

Christianity and Social Work

*Readings on the Integration of
Christian Faith and
Social Work Practice*

THIRD EDITION

Beryl Huguen and T. Laine Scales

Editors

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PREFACE

The first edition of this book developed from the experience of teaching social work on the undergraduate level at Christian colleges and finding that almost all social work textbooks were produced for the secular market. Most texts were at best neutral, with others often antagonistic to Christian concerns. There was clearly a need for a text that would not only offer a Christian perspective on the social work profession as a whole, but also on specific topics within the profession. In discussions with colleagues, they also saw a similar need.

After some research and discussion it seemed that the best approach was to produce a collection of articles dealing with a variety of topics and issues related to the practice of social work. Effort was given to recruit Christian social workers from a wide variety of colleges and universities and practice settings who could address topics in which they were most competent.

The development of the third edition has followed a somewhat similar pattern. We began by surveying NACSW members and Christian college teachers inquiring which chapters in the second edition they felt were most informative and useful and should be included in a third edition. In addition, we asked what new topics or issues would be important to address in this edition. From this feedback, we again sought to recruit contributors.

The contributors represent a variety of academic and social work practice settings, along with a broad range of theological and social work perspectives. All the contributors in this edition are social workers, but clearly offer unique perspectives to the contemporary debate regarding the role of Christian faith in human service delivery. The contributors were not given a strict outline to follow, but rather were supplied with the basic purposes of the book and general stylistic guidelines. As editors, we have attempted to allow the authors' ideas to stand with as few editorial changes as possible. This collection is intended for a variety of audiences, including social work practitioners, educators, and students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The book is organized so that it can be used as training or reference materials for practitioners, or as a textbook or supplemental text in a social work class.

The reader may agree with some of the contributors' ideas and disagree with others. It is our hope that the reader, whether agreeing or disagreeing, will be stimulated to integrate his or her Christian worldview with the professional social work perspective on helping. We sincerely hope that readers will catch a glimpse of the potential contributions that being a Christian in social work can make to the competent and holistic practice of professional social work and, not incidentally, to the furtherance of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the growth of His Kingdom.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Beryl Huguen and T. Laine Scales

One of the developments in social work in the second half of the 20th century has been a marked decline in the recognition of the Christian religion in the teaching and practice of professional social work. The secularization of the social work profession, the notion of religion in both an ideological and institutional sense having little or no part in forming or informing the world of social work, has been very extensive (Hugen, 1994). For many in the social work profession, this question of the relationship of Christian faith and social work is inconsequential, irrelevant, and for some, an inappropriate topic for professional investigation. Even presently, when spirituality is being recognized by the profession as a legitimate area of inquiry, Christianity, as one spiritual voice, is recognized only hesitantly.

This is unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, social work once used the language of Christianity as a basis for its existence. Historically, such language was widely and eloquently used by both social work educators and practitioners. Second, spirituality, and to a large degree Christian spirituality, is very much part of our society and continues to play a significant role in providing moral rationale and reasoning to our political, social, and charitable institutions. As a result, many social workers want to know what role Christian faith plays in a helping profession—specifically, the professional existence and activities of social work. The purpose of this book is to help respond to this question.

A Christian Worldview and Social Work

Looking at history, and particularly the history of social welfare, it would be hard for anyone to deny that the Christian church is one of the true originators of charity. Out of ancient Israel's concern for justice and mercy toward the sick, the poor, the orphaned, the widowed—from Micah and Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah—grew the compassion of Jesus and the devotion of Paul. Both the justice and love of God set forth and exemplified in the Judeo-Christian tradition have given motivation and direction to much of western culture's charities. Historically, the whole shape and operation of organized welfare is inexplicable apart from this religious conviction and commitment. Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant thought have continuously shaped the ideological basis of social work practice. One writer has suggested that these religious traditions, along with the secular philosophy of humanism, are the four foundational roots out of which

has emerged the value base of the social work profession (Kohs, 1966). Many social workers find the assumptions, beliefs, and values of the Christian faith helpful in providing a frame of reference for understanding and responding to both individual and societal problems.

For the Christian, the standard or “plumbline” (Amos 7:8) used to make judgments has always been the principles set forth in the Bible. Hence it is important and necessary for Christian social workers to relate or test the values of the profession with the principles of a Christian worldview. To be explicit about such moral principles provides an opportunity to reconnect with the profession’s religious bearings and roots. To do so may also help recover dimensions of social work teaching and practice that have been alienated from their theological roots.

Many social workers who are Christians do not hold to the idea that there is such a thing as Christian social work—only Christians in social work (we belong to this group). They believe that one’s Christian perspective comes into play in social work practice when one is deciding *what* to do, *when* to do it, *how* to do it, and *why* one should do it. They clearly identify with those who seek to follow Christ in a servant role focusing upon the alleviation of pain and suffering and the establishment of justice and peace in the world. The beginning chapters of the book, chapters 2 through 6, offer Christians in social work - from students, whose calling and motivation to enter the profession are informed by their Christian faith, to seasoned professionals, whose desire is to further develop Christian approaches to helping - a variety of frameworks to help link their Christian faith, personal identity and professional social work practice.

In chapter 2, David Sherwood lays out a framework for a Christian worldview for social work practice. Beryl Hugen, in chapter 3, addresses how one’s Christian faith and one’s professional work are related through the Christian concept of calling. In chapter 4, T. Laine Scales, Helen Wilson Harris, Dennis Myers, and Jon Singletary, social work faculty members at a Christian university, share several student views of the journey toward integration of faith and social work practice. Students tell their stories of seeking God’s plan, dealing with obstacles, and seeking companionship for the journey. Cheryl Brandsen and Paul Vliem, in chapter 5, contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical religious roots of social welfare by recovering the story of a system of social reforms begun by Basil and his contemporaries in the 4th century. Their understanding of justice motivated leaders to expand human rights and social welfare beyond kinship and religious affiliations. Lastly, Sarah Kreutziger, in chapter 6, offers a historical look at how Christian principles gave shape to a framework for programmatic policy and practice of an early twentieth century Christian settlement house program.

Exploring Foundational Christian Beliefs and Values for Social Work

It is increasingly being recognized that social work, despite its preoccupation in the last half century with science and with developing objective and empirically validated practice techniques, is also a normative profession (Siporin,

1982, 1983). Normative means that the social work profession is also concerned with how persons and societies ought to behave “on principle,” and that the purposes and goals of the social work profession are anchored in particular foundational beliefs and values. A normative principle is an objective rule that when properly applied distinguishes between what is right and wrong. Such rules may be applied to the behavior of individuals, whether client or professional, to social institutions, as well as social and political change processes. So when the social work profession advocates for a more just redistribution of resources that are deemed valuable to society, a value basis, belief, or normative principle for such a redistribution proposal is needed. For example, to advocate for a national health care plan because one believes that for persons in the United States adequate health care is a basic human right, requires a value or normative principle as to what is the basis for such a right. Human behavior, both individual and collective, is also socially defined as good or bad, normal or deviant. Whether one chooses as a social worker to enforce such normative standards or advocate for their change, the essential “morality” of these norms or standards requires justification.

Social work has always been guided by such normative principles, although the basis of these principles rarely has been clearly explicated. For Christians, the normative principles used to make moral decisions have always been based upon the values and beliefs set forth in the Bible. An important professional task for Christian social workers, therefore, is to relate or test the values of the profession with values and beliefs derived from a biblical perspective. Articulating these Christian beliefs and values—helping the reader develop the specific content of a Christian worldview related to social work—is one of the focuses of this book, and is addressed in section two, chapters 7 through 12.

In chapter 7, Rick Chamiec-Case offers a model, the Filtering Role Model of Integration, for how social workers can draw upon the beliefs and values of their Christian faith to meaningfully inform their work. Mary Anne Poe, in chapter 8, identifies central biblical principles and theologies (at times in tension) related to the understandings of human nature, social welfare, and the problem of poverty. In chapter 9, Jim R. Vanderwoerd provides underlying Christian principles for the place of macro practice as an essential element of social work practice. Mary Ann Brenden addresses in chapter 10 how Catholic social teaching, by virtue of its harmony with social work values and ethics, is a valuable resource for strengthening the social justice focus of social work education and professional practice. In chapter 11, Mary Anne Poe offers a conception of justice that goes beyond justice as fairness to describe justice as an ideal that reflects the human longing for wholeness and harmony in social relationships. Christian principles provide criterion for measuring this state of justice in relationships. Finally, Jim R. Vanderwoerd, in chapter 12, identifies several key biblical beliefs and values that provide a foundation from which to understand a Christian vision for 21st century social welfare, drawing on understandings of social structures rooted in neo-Calvinist understandings within Reformed Protestantism and Catholic social teaching.

Spiritual and Religious Dimensions in Social Work Practice

Today there is a growing movement within the social work profession to affirm that spiritual and religious beliefs are integral to the nature of the person and have a vital influence on human behavior. These spiritual and religious dimensions are being increasingly recognized as important features of social work practice at all phases of the social work helping process and in all areas of practice. This perspective embraces a holistic conception of the person and has more recently been elaborated as the bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective. This view reintroduces spiritual issues as a legitimate focus for social work practice and provides for a more complete understanding of client strengths, challenges, and resources. As a result, there is now a need for the development of theoretical frameworks and practice models, including assessment tools and intervention strategies that flow from this perspective.

Social work research also has shown that although many social workers see religious and spiritual issues as important parameters in practice and important in their own lives as well as in the lives of their clients, many are hesitant to initiate discussion of spiritual issues with clients (Canda & Furman, 1999; Derezotes & Evans, 1995; Joseph, 1988). Much of this hesitation is due to the lack of knowledge and skill in this area. Greater sensitivity to the concerns of the religious client has also been shown to be related to the social worker's own spiritual awareness—the ability to integrate the personal, spiritual, and religious self with the professional self. Again, there has been a reluctance to incorporate such knowledge into social work education, considering such discussions an intrusion into a private sphere.

This movement within the profession to embrace a bio-psycho-social-spiritual focus in practice, along with the promotion of a professional learning environment that is more supportive of personal religious and spiritual experiences, has resulted in the development of models for incorporating spirituality in a wide variety of practice areas. Christians in social work now have the opportunity to truly minister to the whole person. Several chapters in section three address these spiritual dimensions focusing on a broad range of practice areas.

In chapter 13, Hope Haslam Straughan reviews and critiques several theoretical perspectives on individual spiritual development. David R. Hodge and Crystal R. Holtrop present a variety of spiritual assessment tools useful in different social work practice settings in chapter 14. In chapter 15, Jason Pittman and S.Wade Taylor offer a comprehensive model for incorporating Christian spirituality in substance abuse practice. Chapters 16, 17, and 18 each address the role of spirituality and religion in practice with a specific vulnerable population. Beryl Hugen outlines in chapter 16 the role of a religious orientation in practice with persons experiencing severe mental illness. Cheryl K. Brandsen proposes a model for addressing spirituality in end of life care with the elderly in chapter 17. The role of spirituality and religion in child welfare, specifically foster care, is presented in chapter 18 by Jill Mikula and Gary Anderson. In chapter 19, Helen Wilson Harris leads us on a journey into understanding the

nature and approach to professional helping according to Alan Keith Lucas, and in particular “one of his core ideas—that all good helping involves the skillful use of reality, empathy, and support—dimensions of the helping process that reflect the very nature of God.” In the concluding chapter (20) in this section, David A. Sherwood offers a Christian perspective on ethical decision making in social work practice.

The Changing Environment for Social Work Practice

Social work as a profession has undergone a variety of changes in the twentieth century. Many of these reflect both significant material and technological changes in our society, along with a shift in our ideas about relationships between people and their social environments, particularly government. The early twentieth century was fertile ground for the development and expansion of broad governmental responsibility for social welfare. The idea of the welfare state and of the centrality of government and public service seemed both inevitable and probably necessary.

But the latter part of the twentieth century was much less hospitable to the concept of the welfare state. A perceived lack of results from publicly funded and delivered human services along with a focus on renewing civil society propels today’s government leaders to call for community and faith-based organizations to take increasing responsibility for the social and economic needs of communities and persons in poverty. A central question is whether government can better meet the country’s critical social needs by working in partnership with the faith community, focusing particularly on congregations and faith-based community development organizations.

Several legislative and legal changes have helped facilitate this increased involvement of faith-based organizations in the delivery of social services. The Section 104 “Charitable Choice” provision of the 1996 welfare reform legislation enabled religious organizations to receive government funding for the delivery of social services, without requiring changes in governance, employment practices, or religious characteristics (Center for Public Justice, 1999). President Bush’s development of the Office of Community and Faith-Based Initiatives along with several recent legislation initiatives has given further support to this movement. Social workers who are able to understand and relate to both the public (governmental) and faith-based service communities are today in an important and advantageous position to influence the development of policies and programs that help meet important social needs in their communities (Aker & Scales, 2003). The increased involvement of faith-based organizations in human service delivery also brings new challenges, as the purposes and missions of some of these faith-based organizations include an evangelistic outreach. Previously, such faith-based organizations have been seen as “pervasively sectarian”—too religious to receive public financial support. How do social workers in these congregations and faith-based organizations balance the mandate for professional service delivery with an evangelistic mission? Chapters 21-24 focus on this larger changing environment of social work practice.

In chapter 21, Diana Garland provides insights related to faith in family life for congregational ministries with families seeking to strengthen this aspect of family life. Timothy Johnson, in chapter 22, identifies the Black church's practice of Christian charity and how "its current orientation to living out the Christian discipline of "holistic grace and hospitality" serves as a microcosmic case example of social welfare and systematic helping that undergirds the profession of social work." In chapter 23, John Cosgrove focuses on the contemporary and growing phenomenon of formal relationships between individual congregations in the developed and developing worlds. Christian social workers who wish to have direct "hands on" involvement in the developing world may need look no further than their local congregation for an opportunity to serve that is both professionally and spiritually rewarding. Lastly, in chapter 24, David Sherwood posits a limited and cautious perspective for the role of evangelism in social work practice.

Humility and Competence

One of the primary goals of this book is to apply a Christian perspective to the realities of contemporary social work practice. It is important to remember that in offering a Christian understanding and response to social problems it does not mean that Christians in social work have all the answers. The Bible may provide guidance, but it does not always provide clear and specific direction for the sometimes confusing moral and ethical situations social workers encounter in practice. As Christian social workers, we know that we live and practice in a broken world, and that our only real comfort is that we are not our own, but we belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

It is easy to assert the evident Christian goodness of helping people. And it can be easier still to assume that a Christian perspective on the profession and practice of social work furthers that good. But goodness of motivation may be and frequently is unrelated to outcome. There is always the possibility that our Christian perspectives are no more than self-serving rationales (promoting judgmentalism, discrimination and selective helping motives) rather than the product of a thoughtful analysis. With this book, therefore, we have attempted to offer a Christian perspective for social work practice that is within the parameters of contemporary models of professional social work research and scholarship. We believe that all knowledge is God's knowledge, and clearly social work practice and scholarship can also inform the Christian community.

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