evil?*”

It now becomes clear that respondents perceived their circumstances mainly as coincidence, good luck or bad luck. On the *Chance* Scale 10.2% of the respondents are: very low, 26.7% low, 51.9% middle, 10.7% high and 0.5% very high (range 1-5, mean 2.65).

Table 2. Characteristics of scales *Chance* and *Non-Chance*

Scale	Values					Mean	Skew-ness	SE
	Very Low	Low	Middle	High	Very High			
<i>Chance</i>	10,2%	26,7%	51,9%	10,7%	0,5%	2,65	-0,01	0,12
<i>Non-Chance</i>	49,3%	34,6%	16,1%	0,0%	0,0%	1,67	0,64	0,13

The answers on the *Non-Chance* Scale (“blessing,” “salvation,” “punishment” and “evil”) seem to reveal almost a kind of disgust for the words used. 49.3% of the respondents find that these categories match very poorly and 34.6% poorly; 16.1% choose middle and none (0.0%) judges these categories to be a good description (range 1-5; the mean is extremely low, just above the lowest possible value: 1.67).

Now we see why our respondents did not want to use the words salvation and evil to describe their life experiences. They consider these categories to be poor reflections for the random character of their circumstances.

4. Summary of outcomes regarding the first specific research question

We can summarize the outcomes as follows. With respect to the way young adults generally interpret circumstances and vicissitudes in their lives, we find no traces at all of any use of the terms salvation and evil. We may conclude that young adults perceive these concepts to be largely poor matches for the random character of many of their circumstances and experiences.

Results regarding the traces we detect of processes of meaning making that we can consider to reflect at least some dimensions of the hitherto theological understanding of salvation and evil

1. The underlying meaning structure expressed in judgements regarding work, love relationships and health

To each of the vignettes we added the following two questions: Would a situation like this touch you in your innermost self? Would you presume that a power of a decisive character, such as a supernatural one, is at work behind this situation? If we find positive answers to these questions, we will interpret this as having traced a residual of the meaning structure related to salvation and evil, even if this respondent did not make use of these concepts in his or her use of language when rating the character of the same vignettes (see above). For the sake of convenience we will use only the shorthand expression “(salvation and evil as) meaning structure” when referring to the idea that we are searching for

signs of a specific type of meaning structure, one that parallels at least some dimensions of the hitherto theological understanding of the concepts under study.

We have to conclude, however, that only a very small minority shows a residual of the meaning structure that we searched for. Many respondents do indicate that circumstances as described can affect them in their innermost selves, but they do not see these as originating from a power with a decisive character.

Table 3. Dimensions of meaning structure similar to salvation (%)

	Touches innermost self?		Decisive power?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
work	47	17	8	64
love relationships	40	21	16	59
health	57	13	18	51

We have combined the answers on both questions on a reliable scale we have called “Meaning Structure.” The reliability of the scale (alpha 0.83) signifies that the combination of the two answers is recognized by the respondents as coherent. The characteristics of this scale are depicted in Table 9 where it is shown that our respondents are inclined to attribute middle to very low values to this perspective.

2. Generalized ideology regarding some hidden power or pattern behind events

If not applied personally to complicated circumstances, do we find that at least a conception of a hidden power with a decisive character is available in worldviews in regard to, for instance, the theme of suffering and evil?

This is not the case. Out of ten possible theses, our respondents affirmed only three secular ones: those that express a hidden meaning, responsibility and solidarity. Religious theses are rejected altogether.

Table 4. Perspectives with regard to theodicee (ranking from most to least preferred)

Opinion	Type of model	Value	SD
Experiencing difficulties contributes to growth	Hidden meaning – secular	3.91	1.04
The most important thing in life is to do good	Responsibility - secular	3.41	1.04
Pain shared is pain lessened	Solidarity – secular	3.34	1.07
God doesn’t intervene in human affairs	Without meaning – religious	2.92	1.47
Suffering has no deeper meaning	Without meaning – secular	2.71	1.25
God helps and comforts us when we pray	Solidarity – religious	2.36	1.46
God has a purpose with all our circumstances	Hidden meaning – religious	2.27	1.35
God wants us to struggle against suffering	Solidarity – religious	2.14	1.14
We deserve whatever happens to us	Revenge - secular	2.13	1.12
Suffering comes from God to punish us	Revenge – religious	1.45	0.76

Rated on a 5-point scale, we can trace from top to bottom in the table above the answers indicating the most to the least representative opinions. The relatively large standard deviation shows that respondents are highly divided about this topic.

Our respondents strongly prefer a positive perspective, like growth, responsibility and solidarity. Next to this we see a consequent rejection of religious interpretations. It seems as if the varying religious content does not count at all. We thus come to interpret “God doesn’t intervene” more as a statement to be followed by “...because He doesn’t exist” than as a statement indicating “...although He exists.”

With respect to revenge, both the secular as well as the religious opinions are valued very low.

3. Religious coping as behavioural indicator of a meaning structure regarding a hidden power behind events

To the three vignettes related to work, love relationships and health we added questions about what coping strategies the respondents might practice. We did not detect any trace at all of the conception that a hidden power with a decisive character is at work in life, and even found an active rejection of this possibility.

Our respondents definitively prefer secular coping styles (means 66-55%). The religious strategies, whether active or passive and whether event-oriented or emotion-oriented, are not only the least practiced but are very seldom practiced (means 15-9%).

Table 5. Coping styles which respondents expect to practice (%)

	work	relationships	health	mean
SAeV	76	72.5	56.5	66
SPeM	94	32	50	59
SAeM	96,5	66	14	57
SPeV	66	21	78	55
RPeV	9	7	29	15
RPeM	13	5.5	18	12
RAeV	17	7	3	9
RAeM	5	11	10	9

S/R= Secular/Religious

A/P= Active/ Passive

eV/eM= event-oriented /emotion-oriented

Combining all the statements and dimensions we are able to create four (not independent) scales. Now we can see clearly that our respondents to a large degree reject strongly the possibility of religious coping. On the one hand, this scale is very coherent (alpha 0.89 whereby 1 is maximum), signifying that our respondents recognize the similarity between the religious items and deal with all of them in similar ways. On the other hand, we find mainly very low to low values. About eighty percent of the respondents will not deal religiously with the circumstances as described in the vignettes.

Table 6. Characteristics of coping scales

	Alpha	Values (%)					1-5 <i>mean</i>
		very low	low	middle	high	very high	
religious	0.89	47.8	29.7	19.6	2.8	0.0	1.77

* active	0.70	0.7	38.9	53.1	7.3	0.0	2.67
* passive	0.60	0.4	35.1	56.5	8.1	0.0	2.73
* emotion focused	0.67	0.7	36.4	55.7	7.0	0.2	2.70
* problem focused	0.59	0.4	39.4	54.2	6.1	0.0	2.66

* A problem has arisen concerning this scale. We will discuss this later, while answering our third research question

4. Summary of outcomes regarding the second specific research question

We can summarize the outcomes as follows. We found only a faint trace of a meaning structure that we consider reflects dimensions of the hitherto theological understanding of the concepts salvation and evil. Only a very small minority states that complicated personal circumstances that touch them in their innermost selves can be attributed simultaneously to a hidden power of a decisive character. With respect to ways to cope with them, as well as to the topic of human suffering in general, the possibility that a hidden power may be somehow at work is not only absent but seems to be completely rejected.

Introduction to the outcomes of the next three specific research questions

Now the character of our investigation will change. Having noticed that our respondents dealt with salvation and evil as instances of “Non-Chance” and that only a small minority was inclined to apply a meaning structure equalling a theological understanding, we will attempt to gain more understanding about the dynamics and the pragmatics of these constructions.

In the next three sections we will report findings about the role we may attribute to three parameters: generalized worldviews, views about the life course as such, and coping strategies. Ideally, the format of each of these sections would have the following character: after we have described some basic empirical characteristics of the parameter under study, we then would report the statistical relationships between this parameter and the two main outcomes we have found thus far. But in reality this format will be applied to the next section, which studies the role of generalized worldviews. The remaining two reports will be short (although still revealing some relevant insights). The reasons for that will become clear later on. Let us now turn to data regarding the role of worldviews of our respondents, which will, in contrast, be a quite lengthy one.

Results regarding the role we can attribute to worldviews

In this section we will first report some basic descriptive data regarding what we call the “worldviews” of our respondents. We use this concept somewhat loosely. We wanted to gain access to the patterned ways (if there are any) of how our respondents approach the main themes of their lives. We looked for a concept that was able to cover types of faith as well as some of its secular alternatives. As we use the concept, worldview is a multidimensional whole comprising such components as a philosophy of life, a view of life, a

commitment to ideology or moral standards, existential experiences, etc. Having started with a large array of items, here we will describe only the four main patterns we have found: Religious Salience, Belief in a Personal God, Numinous Experiences and Holistic Experiences.

Before we finish by describing the effects of these main components on our results thus far, we will look at the type of statistical method we have used, linear regression analysis, and the model we have introduced into these analyses. At that point we also will present an overview and summary of all the scales we have been discussing so far.

1. Religious salience as the first worldview pattern

Salience expresses the degree to which our respondents rate their philosophy of life as important. Factor analyzing all our items we found that the following dimensions form one scale for Salience: belonging to a faith community and rating the following dimensions as “important”: ideology, experiences, rituals and moral behaviour.⁹

Scale 1: Religious Salience

Do you feel that you belong to a belief community, e.g. a church? How strongly would you rate ideology as playing a role in your view of life? How strongly would you rate feelings and experiences as playing a role in your view of life? How strongly would you rate moral behaviour as playing a role in your view of life? How strongly would you rate rituals as playing a role in your view in life?				$\alpha = 0.71$
--	-	0	+	++
4.9%	46.9%	35.1%	10.3%	2.7%

The table shows that eighty two percent of our respondents rate the salience of their worldview to be of low or middle strength.

2. Belief in a God who orders life as the second component of world view

We asked next about their concept of God, specifically related to basic assumptions about immanence and transcendence. We presented five statements:

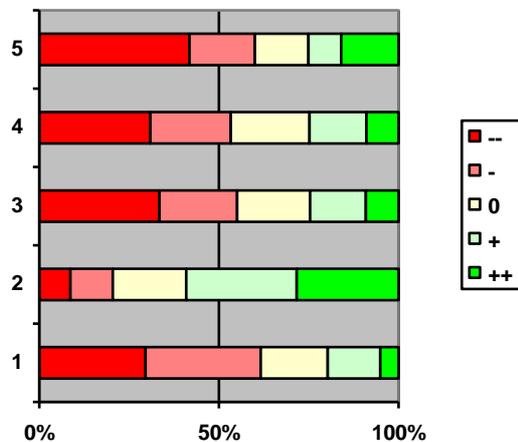
Table 7: Assumptions with regard to immanence and transcendence (values 1-5)

Statement	Score	SD
I believe only in what my eyes can see	2.34	1.19
I believe in something outside our world	3.58	1.25
I believe in a kind of higher power that rules life	2.45	1.33

⁹ We found two clear relationships, one between ideology and rituals and another one between moral behaviour and experiences/feelings. But we did not find any relationship between the pairs. It is remarkable that the second pair, “moral behavior and feelings/experiences,” does not correlate with belonging to a belief community whereas the first pair, “ideology and rituals,” does (0.61 and 0.53 respectively). It seems as if (Christian?) rituals and ideology exclusively play a role only for those young adults who belong to a church and not for others; whereas feelings (spirituality) and experiences appear to be more generally accepted.

I believe in a divine inner core within every human being and also in nature 2.39 1.45
 I believe in a God who pays attention to every individual human being in a personal way 2.49 1.31

The figure below shows not only the proportions of each of the five categories (--, -, 0, +, ++)



It is remarkable that only the second statement, believing in something outside this world, gains the approval of a majority of the respondents (58.8%). We conclude that both opinions at the extremes, that of radical immanence as well as radical transcendence, are rejected. The belief in a divine inner core is also rejected. The relationships between the statements do not reveal any clusters. Several combinations are possible. For instance, 13.5% believe

both in a God who pays attention to every individual human being and in a divine inner core within every human being and in nature. But 10.5% of them perceive these same two statements as opposites that cannot be accepted simultaneously. Theologically speaking, the views are highly idiosyncratic and logically inconsistent. It almost seems as if our respondents do not put much weight on any further conceptual clarifications.

Factor analyzing all the items results in a scale that combines the concept of God and theodicy and has been given the name "Belief in God." This scale depicts believing in a (not necessarily personal) God or Power who orders life with all its ups and downs. As with salience, respondents judge their values to be middle to (very) low: not many of them believe in a (personal) God.

Scale 2: Belief in God

I believe in something outside our world I believe only in things my eyes can see* I believe in a kind of higher power who rules life. I believe in a God who pays attention to every individual human being in a personal way I believe in a divine core within every human being and in nature Suffering comes from God to punish us God has a purpose with everything that happens to us God helps and comforts us when we pray God want us to fight against suffering God doesn't meddle in human affairs*				$\alpha = .88$
--	-	0	+	++
22.0%	30.5%	25.2%	19.2%	3.1%

* direction reversed

3. Numinous and holistic experiences as the third and fourth worldview patterns

A next general category within worldview has to do with various spiritual and existential experiences. We asked our respondents about the degree to which they could approve of eight items. Unifying experiences are reported most frequently.

Table 8. Spiritual Experiences (values 0-3)

Statement	Score	SD
I have felt the conflictual nature of life	1.90	0.77
I have experienced a condition in which I had no sense of time, space	1.85	0.76
I have experienced a state of feeling united and one with everything	1.78	0.70
I have had the feeling that I am exactly the person who I am meant to be	1.59	0.69
I have experienced something divine	1.56	0.74
I have had the feeling that I have lived before	1.47	0.70
I have felt threatened by dark powers	1.22	0.49
I have experienced something demonic	1.17	0.46

Factor analyzing the items results in two scales. The first is called Numinous Experiences and consists of three items. Nearly 90% of our respondents were not familiar with experiences of the divine, dark powers and the demonic.

Scale 3a. Numinous Experiences

I have experienced something divine I have felt threatened by dark powers I have experienced something demonic				$\alpha = 0.61$
--	-	0	+	++
50.8%	37.1%	6.7%	4.3%	1.2%

The fourth and final worldview pattern is called Holistic Experiences. This scale consists of five items. Overall, the statements can be classified by unity within the cosmos and its elements. As with salience, most respondent judged that they experienced this to a middle or low degree. At the extreme positions we find only very marginal groups, the very few who identify completely or not at all with these types of experiences. Many of our respondents give expression to some dim awareness of having felt somewhat unified with the cosmos and humankind.

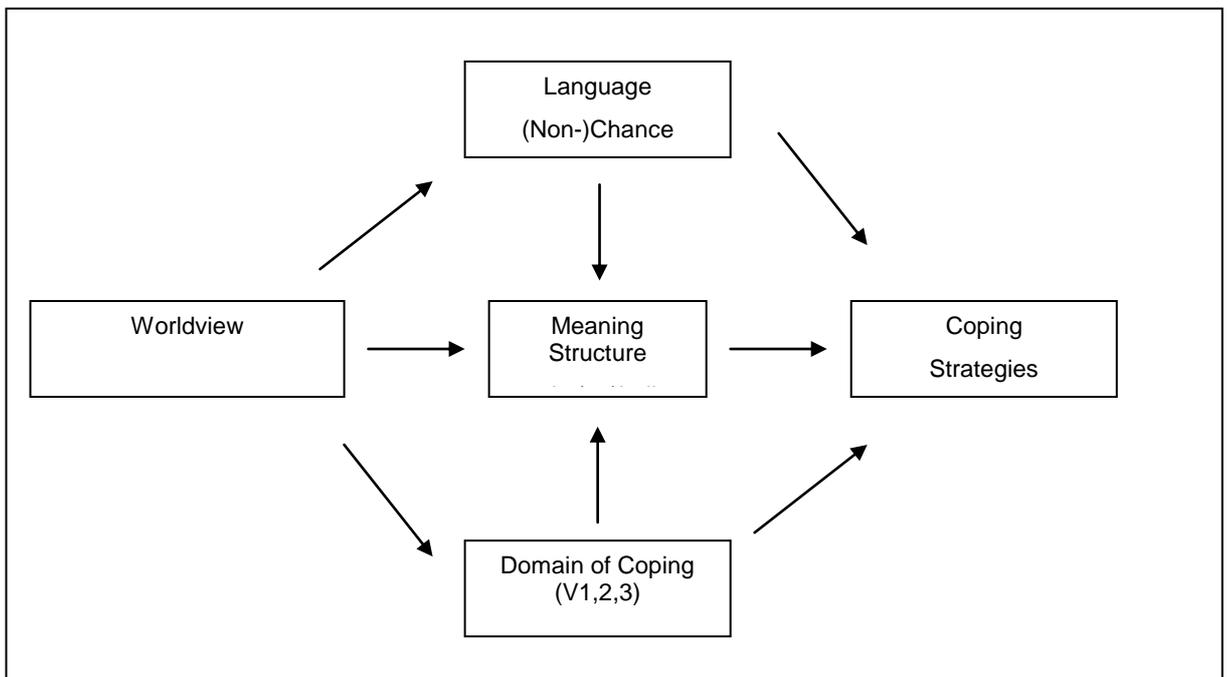
Scale 3b: Holistic Experiences

I have experienced a condition in which I had no sense of time, space and distance				α = 0.59
I have had an experience of feeling oneness with everything around me				
I have felt the conflictual nature of life				
I have had the feeling that I have lived before				
I have had the feeling that I am exactly the person who I am meant to be				
--	-	0	+	++
17.7%	32.9%	38.9%	7.3%	3.1%

Linear regression: a model depicting the presumed relationships between the parameters under study

By means of a linear regression analysis we estimated if worldview influences the language and meaning structure of salvation. The statistical method of linear regression analysis makes visible the degree to which a specific variable is predicted by a range of other variables. Before we can show the results of entering each of the four worldview patterns in a regression analysis, we will explain the model that is required and depicts the presumed relationships between the main variables under study.

Model 1: Presumed Relationships between Main Variables Studied



We assume that worldview will guide the chance language and the meaning structure applied to situations; and that worldview and language and meaning structure will affect which coping strategies will be selected. Thus, language and meaning structure are dependent variables with respect to worldview rather than

the other way around. Coping strategies will depend on language and meaning structure. By means of linear regression we are able to calculate the degree to which (β) the several variables contribute to the dependent (or response) variables.¹⁰

Before reporting the results of our analyses, we first will give an overview of all the scales we have been discussing so far.

Table 9: Overview of Scales depicting Main Variables Studied

Scale Topic	Values					Mean.	Skewness ¹¹	SE
	Very low	Low	Middle	High	Very high			
<i>Chance</i>	10.2%	26.7%	51.9%	10.7%	0.5%	2.65	-0.01	0.12
<i>Non-Chance</i>	49.3%	34.6%	16.1%	0.0%	0.0%	1.67	0.64	0.13
<i>Meaning Structure</i>	3.4%	25.2%	56.8%	13.2%	1.4%	2.84	0.07	0.10
Worldview								
<i>Salience</i>	4.9%	46.9%	35.1%	10.3%	2.7%	2.59	0.64	0.10
<i>Belief in God</i>	22.0%	30.5%	25.2%	19.2%	3.1%	2.51	0.23	0.10
<i>Numinous Exp.</i>	50.8%	37.1%	6.7%	4.3%	1.2%	1.64	1.64	0.10
<i>Holistic Exp.</i>	17.7%	32.9%	38.9%	7.3%	3.1%	2.45	0.48	0.10

1. The role of worldview with respect to Non-Chance and Chance

We will now first report on the degree to which the worldview patterns predict the use of salvation at the linguistic level, which we have found to belong to a

¹⁰ The probabilistic model for linear regression analysis has the following form: "Response Variable = Constant + (B1 x Predictor 1) + (B2 x Predictor 2) +" The variables B1, B2 ... are numbers and how high they are show how strongly each of the predictor variables contributes to the response variable. In addition to the value of the response variable with its Standard Error (SE) and Significance a value "Beta" is shown. This measure signifies the standardization of a B and its value always fits somewhere in the range from 0 to 1 or, when the relationship is negative, from 0 to -1. Usually, it will not be possible to establish a direct connection between B1, B2, etc. A procedure of standardization as expressed in beta shows their relative proportions. The greater the distance of the beta from zero, the stronger the contribution by the predictor variable to the response variable. Via linear regression analysis we can also see the degree to which the predictor variables contribute to the variance of the response variable (R²). The variance is standardized, too, and its values range from 0 to 1. Let us give an illustration. If we find a value 0.45 then we know that 45% of the variability within the answers to the response variable is related to the answers of the respondents to the predictor variables. If we find a value 0, then there is no relation at all. If we have the value 1, then we know that the response variable is completely predicted by the answers to the predictor variables.

¹¹ Because the skewness has been calculated by making use of raw data and not of scale values (whose values range from 0-5), we find relatively high values. Whenever skewness approaches values more than two or three times its standard error, we are dealing with so-called asymmetric distribution. In our data this is very much the case for the scale "Numinous Experiences" and also applies to a certain degree to the scales "Religious Coping," "Religious Salience" and "Non-Chance." It is not at issue for the scales "Holistic Experiences" and "Belief in God." Applying several of the usual statistical methods for the adjustment of skew data did not yield any improvement. We can still make a number of valid statistical calculations, but when we look at the scale "Numinous Experiences" especially in the relationships, we need to be cautious when interpreting the results and not draw strong conclusions.

larger semantic pattern called “Non-Chance” (use of descriptive categories like blessing, salvation, evil, punishment).

We find that only a small proportion of Non-Chance (23%) is predicted by Belief in God and Numinous Experiences. Of both predictors, Belief in God contributes by far the most. This means that the more strongly our respondents believe in a (not necessarily personal) God who controls life, the more likely they will be inclined to understand their circumstances in terms of blessing, salvation, evil and so on.

Table 10: Outcomes linear regression 1. Effects of worldview on Non-Chance

		B	SE B	Beta	Sig.
Constant	13,95	0,81			
Belief in God		0,22	0,03	0,39	0,00
Numinous Experience		0,52	0,20	0,14	0,01
		R ² = 0,23		Sig. = 0,00	

For the sake of clarity, we also have entered Chance into a regression analysis. This contributes greatly to our understanding because we find a substantial but reversed effect of Religious Salience on the use of Chance. The more our respondents value their philosophy of life as important for their daily lives, the less likely they interpret the character of their difficulties in life as merely coincidental or instances of good or bad luck. They will be more inclined to refer to a hidden pattern or divine guidance. Salience predicts 45% of the variance of Chance. We still lack knowledge about the factors, whether random or not, that predict the residual 55%.

Table 11. Outcomes Linear Regression 2. Effects of Worldview on Chance

		B	SE B	Beta	Sig.
Constant	34.42	1.31			
Salience		-0.54	0.03	-0.21	0.00
		R ² = 0.45		Sig. = 0.00	

2. The role of worldview with respect to meaning structure

In addition to the use of language referring to salvation, we want to know to what extent worldview will predict a meaning structure equalling the theological understanding of salvation. We have entered both of the presumed relationships: a direct effect and an effect through Chance and Non-Chance (see Model 1). Indeed, we find effects from both types of predictors.

Table 12. Outcomes Linear Regression 3. Effects of Worldview (and Language) on Meaning Structure

	B	SE B	Beta	Sig.
Constant	5.36	0.91		
Belief in God	0.25	0.02	0.54	0.00
Holistic experience	0.17	0.08	0.09	0.04
Non-Chance	0.17	0.04	0.20	0.00
R ² = 0.48		Sig. = 0,00		

The high beta (0.54) of Belief in God shows that this factor plays a major role in predicting the use of the meaning structure under study. The more the respondent adheres to believing in God, the more likely she will attribute experiences that affect the innermost self to a higher (e.g. supernatural) power with a decisive character. We may deduce from this that respondents judge this meaning structure to be religious in character, which is in line with our general guiding assumptions.

In addition to this, we find two other scales to be of influence but to a much smaller degree, Holistic Experience and Non-Chance. Respondents who are sensitive to several types of unifying experiences will be somehow inclined to answer positively that a higher power is at work when they are being touched in their innermost selves. Perhaps we may attribute this to a certain similarity in the semantics of both types of interpretations. The fact that Non-Chance also affects meaning structure is what we would logically expect: a tendency to attribute deep experiences to a decisive power concurs intrinsically with a tendency to make use of non-chance descriptors for difficult circumstances in life. But it is noteworthy that these empirical data confirm our earlier theoretical work in which we reasoned that salvation as understood theologically will be paralleled closely by a meaning structure in which two interpretations come together: an event touches the innermost self and behind the event some hidden power of a decisive character is at work (Ganzevoort 2004).

Of the three, Belief in God is the far most important.

3. Summary of outcomes regarding the third specific research question

At the level of theory we find a few useful insights regarding the role of worldview. The more respondents adhere to a belief in God, the more they will be inclined to subscribe positively to a meaning structure somehow similar to a theological understanding of salvation and perceive that their circumstances in life express some kind of intended meaning like being a blessing or a punishment. The more the respondents rate their philosophy of life as salient, that is as important to their daily affairs, the less they view their circumstances as instances of merely coincidence. But, practically speaking, in the first place we can apply these results to only a very small proportion of our sample as a whole. Next to that, we must take into consideration that our respondents have mostly answered in response (that means: passively) to categories offered to them in a

questionnaire. The question arises as to how many of this already small and marginal group will apply actively the language or the meaning structure of salvation? Will we find anybody who does?

Results regarding the role we may attribute to views on the life course as such, as captured by metaphors which give expression

Now we will turn to the role played by views of the life course. When respondents are asked to choose three metaphors (out of twelve) that give expression to their conceptions of the life course as such, we find that imagery regarding traveling shows up most frequently: “following a road with many possible choices about what side roads to take” (53%), “traveling along a road” (42%), “making a journey” (41%), “a quest” (38%). After the next one that follows, i.e. “that still is an open question” (34%), we find that the remaining items do not play any role at all: “following a winding road,” “climbing stairs that go higher and higher,” “a movie being played,” “a melody being played,” “a story that is being written,” “a flying bird,” “a bridge being crossed by people.”

The combinations that have been chosen vary greatly; we do not find any fixed pattern. As a consequence, we are not able to establish a statistical relationship with other parts of the questionnaire. But it seems that we can gain understanding if we reflect on this outcome for a while.

We judge this to be a radically optimistic view in more than one respect. Our respondents seem to stress that they experience life as moving onwards, a process which for them also has the quality of a linear progression. And they expect an abundance of choices to show up all the time. With respect to our topic, this might imply that our respondents will not easily judge any actual experience – however bad or difficult it may be for the time being – as being truly decisive in character. In this view, another new side road will somehow appear and there will be another choice to make, bringing a turn, new perspectives or renewal. If that is the case, there is probably no need to frame the value of any experience within a more existential or religious frame of reference. A trigger for such a valuation process may be simply lacking. We will return to this possibility in our discussion where we will formulate some recommendations for further research based on this implication.

Results regarding the role that may be attributed to strategies to cope with important experiences in life

Above we discussed a model in which coping strategies are perceived to be dependent on one’s philosophy of life and situations that are to be coped with. Now we want to explore the possibility of causal relationships in the other direction. Do preferred styles, whether they be active or passive or focused on events or emotions, affect the meaning attributed to salvation and evil?

Unfortunately, our results do not allow us to find an answer. Our respondents were very clear in rejecting the possibility of religious coping, but they were not at all clear with respect to the other dimensions. We were not able to detect patterns with respect to dimensions of coping actively, passively, with the aim of regulating emotions or changing situations. This is the reason for having marked these scales in table 6. At this point of our research we have to leave it open as to why this is so. We might have to improve our vignettes and items. But it seems all the more to be the case that our respondents are very much determined to reject every possibility of religious coping. When we attempted to leave religious items out, all the other scales lost their coherence (alphas: 0.35, 0.37, 0.31 and 0.33 respectively). So the dynamics of answering all the questions seem to be very much guided by the motives of the respondents to show how much they disregard religion.

4. Summary of outcomes regarding the fifth specific research question

Our results do not allow us to make a statement regarding any specific effect of coping styles on the meaning attached to salvation. Instead, our outcomes contribute to the interpretation that the respondents very much reject a religious approach when dealing with their life situations.

CONCLUSION

We wanted to investigate whether the concepts of salvation and evil may be considered to be meaningful for members of contemporary society, especially with respect to the way they themselves construct meaning in life and cope with difficult situations.

Our main conclusion is that this is not the case for a large majority of students at Christian teachers' training colleges. They do not make use of the key concepts of salvation and evil in their language when they rate the most beautiful and most difficult experiences in their lives. They hold that these concepts do not match the random character of circumstances of their lives. Also, the respondents do not apply a somewhat similar meaning structure, for instance when confronted with complicated matters at work, in love relationships and health.

Although they acknowledge that there is "something more" in the universe and do not as such fully approve of a completely immanent or materialistic worldview, as a group they do not show any concern for clarifying this by making further sharp conceptual distinctions. Their view on life as such is optimistic. They hold that life implies an unfolding progression with manifold possibilities and choices and assume that suffering offers possibilities to grow and become a richer human being. They find no meaning in the possibility that a hidden (supernatural) power with a decisive character is at work when people in general suffer and they very strongly reject the possibility that a hidden power is to be relied on when they themselves have to cope with difficulties. It may be

that they will hardly ever see any of their experiences as decisive one or as having an existential character.

In addition to answering our research question we also have to report an unexpected but extremely relevant finding. Throughout the questionnaire our respondents reveal that whilst they recognize (classical) religiosity, they firmly reject it. They reject the possibility of describing their life experiences via the categories of salvation and evil. They reject religious *theodicy* models and prefer secular perspectives of human growth. They very much reject the possibility of religious coping. As a whole, our respondents seem to want to make a firm statement.

DISCUSSION

By doing empirical research as practical theologians, we hoped to find new possibilities to reflect and communicate in more differentiated ways about cultural shifts in meanings. We now will conclude this chapter by discussing some details of the choices and outcomes of our research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the validity and implications of what we have presented thus far. We will first reflect on the main outcomes with help of the guiding assumptions described above. Next we will explore some of the particular characteristics of our group of respondents. We will then comment on some of the weak parts of our questionnaire and, finally, we will focus on some clues for communication about religiosity in Christian ministry.

Cultural shifts in meanings

In our introduction we stated that if we take a closer look at theological concepts, we should be able to detect at least some dimensions of meaning that originated in the dynamics of some cultural process of that time and that there we will find at least some space for redefinitions if we feel the need to actualize a classical theological concept. Our outcomes seem to show that cultural shifts in meanings have occurred with regard to what we may call religious “temporal-spatial metaphors.” Yearning in our participants’ life stories is related directly to their immanent optimism, focusing on meaning and relationships. They do not look for or need salvation in any (classical) religious sense, precisely because they experience their lives in such positive ways. Their yearning for salvation, inherent to their life stories, is directed to the dimension of this world. Our empirical material tallies with and expands theoretical reflections in our previous volume on weal and woe. In that volume, Ganzevoort ventured the view that our life stories are inherently defined by a yearning for *shalom* or salvation (Ganzevoort 2004). This yearning need not be articulated by them in a classical religious way to make it significant in theological terms (see also De Lange in this same volume; De Lange considers the possibility and need to reframe systematic-theological and theological metaphorical speech constructions about transcendence).

Prior to the study we assumed that we might find a type of meaning structure somewhat similar to the hitherto classical theological understanding of salvation and evil but connected to religious practices or language parameters other than the classical and well-known ones. Indeed, we found a slight clue for this possibility. Our main finding, however, is that the very small minority of the respondents who are willing to apply our key concepts to their lives to some degree and experience and acknowledge the analogous meaning structure can be characterized as belonging to a Christian belief community and adhering to belief in a God. This makes clear that the classical concepts under study as well as the meaning structure that they imply are in the first place tied to a religious environment in which they are still embedded in some ranges of micro-social exchanges and of sub-cultural patterns such as traditional Christian religious rituals and teaching. But aside from that, we find that only a small group of respondents other than traditional believers perceive non-chance and apply a meaning structure similar to that of salvation (see table 12). Our data do not allow us to make any statements about the background of these respondents and their perceptions.

Some remarks about the relationships between our conclusion and particular characteristics of our respondents

We now want to deal with the question of the degree to which the answer we have found should be conceived of as limited, tied specifically to the population we studied. Could studying other groups yield a much different picture – for instance will we then find more sympathy for religiosity? We will give a somewhat differentiated answer to this theme.

With respect to the four characteristics of gender, age, level of education, and geographic origin, our group is uniform. This means that our data do not allow us to detect via statistical methods which of the results would be different in comparison to other ages, gender and levels of education. We can speculate about the following aspects.

The topic of gender will be more fully discussed later (see Zonne's contribution to this volume). But if we were struck by the anti-religious tendency in our data, let us point out that in general women are supposed to be more religious than men (cf. Roukema-Koning 2005). A mixed sample probably would show an even more negative result! This suggests that the age group as a whole will in reality probably be more anti-religious than we already have found for this sample.

Our respondents were optimistic about their life course. They expected linear progression, human growth arising out of suffering and many choices to make, time and again. We thus suspected that they would probably hardly ever consider any life experience as decisive. Considering their age as well as their relatively high level of education, we can imagine that groups with lower levels of education and older respondents might answer in a much less optimistic

mode. Would the less highly educated, working-class young people (a group that has a much higher unemployment rate) answer as optimistically about the course of their lives? Probably not. And we would guess that somewhat older respondents (eg. 35-45) will probably have undergone more experiences in their lives that are already of a decisive character (such as having or not having found a partner and/or having children, having found or not having found a satisfying job and started a career, having encountered illness or parents dying, etc.). We expect that the more the number of experiences in life can be considered to be decisive in character, the more they require a type of response to an existential character. Our relatively young and well-educated respondents may indeed be probably somewhat extreme with respect to the question if existential choices can be left open. This is something on which to reflect later.

A final point has to do with geographical one-sidedness. Nearly half of the respondents (278 of 592) attended one college in Assen. And about 70% were found at two colleges, i.e. in Assen and Hengelo. Our data do not allow us to attribute any effect to this. But we can imagine a negative scenario. The very extreme anti-religious tendency from our respondents should be interpreted perhaps at a local level (for instance as having wanted to make a statement with regard to their classes in religion at their college) rather than as representative for their generation. As such, that can still and should evoke our interest. What is it about these classes in religion that so frustrates these young people that they have come to reject many of the religious options in our questionnaire? Could this still be a sign of a larger frustration, felt by a larger group of young people, that concerns a great deal of religious education in general that does not fit their strengths, needs and quests?

So we can point to some elements in our conclusion that could probably be viewed as atypical to some extent and perhaps not truly representative for a larger group in our post-Christian society. Future research is needed to be more certain with respect to this possibility, but we expect that our outcomes will not prove to be idiosyncratic. Sengers (in this volume) compares the results of the Kampen study with the results of an array of other more or less comparable empirical studies in order to determine if this specific sample generally matches their generation closely.

Some remarks about the weak parts of our questionnaire

On the whole, the content of many of the variables created in our questionnaire has proved to be reliable and meaningful. Two weaker points deserve attention.

We recommend that the adjective “supernatural” be left out when respondents are being asked if they see a power of a decisive character at work within circumstances in their lives. By leaving this adjective out, we can obtain more information about the ideology of our respondents with regard to the possibility of a hidden pattern in their circumstances (they may want to refer to biology, psycho-systemic cross-generational forces, karma, etc).

Next, we would like to point to some intriguing findings with regard to coping. Our respondents have answered with remarkable clarity regarding their rejection of religious coping. But they answered with a remarkable lack of clarity and inconsistency concerning the other dimensions of coping, such as active or passive coping and being directed toward change in emotion or in problem. This may be due to the procedure we used in which the religious-secular dimension could have contaminated the other dimensions to the extent that we could not adequately measure the other dimensions any more.

Hints for improving communication in Christian ministry

A change in some of the parameters like ages, geographic origin or vignettes indeed may affect some of our outcomes and conclusions. But having a more precise view of the data is not the final purpose of this study. As a whole, the outcomes of our research, whether atypical to some degree or not, undergird an urgent need to reflect very fundamentally and thoroughly on the question of how to handle communication about key Christian concepts, practically as well as theologically.

We hoped to find new possibilities for communicating in a more differentiated way. Our outcomes offer some hints for communication about religiosity and we will conclude by briefly mentioning them. In doing so, we will also refer to some of the other contributions in this volume that elaborate on these topics.

Our respondents made clear they can be touched in their innermost selves without attributing their experiences to a supernatural power (see results of the second specific research question). Refining and differentiating a vocabulary for sharing such deep experiences of the self in Christian ministry may be a relevant tool for building connections and deepening mutual trust. The experiential realm may offer an access through which one can gradually become aware of a variety of dimensions of (existential) meanings (see also Zonne in this volume).

The fact that our respondents acknowledge that there is “something more” in the universe but at the same time do not show any concern for clarifying this or making sharp conceptual distinctions (see results of the third specific research question), should be taken seriously. One can interpret these results as empirical evidence for what Dingemans (2005) amongst others has called 'somethingism'. Using an overload of concepts or using concepts outside of the context of experiential or daily reality will easily create disinterest (cf. Lee 1990 on pedagogical procedures that relate to the whole person and also take her social world into account).

The anti-religious mood of our respondents is to be taken very seriously.¹² Listening carefully to what it is in (classical) religious communication that

¹² Allport and Ross (1967) already distinguished a type of religiosity in addition to intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic religiosity and the indiscriminately pro-religious, which they called “indiscriminately antireligious” (Wulff 1991, 232). According to Tate and Miller’s (1971) study of United Methodist church members, the

arouses their anger and frustration seems to be a necessary next step in developing a future fruitful communication (see Zondervan in this volume who explores the psychodynamic difference between several attitudes towards religiosity: indifference, ambivalence and active rejection).

The very optimistic views of our respondents with regard to their life courses (see results of the fourth specific research question) create a huge challenge in communicating about religiosity in new ways. The classical good news used to be a kind of promise of future happiness to people who now live in misery. But an experiential need for such a promise seems to be absent from the lives of our respondents. In this volume Ter Avest comments on some important dimensions, on the one hand, of the theological constructs of salvation and evil that have been neglected until now in the research of the Kampen group and responds critically, on the other, to the conceptual validity of parts of our empirical approach. By adding and implying cultural-sociological analysis about processes of construction of existential meaning, she develops recommendations for the renewal of theological education.

character of the “antireligious” may be expressed in their having given the values Freedom, Mature Love, Self-Respect, Independent and Intellectual noticeably higher rankings than all the religious groups, and a strikingly lower ranking to Salvation as measured by Rokeach’s Value Survey (Wulff 1991, 232, 233).

R.Ruard Ganzevoort & Barbara Roukema-Koning, Hope without Salvation.
In: Ganzevoort, R.R. & Mulder, A.C. (eds.) *Weal and woe II*. Münster 2008, 18-57.
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SUPPLEMENT: QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Sex: masculine feminine
2. Age: _____ years
- 3a. Do you feel you belong to in a community of faith (for example a church)?
 Not at all a little quite strongly very strongly
- 3b If you do, which community of faith? _____
4. What religious or ideological tradition were you raised in? _____
5. *Below you see some statements on world views. Please indicate how you feel about them:*
- | | Completely disagree | | | | | completely agree | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| I believe in something outside this world: | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I only believe what I can see: | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I believe in some higher power that governs life: | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I believe in a God who pays attention to every individual human being in a personal way: | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I believe in a divine inner core within every human being and also in nature: | <input type="checkbox"/> |
- When this questionnaire speaks of God, we mean the image you indicated here.*

6. *In faiths and world views we can distinguish four dimensions:*
 1) *opinions on religious affairs, for example about the existence of God;* 2) *experiences and feelings (for example feeling secure);* 3) *moral behaviour (for example taking care of others);* 4) *rituals (for example going to the mosque or to the church)*

How strongly do these dimensions play a role in your belief or philosophy?

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Opinions play | <input type="checkbox"/> no role | <input type="checkbox"/> a role | <input type="checkbox"/> a strong role |
| Experiences and feelings play | <input type="checkbox"/> no role | <input type="checkbox"/> a role | <input type="checkbox"/> a strong role |
| Ethical actions play | <input type="checkbox"/> no role | <input type="checkbox"/> a role | <input type="checkbox"/> a strong role |
| Rituals play | <input type="checkbox"/> no role | <input type="checkbox"/> a role | <input type="checkbox"/> a strong role |

7a. Which persons are your role model? Which of their qualities do you appreciate most?

7b. Which persons are your role model in religious matters? Which of their qualities do you appreciate most?

8. Could you indicate the importance of the values and ideals below? Please mark the **three** items that are the most important to you.

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a comfortable life | <input type="checkbox"/> freedom | <input type="checkbox"/> achieve something on your own |
| <input type="checkbox"/> religiousness | <input type="checkbox"/> an exciting life | <input type="checkbox"/> friendship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> beauty | <input type="checkbox"/> wisdom | <input type="checkbox"/> peace |
| <input type="checkbox"/> being happy | <input type="checkbox"/> tolerance | <input type="checkbox"/> equality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> health | <input type="checkbox"/> inner harmony | <input type="checkbox"/> having a nice job |
| <input type="checkbox"/> love | <input type="checkbox"/> honesty | <input type="checkbox"/> safety |
| <input type="checkbox"/> independence | <input type="checkbox"/> having fun | <input type="checkbox"/> competence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> social recognition | <input type="checkbox"/> self-control | <input type="checkbox"/> self-respect |
| <input type="checkbox"/> the ability to forgive | <input type="checkbox"/> appearance | |

9. You can use different images to compare the life with. Please choose the **three** items you are most comfortable with.

You can compare life with

- a road to travel.
- stairs going up and down.
- playing a movie.
- the flight of a bird.
- playing a melody.
- travelling.
- walking a twisting road.
- a bridge people crossing over.
- writing a story.
- following countless forks of roads.
- an open question.
- a search.

Every day we experience situations, nice and difficult. Most of it we forget, but some experiences remain meaningful.

10a. Can you describe briefly the most beautiful experience in your life, that still affects you?

- 10b. Could you call this experience coincidence? No maybe Yes
- 10c. Could you call this experience good luck? No maybe Yes
- 10d. Could you call this experience a blessing? No maybe Yes
- 10e. Could you call this experience salvation? No maybe Yes
- 10f. Would you use another word for this experience? No. Yes: _____

11a. Can you describe briefly the most difficult experience in your life, that still affects you?

- 11b. Could you call this experience coincidence? No maybe Yes
- 11c. Could you call this experience bad luck? No maybe Yes
- 11d. Could you call this experience punishment? No maybe Yes
- 11e. Could you call this experience evil? No maybe Yes
- 11f. Would you use another word for this experience? No. Yes: _____

12. Which of the following statements apply to you?

	Not applicable	Partly	Applicable
I have had an experience in which I had no sense of time, space and distance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have experienced something divine.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have felt threatened by dark powers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have experienced a state of feeling united and one with everything around me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have felt life being torn apart.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have felt that I have lived before.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have had the feeling that I am exactly as I am meant to be.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have experienced something demonic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

13. How would you rate the following statements? If we speak in the statements of 'God', we mean the images you choose in item 5.

	Completely disagree			completely agree	
Doing good is the most important value in life	<input type="checkbox"/>				
A trouble shared, is a trouble halved	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Suffering is a punishment from God	<input type="checkbox"/>				
God has an intention with what happens to us	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Suffering has no deeper meaning	<input type="checkbox"/>				
God helps and comforts when we pray	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Nasty experiences give the opportunity to develop	<input type="checkbox"/>				
God wants us to fight suffering.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
We deserve what happens to us	<input type="checkbox"/>				
God does not interfere in our experiences	<input type="checkbox"/>				

“Trouble at work”

Imagine yourself in the following story:

Work A

Times are rough, economically speaking. That also holds for the company where you have enjoyed working for the past four years. Rumours are that management intends to close down your department. Your job is at stake. When needed, you could come by on the salary of your partner, but you would have to forget the larger house that you were hoping for.

After your yearly performance interview, your supervisor tells you that he is negotiating a major order which would solve the problems and fit your expertise exactly. Up till now, however, nothing is decided...

Work B

Times are rough, economically speaking. That also holds for the company where you have enjoyed working for the past four years. Rumours are that management intends to close down your department. Your job is at stake. When needed, you could come by on the salary of your partner, but you would have to forget the larger house that you were hoping for.

A conversation with your supervisor suggests that he intends to lay off your colleague Will, with whom you collaborate often, in order to have enough work to keep you busy. You know that Will has two children and needs his income to make ends meet. Will is better in his job than you are, but your boss doesn't like him. Up till now, however, nothing is decided...

14. To what extent did you experience something like this?

- Never Only the same issue Practically the same

15a. Do you see positive aspects in this situation? No a little Yes

15b. Could you call this situation coincidence? No maybe Yes

15c. Could you call this situation good luck? No maybe Yes

15d. Could you call this situation a blessing? No maybe Yes

15e. Could you call this situation salvation? No maybe Yes

15f. Would you use another positive word for this situation? No. Yes: _____

16. Do you see positive aspects in this situation? No a little Yes

16b. Could you call this situation coincidence? No maybe Yes

16c. Could you call this situation bad luck? No maybe Yes

16d. Could you call this situation punishment? No maybe Yes

16e. Could you call this situation evil? No maybe Yes

16f. Would you use another negative word for this experience? No. Yes: _____

17. Would this situation affect your inner self?

No, absolutely not No I am not sure Yes Absolutely

18. Would you suppose that a power of a decisive character, such as a supernatural one, is at work behind this situation?

No, absolutely not No I am not sure Yes Absolutely

19. Which value or ideal of life is here involved in your opinion?

20. Would such a situation change or affect your values or ideals?

No maybe Yes

21. *Confronted with such a situation, people can respond in different ways. Please rate the following statements:*

	Absolutely not			Absolutely	
You feel sick and tired of the uncertain situation at work	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You try very hard to show your best at work	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You wonder why God lets all this happen	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You read books about personal and spiritual grow	<input type="checkbox"/>				
The conversation with your boss keeps you awake for days	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You pray for wisdom for your boss and yourself.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You discuss your worries with your partner.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Everything that is happening fits in the Plan of your life.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

“Kevin or Rob”

Imaging yourself in the following story:

Love A

Imagine you are a young woman. Your relation with your boy friend Kevin is becoming less interesting. After a year and a half, the fire seems to be missing. A day out with your friend Mary seems a good idea. She takes you to a mega-danceparty with DJ Tiësto. Although you don't really like this kind of meeting, it is nice to spend time with her.

That day you meet Rob. He turns out to be a huge fan of Tiësto. Instead of dancing along however, he takes time to get to know you. He explains everything about mixing, music, and the inspiration behind Tiësto's work. You become enthralled and the two of you hit it off quite well. Rob suggest to go on a date...

Love B

Imagine you are a young woman. Your relation with your boy friend Kevin is becoming less interesting. After a year and a half, the fire seems to be missing. A day out with your friend Mary seems a good idea. She takes you to a Christian music festival. Although you don't really like this kind of meeting, it is nice to spend time with her.

That day you meet Rob. He turns out to be a huge fan of the festival. Instead of singing along however, he takes time to get to know you. He explains everything about the Christian lyrics and the inspiration behind this kind of festival. You become enthralled and the two of you hit it off quite well. Rob suggest to go on a date...

Zie voor de volgende de correcties voor vignet 'werk'

22. To what extend did you have a comparable experience in your life?

Never Only the same issue Practically the same

23a. Would you rate this situation as positive? No a little Yes

23b. Could you name this situation coincidence? No maybe Yes

- 23c. Could you name this situation good luck? No maybe Yes
 23d. Could you name this situation a blessing? No maybe Yes
 23e. Could you name this situation salvation? No maybe Yes
 23f. Would you use another positive word to name this situation? No. Yes: _____

24. Would you rate this situation as negative?
 24b. Could you name this situation coincidence? No maybe Yes
 24c. Could you name this situation bad luck? No maybe Yes
 24d. Could you name this situation punishment? No maybe Yes
 24e. Could you name this situation evil? No maybe Yes
 24f. Would you use another negative word to name this experience? No. Yes: _____

25. Could this situation affect your inner self?
 No, absolutely not No I am not sure Yes Absolutely

26. Would you presume that a power of a decisive character, such as a supernatural one, is at work behind this situation?
 No, absolutely not No I am not sure Yes Absolutely

27. Which ideal of life is here involved in your opinion? _____

28. Would such a situation change or affect your values or ideals?
 No maybe Yes

29. *Confronted with such a situation, people can respond in different ways. Rate the following statements:*
 Absolutely not Absolutely

You listen as much as possible to the music of DJ Tiësto (or: Christian music) with Rob in your mind.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You ask Marieke for advice whom to choose.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You don't know what to do and decide to wait for a signal from above.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You pray for forgiveness, because you feel unfaithful to Kevin.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You hope that Kevin will fall in love with someone else.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You find out how you have to cope with relational issues according to your faith.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You honestly discuss your feelings of unease with Kevin.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
You are so much in love, it has to be divine	<input type="checkbox"/>				

“Health”

Imaging yourself in the following story:

Health 1

You have always been fond of sports and lived a healthy life. Many activities, little alcohol, and no smoking. At a certain moment, you develop a disease and end up in hospital. After many investigations, you turn out to have a serious condition. The doctors are surprised given your healthy life style.

During your time in hospital, you get to know your room mate who turns out to have the same disease. Her strong faith proves to be a major support helping her through these difficult times. Conversations with her make you think about religion ...

Health 2

You have always lived a busy and unhealthy life. Plenty of stress, long working hours, a lot of fast food and many cigarettes. At a certain moment, you develop a disease and end up in hospital. After many investigations, you turn out to have a serious condition. The doctors are not surprised given your unhealthy life style.

During your time in hospital, you get to know your room mate who turns out to have the same disease. Her strong faith proves to be a major support helping her through these difficult times. Conversations with her make you think about religion ...

30. To what extend did you have a comparable experience in your life?

Never Only the same issue Practically the same

31a. Would you rate this situation as positive? No a little Yes

31b. Could you name this situation coincidence? No maybe Yes

31c. Could you name this situation good luck? No maybe Yes

31d. Could you name this situation a blessing? No maybe Yes

31e. Could you name this situation salvation? No maybe Yes

31f. Would you use another positive word to name this situation? No. Yes: _____

32. Would you rate this situation as negative?

32b. Could you name this situation coincidence? No maybe Yes

32c. Could you name this situation bad luck? No maybe Yes

32d. Could you name this situation punishment? No maybe Yes

32e. Could you name this situation evil? No maybe Yes

32f. Would you use another negative word to name this experience? No. Yes: _____

33. Could this situation affect your inner self?

No, absolutely not No I am not sure Yes Absolutely

34. Would you presume that a power of a decisive character, such as a supernatural one, is at work behind this situation?

No, absolutely not No I am not sure Yes Absolutely

35. Which ideal of life is here involved in your opinion? _____

36. Would such a situation change or affect your values or ideals?

No maybe Yes

37. *Confronted with such a situation, people can respond in different ways. Rate the following statements:*

	Absolutely not		Absolutely	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You watch TV to find distraction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You read a lot about different dietary patterns and modes of living to find a healthier life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You surrender to whatever happens.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You visit the other patient and attend a religious meeting with her or him.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You wait for the treatment the doctor will come up with.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You visit a meeting of a faith healer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You join a partner group.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This experience pulls you to God.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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