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A FAITH INFORMED MODEL OF MORAL DECISION-MAKING IN SOCIAL WORK

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A Faith Informed Model of Moral Decision-Making in Social Work

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In 2005 a student at a Missouri Social Work Program signed a contract with her program that she alleged required her to conform her religious beliefs to a code of ethics that she could not support. There are similar cases from Rhode Island and Illinois, and many more instances of alleged “unwarranted, frequently public, criticism for religious beliefs by faculty and students” (Ressler & Hodge, p. 68). All social work students and faculty, not just those with strong religious beliefs, can benefit from a deeper exploration into the basis for moral decision-making in trying to determine ways to practice (and learn and teach) ethically. The purpose of this article is to provide a clearly outlined basis for moral decision-making that can be applied to decision-makers with different sets of beliefs: secular and theistic, including Christian and within Christian, specifically Catholic.

The principles that guide ethical decision-making arise from two complementary sources: ethics and religious belief. As a philosophical discipline, ethics seeks to discover ethical principles using reason alone, without recourse to any privileged experiences or divine revelations that might form the basis for religious belief. Ethics itself is a hierarchical

discipline, composed of three divisions that address different aspects of ethical decision-making:

- Metaethics addresses the most fundamental issues concerning ethical principles and moral judgments and investigates the source and nature of ethical principles (Oldenquist, 1984);
- Normative ethics adopts specific metaethical positions to generate specific theories concerning the definition of moral terms and the procedures for making moral judgments (Oldenquist, 1984);
- Applied ethics uses various metaethical and normative positions to formulate codes of ethics that guide ethical decision making in particular areas of life.

Although metaethics and normative ethics have been the subject of philosophical investigation for centuries, there is no consensus on these topics, forcing those who are charged with developing applied ethical systems, such as professional codes of ethics, to incorporate components from incompatible ethical theories. The result is ethical codes that reflect the pluralism of contemporary society with ethical principles that change over time and moral judgments that are relative to current opinion.

Ethical decision making, however, is not the sole province of philosophical ethics.

Religions also address the proper way for people to act in particular situations, drawing upon divine revelation and privileged experiences as a separate source of guidance and instruction that supplements the insights provided by ethics. Within Christianity, the teachings of Jesus and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, together with the divine

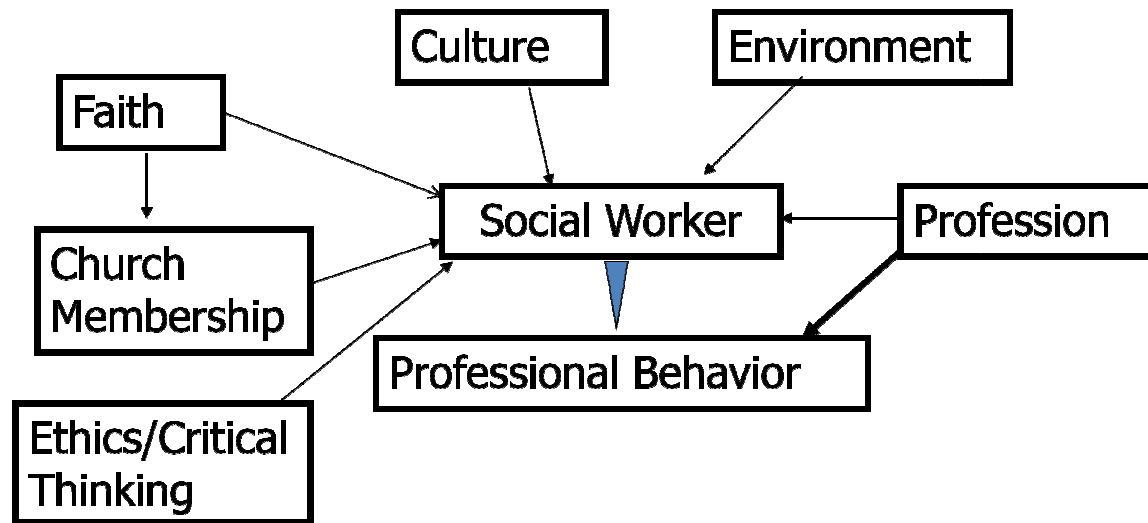
revelation embodied in Judaism, provide Christians with both theoretical insight and practical guidance concerning ethical decision-making.

In addition, social work is a profession that understands the importance of the person-in-the-environment perspective. People are shaped by their culture and their environment, as well as their faith and beliefs (Canda & Furman, 1999). In addition, they are taught and encouraged to make decisions with skilled reasoning and research that provides them with evidence to make an informed decision. Finally, armed with clear guidance from the profession's code of ethics (NASW, 1999; Reamer, 1999, 2006), the social worker can make informed and ethical decisions about how to practice (and learn and teach).

How does a social worker decide the relative weight to give to each of these elements that inform moral decision-making? The relative weights will depend on the relative importance and credibility of the information and direction provided by the sources of influence, and these will necessarily differ depending on the social worker's religious beliefs.

Secular Model

Whether or not a social worker is religious, if the social worker believes that a secular influence is the most credible and important influence on ethical behavior, he/she will rely primarily on the social work code of ethics, and on interpretations of the code by its spokespersons, i.e. faculty members who first introduce, teach, and test on the topic. The following chart depicts that relative influence on professional behavior:

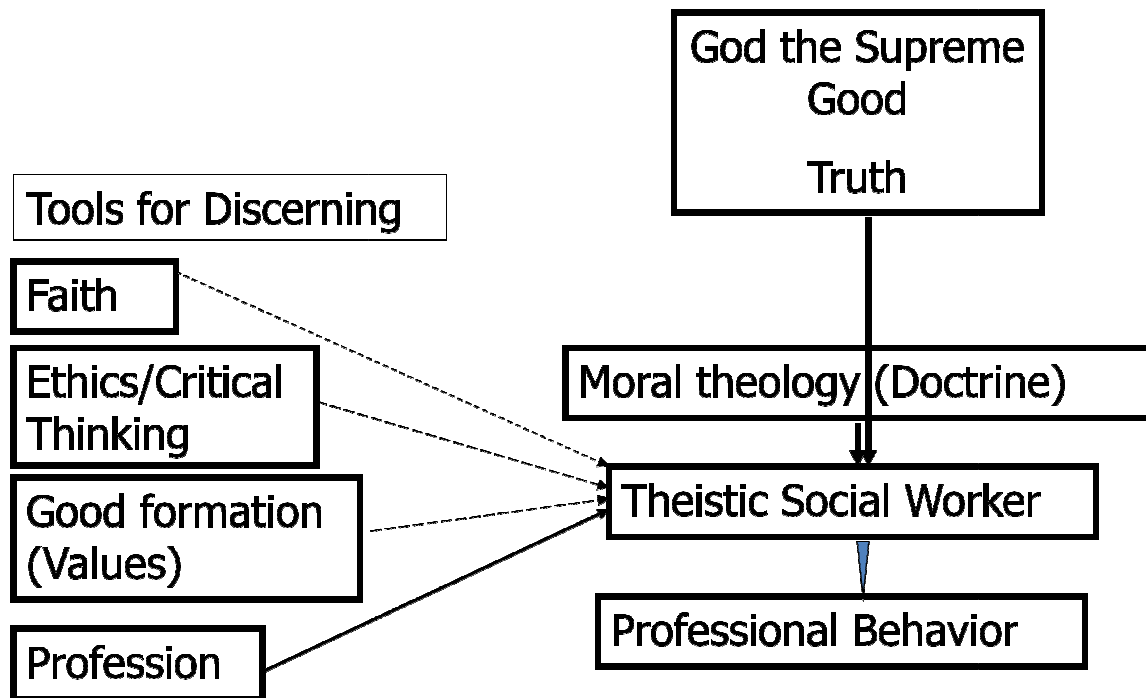


Note that, in the chart, while other elements influence the worker, the profession exerts primary influence on professional behavior (Reamer, 2006).

Theistic Model

Since codes of ethics are derived from groups of professionals choosing in a specific place and time, it may be difficult to give more credibility for deciding moral behavior to a group of elected persons than to God, and rightfully so. While a person's faith, understanding of ethics, critical thinking, values, and the profession itself help shape the social worker's perceptions and judgments, the social worker is directly influenced by God and his/her understanding of morality based on this belief or theology (understanding and study of God). It is important to note that this faith, this system of beliefs and moral understanding cannot be subservient to a professional interpretation of ethical conduct, because faith-inspired moral obligations are as "real" and legitimate as professional ones (Sherwood, 2007).

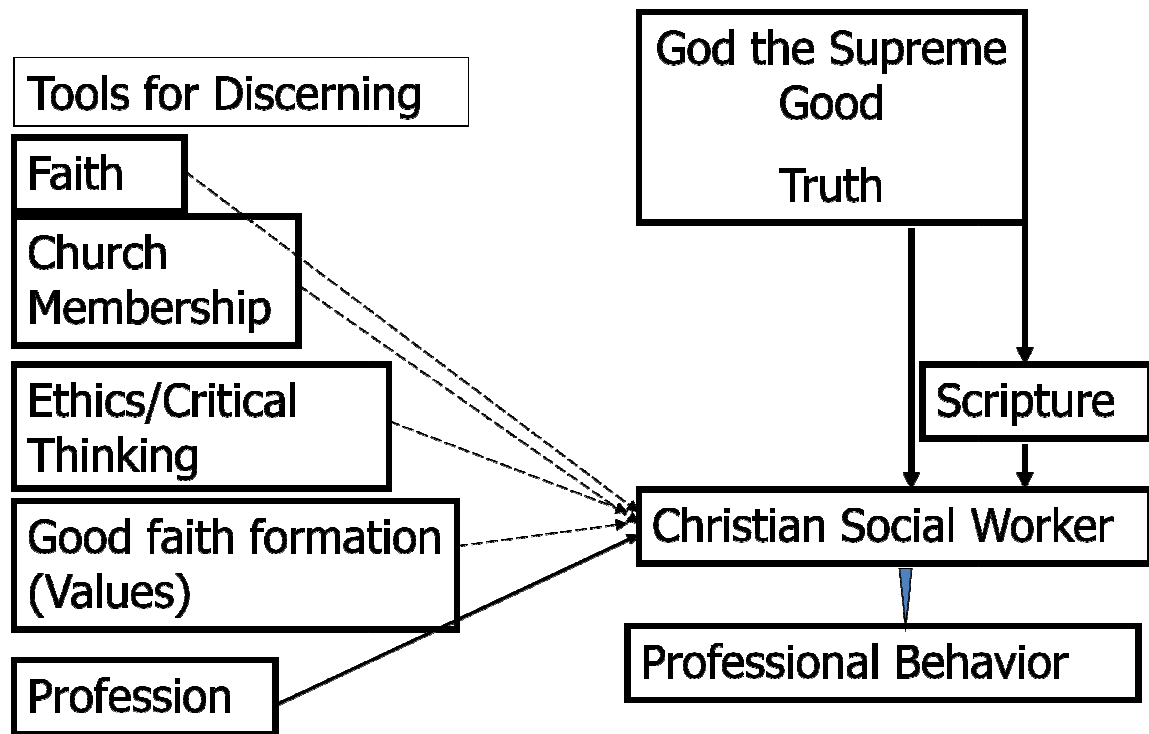
This understanding, along with the information and influence already described, will directly impact the social worker and moral decision-making. Therefore, a theistic view of moral behavior would appear to be the following:



Note that in this model, the profession provides a strong influence on the social worker, not on professional behavior directly.

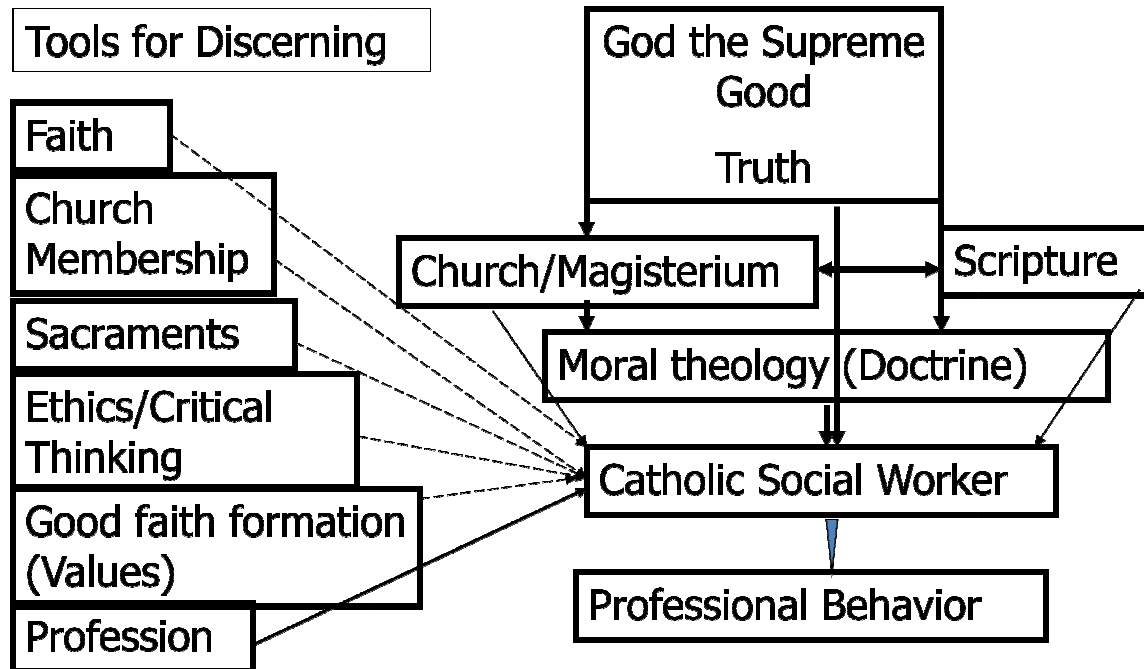
Christian Model

However Christians employ another source of information: Scripture. And their church membership provides an additional tool for discerning morality, resulting in the following decision-making model:



Catholic Model

Finally, a Catholic model would need to include not only Scripture, but Church teaching handed down for two thousand years as the teachings and doctrine interpreted by the Magisterium (the teaching authority of the Church), and provided as moral theology, again with church membership along with the Sacraments, to enlighten the process.



In summary, models that depict the relative weight of influence on decision-making can be extremely helpful. They clarify the processes which social workers use to make very complicated choices, and they provide a pictorial representation that promotes dialogue and debate. The model, with its variations, distinguishes between secular and religiously informed ethical decision making, and enables the social worker to recognize that there is a role not only for philosophical but also for religious principles in this decision making.

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