CHAPTER 7

WHEN SOCIAL WORK AND CHRISTIANITY CONFLICT

Lawrence E. Ressler

His name is Emory and he is a Christian. To be more specific, he is a Mennonite. He may not look like what you expect a Mennonite to look like, but he is. When Emory was young, his family followed more traditional customs. They drove only black cars, for example. His dad wore a plain coat and his mom wore a white bonnet and dark stockings. They had no radios or televisions. His relatives, who have remained committed to traditional Mennonite customs, would not approve of the mustache he now wears, the television, stereo, computers, and gold-colored car he has. What is more important to know about Emory, however, is that while he has abandoned many of the traditional customs, he still has the soul of a Mennonite. It is the framework that provides structure and purpose to his living. A story might help illustrate the influence that being Mennonite has on his life.

When Emory was about 13, he earned money by mowing lawns. One day, when he went to mow a lawn for a customer, he found another boy at the same house with a lawnmower. Emory informed the boy that he had been hired to do the mowing, to which the boy replied that he had been hired to do it. Emory insisted the job was his, and before he knew what happened, the other boy drew back and hit Emory squarely on the jaw, knocking him to the ground. Emory got up and did what he thought was proper. He turned his face to one side and said, “Here, do you want to hit this side too?” After all, Jesus had said, “Turn the other cheek.” To Emory’s surprise, the boy hit him a second time. Rather than fight about the lawn, Emory got up and went home. Even as an adolescent, Emory was guided by the Mennonite commitment to nonviolence.

Emory’s personal sense of history begins in January 1525 when Conrad Grebel and Felix Mantz chose to be rebaptized as adults in Zurich, Switzerland. They did so based on their reading of the Bible. The choice to be a Christian, they believed, should be a voluntary adult decision rather than a procedure imposed on infants, as was the custom of the day. Such an idea ran counter to official church policy and the law that required infant baptism. This issue may not seem significant today, but at that time adult baptism was considered both heresy and treason.
Adult baptism was considered so egregious during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that it could result in capital punishment.

The adult baptisms of Grebel and Mantz marked the beginning of the Anabaptist (rebaptizer) movement which was an extension of the Protestant Reformation begun by Martin Luther in 1517. The word Mennonite was given to followers of Menno Simons, an Anabaptist leader in Holland in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Menno Simons and his followers were deeply committed Christians who desired to use the Bible as a guide to living, particularly the New Testament and the teaching of Jesus. Over the years, a distinctive Mennonite theology and life style developed. This included such things as nonconformist living, service to others, community accountability, and simple living. The visible application of this theology included dressing distinctively, rejecting some technology, a worldwide voluntary service system to help people in need, and living a modest lifestyle. Central to their belief system was a commitment to nonresistant love which was to be put into consistent and practical action. Love, following the teaching of Jesus, was to be extended even to one’s enemies.

Anabaptists, including Mennonites, were so empowered by and committed to their faith, that while they would not kill to preserve their beliefs, they were willing to die for them. The commitment to their faith was put to the greatest of tests. Anabaptists were persecuted for several hundred years in Europe because of their beliefs and lifestyle, with over 3000 men, women, and children being burned to death, drowned, and beheaded (Bracht, 1837). Take Michael Sattler and his family who were rebaptized in 1525, for example: The Sattlers were arrested, tried, found guilty of heresy and treason, and instructed to recant. Because Michael would not, his tongue was cut out and red hot tongs were applied three times to his body. When he continued to refuse to abandon his beliefs, he was driven to the countryside and had red hot tongs applied five more times to his body. When he still would not renounce his Anabaptist beliefs, he was burned at the stake. His wife and sisters were later drowned because they also would not recant (Baergen, 1981).

In Emory’s own direct family, his grandfather seven times removed was sentenced to prison in 1710 for his religious beliefs. The family, along with many other Mennonites, came to America in 1715 primarily in search of religious freedom. James Madison specifically mentions the “Menonists” in the influential apology for religious liberty written in 1785 entitled “Memorial and Remonstrance” (Gaustad, 1993, p. 145). For Emory’s ancestors, the First Amendment to the Constitution was a welcome end to several hundred years of religious oppression.

Like his ancestors, Emory has no interest in killing to protect his
rights. While Emory cannot state for certain that he would take persecution to the point of death for his beliefs, in his soul he would want to. Following Christ is as dear to Emory as it was to his ancestors.

Emory is also a social worker. He has worked with delinquent children, with individuals and families as a counselor, in rural and urban community development, and in a prison. He has been employed in both religious and secular settings and has attended or worked in social work educational institutions for two decades. Emory has also had leadership roles in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), as well as the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW).

Emory is equally committed to his faith and the social work profession. He has found the social work profession to be a particularly meaningful vocation. This is not surprising since the social work profession has religious roots. For him, like the originators of social work a century ago, the motivation for helping those in need is related to being a faithful follower of Christ. I John provides a particularly clear connection between Emory’s theology and his interest in social work:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action (I John 3:16-18).

Emory is an example of what can be called a Christian social worker. Emory didn’t realize there was such a thing until he went to graduate school and his professor proudly introduced himself as a Radical social worker. Emory learned that a Radical social worker is one who accepts the thinking of Karl Marx and the ideals of Marxism. Emory did not become a Marxist, even though his professor wanted him to become one, but he did learn that one’s worldview influences how he or she sees history, the world, problems, solutions, and how he or she does social work. He was inspired when he realized that Jesus Christ and Christianity was for him what Karl Marx and Marxism was for his professor. If there is a Radical social work, then there is a Christian social work, he thought. Emory appreciated the honesty of his professor and decided he would be as open about his belief system.

Emory was surprised a few years later, when he learned that a few social workers think you cannot be both Christian and a social worker. If you want to be a “real” social worker, they said, you have to let go of the Christianity since it is oppressive. Emory was startled, when he began to do research about religion and social work, to learn that social
workers, students, and faculty who identify themselves as Christian experience religious discrimination in the profession. Emory was disheartened about how often it takes place in the profession when he learned that in one study half of the subjects who identified their theology as conservative said they had experienced religious discrimination because of it (Ressler, 2000). The NASW Code of Ethics includes religious groups among the list of people who deserve respect.

How can this discrimination be happening, he wondered? There are points of tension between social work and Christianity. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the reasons for these tensions and to offer several suggestions for reducing the tensions between the two.

**Spirituality and Religion**

To fully understand the tension between Christianity and social work, it is important to distinguish between spirituality and religion.

**Definitions**

Spirituality, in the popular social work use of the term, refers to “the basic human drive for meaning, purpose, and moral relatedness among people, with the universe, and with the ground of our being” (Canda, 1989, p. 573). Human beings from this perspective are viewed as more than physical beings determined by their basic drives as Freud suggested, by the economic system as Marx believed, or by the environment as Skinner argued. A spiritual perspective holds that at the core of the human being is a search for meaning, the desire to know, and the yearning to be connected. The spiritual aspect becomes especially clear where there is a crisis like the World Trade Center disaster in New York City. People were stunned and wanted to know why the carnage had happened. God-talk became a part of public discourse, and prayer became commonplace. The loss of life of nearly 3,000 people generated a compassionate response from millions who reached out to console and support those who lost loved ones. Just as a fallen power line reminds us of the electrical system that we generally take for granted, death and destruction exposes the spiritual part of human beings of which we are often unaware. Spirituality is just as inherent to human existence as biology, psychology, and sociology.

Spirituality is distinguished from religion which is defined as “an institutionally patterned system of beliefs, values, and rituals” (Canda, 1989, p. 573). Religion involves the organization of ideas about the relationship of the supernatural world and the natural world. It also in-
cludes the organization of activities and people that stem from an understanding of the supernatural and natural worlds. Whereas spirituality is largely philosophical in tone and speaks to human nature issues, religion is more sociological and theological. Spirituality is a personal phenomenon while religion is a social phenomenon.

A Typology

Using contemporary definitions, an analysis of spirituality and religion results in a fourfold typology. The first category could be called **Spiritual and Non-Religious**. This would include people who are actively engaged in a search for, or have found, meaning and connection in life. They do so, however, outside of a religious framework. They do not attend a church and are not involved in what is considered religious activities. Meaning in life and connectedness come from non-religious sources such as nature, a job, special relationships, or even the mundane aspects of daily living that are approached with a spiritual attitude. The second type could be designated **Religious and Disspirited**. This would be typical of people who go to church, follow religious rituals, and even support the religious organization. Their life, however, has no meaning and they do not feel connected to others. They may be involved in religious activity, but it does not provide meaningful structure or purpose for life. The third classification could be referred to as **Disspirited and Non-Religious**. This would involve persons who are not consciously purposeful about life nor connected. They may well feel aimless and isolated from others. They also are not involved in religious activities, do not embrace a religious belief system, and are not part of a religious community. The fourth category could be called **Spiritual and Religious**. This would consist of persons whose meaning in life is related to their religious experience. Emory, described earlier, is in this category. The person of Jesus Christ and the Bible, as well as an awareness of the Holy Spirit, gives form and substance to his life. The Mennonite theology helps organize how he understands the world, history, and the future, and it influences how he lives. Going to church, reading the Bible, praying, singing, worshiping with others, and attending church conferences provide inspiration and motivation. His religion is a source of hope and strength. Radical social work would also be in this category even though Marxism is not a traditional religion.

**Spirituality, Religion, and the Social Work Profession**

After decades of neglect, the topic of spirituality has become increasingly popular in social work in recent years. Spirituality is being
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addressed more frequently in social work journals and in textbooks (e.g. Bullis, 1996; Ellor & Netting, 1999). Workshops at conferences include topics related to spirituality. Dozens of colleges and universities offer courses on spirituality. Spirituality has moved from being ignored to being in vogue.

The topic of religion, like spirituality, has been largely ignored in social work for the greater part of the twentieth century (Cnaan, 1997; Loewenberg, 1988). There is an interesting paradox with respect to religion, however. On the one hand, increasing recognition is being given to the importance of religion in the profession. This is evident in the revised 1996 NASW Code of Ethics where religious diversity has been given increased status. Religion is now included as one of the groups which social workers are implored to be sensitive to along with race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, and mental or physical disability. Social workers are instructed in the NASW Code of Ethics to “obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression” related to religion as well as diverse groups (1.05). Social workers are further instructed to “avoid unwarranted negative criticism of colleagues” related to religion (2.01), to “not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination” on the basis of religion (4.02), and are required to “act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class” on the basis of religion (6.04). In other words, respect for religious diversity seems to be of equal importance to other types of diversity.

At the same time, there has been significant tension in the profession with respect to religion, especially when religion is an important source of meaning for clients and social workers, i.e., those who are in the Spiritual and Religious category. Alan Keith-Lucas highlighted the crux of the matter with this question in 1958, “What happens, then, to the social worker who is not content with religious generalizations and who really believes and acts by what he says in his creed?” (Keith-Lucas, 1958, p. 236). Keith-Lucas, who wrote prolifically about the integration of Christianity and social work for 50 years, believed that, with careful theology and a good understanding of social work, the two were compatible. He states,

The task of beginning to make such a synthesis will not, however, be an easy one. It will require an exploration for those willing to undertake it, of what theology really teaches and not what most people take for granted that it teaches, or remember from Sunday School...It must be intellectually rigorous, con-
ducted by people who are amateurs neither in religion nor social work. It will have to do with the ‘hard paradoxes’ rather than the ‘easy correspondences’ (p. 236).

Not everyone supports Keith-Lucas’ argument that religion and social work are compatible. In spite of clear evidence that social workers do not feel adequately prepared to deal with religious issues which arise in social work practice (Joseph, 1988; Sheridan, 1992), some social workers are opposed to exploring and acknowledging the relationship of religion and social work. Clark (1994), for example, argues, “If we want the social work profession to maintain its political and technological gains, we must not move religion to a position of central importance” (p. 15). Increased attention to religion in social work, Clark argues, will place the profession on a “slippery slope.”

Some social workers have gone so far as to try to eliminate religiously committed social workers or faith-based institutions from the profession. One of the most visible and volatile clashes in social work took place between the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and religiously-affiliated institutions in the 1990s. At the center of the conflict was an accreditation standard developed in 1982 that expanded nondiscrimination requirements. Proponents wanted to require every social work program to state that they would not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. This requirement conflicted with the state laws in some states as well as the religious beliefs of some schools. The religious institutions that objected to the expanded policy did not discriminate against students and faculty on the basis of their orientation, but they did insist on their right to establish codes of conduct that prohibited homosexual behavior just as they prohibited other types of behavior such as non-married or extra marital heterosexual intimacy, gambling, smoking, and use of alcohol. The opposing institutions refused to put the phrase “sexual orientation” in their nondiscrimination statements because proponents do not distinguish between orientation and behavior. For the Christian colleges, the non-compliance with the expanded policy was based on an important religious belief which they believed should have the same respect as that given to other groups.

From 1982 to 1995, the conflict was dormant because the policy was not enforced. That changed beginning in 1995 when a number of schools were told by representatives of the CSWE Commission on Accreditation that they would not be accredited if they did not comply with the standard. Some religiously-affiliated schools responded by threatening CSWE with a lawsuit on several grounds. First, the 1982 standard was viewed as a violation of the profession’s commitment to
religious diversity; and being denied accreditation was seen as a violation of the principle of social justice. Second, denying accreditation to religiously-affiliated institutions for policies related to their religious beliefs was interpreted as a violation of the First Amendment guarantee of religious freedom. Third, since eliminating religiously-affiliated institutions from accreditation would result in their students being ineligible for state licensure, anti-trust concerns were raised. Interestingly, CSWE acknowledged in a publicly distributed memorandum that the requirement concerning sexual orientation had been added with the knowledge that it violated the religious beliefs of some institutions (CSWE Commission on Accreditation, January 1996). The proponents of the policy saw the standard as enforcing justice. The opponents saw the standard as religious discrimination that violated the profession’s commitment to diversity and opposing oppression and discrimination.

Two months later, a meeting was called to discuss the matter at the Annual Program Meeting of CSWE. An attorney employed by CSWE announced in the meeting that the 1982 policy was a violation of the law and would not stand up in court. The CSWE Commission on Accreditation (COA), forced to change the policy, made several attempts to find a solution that appeased both the proponents and opponents of the expanded non-discrimination policy. Finding a solution that was agreeable proved to be very difficult. After several proposed revisions, the 1982 standard was removed and a new one put in place that called for “specific, continuous efforts to provide a learning context in which understanding and respect for diversity (including age, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, national origin, race, religion, and sexual orientation) are practiced” (CSWE Commission on Accreditation, 1997). The standard was received favorably by many religiously-affiliated institutions but was resisted by advocates of gay and lesbian groups. These advocates insisted that the nondiscrimination policy must mention specifically sexual orientation. Despite opposition, The CSWE Board of Directors approved the statement by a narrow margin in June of 1997.

The conflict emerged again in 2000 when the Curriculum Policy Statement was revised into a new Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). The 1982 mandatory statement was proposed again and many religious institutions objected. Lawyers were consulted again and CSWE was informed again that the 1982 policy was illegal. CSWE returned to the 1997 standard, which was incorporated into the new EPAS. A great deal of tension remains just below the surface and the conflict has exposed a significant level of animosity among some social work educators and practitioners toward religious persons and institutions.
Recent studies have shed new light on the religious tensions in the profession. The conflict appears to be related to a clash of worldviews more than rejection of religion as a whole. One study (Ressler & Hodge, 2001) explored the experience of social workers by self-identified theological orientation. Four options (Very Conservative, Conservative, Liberal, and Very Liberal) were presented on a rating scale and respondents were asked to identify themselves. The results demonstrate that the tension increases as the theology becomes more conservative. Christian social workers who embraced a conservative theology reported 142% more discrimination than Christian social workers who embraced a liberal theology. In a follow-up qualitative study of Christians who identify their theology as conservative (Ressler & Hodge, 2001a), every respondent (N=12) indicated that they had experienced discrimination in the profession because of their faith. Respondents gave wide-raging examples of discrimination including: not being hired for jobs, being fired, not being admitted to graduate school, being publicly ridiculed, receiving failing grades, and being denied tenure.

These studies support the sociological theory of Hunter (1991) who argues that a “culture war” is taking place in American society between those with what he calls a “progressive” worldview and those with an “orthodox” worldview, rough equivalents to the concepts of liberal and conservative. According to Hunter, one pole in the culture war is the conservative perspective, which anchors its epistemology in external, definable, transcendent authority. For Christians this authority is the Bible. Biblically based justice from an orthodox worldview involves divinely established, timeless principles. Justice is measured as conformity to right living as is defined in scripture. Right living includes both macro behavior of systems and micro behavior of individuals. On the other end of the continuum is the liberal perspective which anchors its epistemology in a more humanistic tradition with truth seen as an unfolding reality informed by the ethos of the current age. Justice is defined by the most recently enlightened understanding of inalienable rights and healthy behavior of systems. Empirical evidence and logic are the primary authorities in determining what justice is and is not.

The tension in social work, using Hunter’s framework, is a conflict between progressive-minded social workers and orthodox-minded social workers (i.e. liberal and conservative) who define and work for justice based on very different understandings of what the good society looks like and how it functions. The heated debates about the issues of abortion, euthanasia, and sexual behavior are social fault lines around which the two worldviews clash. It follows that since the social work profession is dominated by progressive-minded supporters, religious devotees who embrace a more conservative theology experience significantly more prejudice and discrimination than liberally oriented religious devotees.
Why the Conflict Between Social Work and Christianity?

At one level, there seems to be a natural compatibility between Christianity and social work. Take the six core values and related ethical principles espoused in the NASW Code of Ethics, for example. Related to the value of Service is the following ethical principle, “Social workers’ primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.” For Christians, this brings to mind the statement of Jesus, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:26-28). The value of service appears to be highly esteemed in both social work and Christianity.

The second of the social work values is Social Justice with the ethical principle stated as follows, “Social workers challenge social injustice.” Some theologians, such as Donahue (1977) argue that justice is the central theme in the Bible. The admonition of Micah 6:8 seems to fit quite nicely with the NASW principle. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

The third social work value is Dignity and Worth of the Person and the fourth value is Importance of Human Relationships. The related ethical principles are that “Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person” and that “Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.” Both of these principles appear to have striking Christian parallels. The most dominant symbol in Christianity, the cross, is a powerful reminder to Christians of God’s unconditional love. The NASW commitment to social relationships seems compatible with Jesus’ admonition to love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27). Indeed, Christians are called to love one’s enemies and to do good to those who hate them (Luke 6:27).

The fifth and sixth values are Integrity and Competence with the related ethical principles being “Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner” and “Social workers practice within their areas of competence and enhance their professional expertise.” While the Bible does not speak to these issues directly, they would easily fit the Christian imperative to be holy (Ephesians 1:4) and to be above reproach (I Timothy 5:4).

In other words, at the principle level of the NASW Code of Ethics, there exists what appears to be an easy fit between social work and Christianity. At this level, social work appears to be a natural profession for Christians who want to help.
Incompatible Christian Issues

While similarities can be demonstrated between Christianity and social work at the value and ethical level, there are many areas of difference, some of which result in significant tension. Some of the tensions are rooted in Christian practices and beliefs that some people in the social work profession find problematic. This includes spiritual reductionism, unbalanced social work practice, and religious tyranny.

Spiritual Reductionism

One source of tension between social work and Christianity stems from a strain of thought I will call spiritual reductionism. Reductionism, according to Babbie (1995), is an overly strict limitation on the kinds of concepts and variables to be considered as causes in explaining a broad range of human behavior” (p. 93). Spiritual reductionism is rooted in the ancient Greek philosophy of gnosticism that embraced a dualistic view of the world. To oversimplify, the material world was seen as evil while the spiritual world was viewed as good. Gnostics believed they had secret knowledge which would lead people to return to the goodness found in the spiritual world.

In a similar way, contemporary Christian spiritual reductionism has a bifurcated view of existence. The material world, including the human body, is viewed as fallen, doomed, and temporary. The spiritual world, including the human soul, is eternal. Heaven and Hell are places where good and bad reign for eternity. The ultimate destiny of the soul depends on spiritual decisions made prior to death. Since the soul is viewed as eternal and the material world as temporary, saving a person's soul is the only action that really matters.

Spiritual reductionism can have a significant impact on how Christians conduct themselves. For example, shortly after I moved to a new house, two representatives from a local church knocked on my door. Bluntly they asked, “Are you a born-again Christian?” I was shocked by their directness and was speechless. I mumbled something, and they went away. The only issue that concerned them was my spiritual welfare. I suspect I said yes, and that seemed to be all they were concerned about.

This type of theology can also have a direct impact on attitudes about social work. For example, Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday, well-known evangelists of the early twentieth century, spoke out actively against social work arguing that it detracted from the more important work of saving souls (Loewenberg, 1988). Moberg (1977), in The Great Reversal: Evangelism and Social Concern, examines the split between “fundamentalists” and “social gospelers” that took place between 1910 and
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1930. He describes in considerable detail the rejection of social welfare concerns by fundamentalists who embraced a gnostic-like theology.

Christian spiritual reductionism can impact the practice of social work as well. Food, clothing, or shelter, for example, may be used as a means to an end. Material needs may be addressed only as a way to get to the spiritual aspect of clients which is viewed as the more important aspect. Christian spiritual reductionism can also result in a myopic assessment of problems. Placing a higher value on the spiritual dimension than on other dimensions of a person may result in the belief that if spiritual problems are resolved, other problems will dissipate. It can also reduce intervention strategies to those which address spiritual issues. Furthermore, Christian spiritual reductionism can result in a dependence on religious language when working with clients. Not only may the social worker rely heavily on religious language when assessing problems, he or she may establish client use of religious language as a measure of success. Finally, working in contexts which prohibit the use of religious language for legal or other reasons, may lead to employment frustration for spiritual reductionistic social workers because of their inability to deal with what they consider to be the most important area of life.

Unbalanced Social Work Practice

A second tension between social work and Christianity stems from an understanding of evangelism that has the potential to clash with the profession's commitment to client self-determination. I received a letter once from a Christian social worker who shared this dilemma:

It is the dying person who seems content without “religion” that truly frustrates me. I fear for his/her death based on my own spiritual beliefs that death without Jesus Christ equals Hell. Yet, I continue to practice my commitment to not force discussion about his/her spiritual apathy in honor of my professional value: self-determination. So I ask the following question: How can I profess to be a Christian and practice ethical social work? (personal correspondence, 1996)

The more a person's theology emphasizes evangelism and Hell, the more difficult it may be to remain committed to the social work value of self-determination. If one believes “death without Jesus Christ equals Hell,” the most caring act one could engage in would be to lead the person into a saving knowledge of Christ and into eternal life. The more intense the conviction, the more extreme the measures may be to “save” people. Indeed, in its most extreme form, forcing someone to confess
their sins is interpreted as a loving act even if causing pain is necessary. Sadly, some Christians have used beating, torture, drowning, and burning people to death in an effort to save their souls.

Christian social workers are sometimes linked to extremist groups who get media attention for their aggressive behaviors and message of judgement. Some of these groups base their actions on Christian theology and justify their abrasive behavior on Divine duty. The pro-life effort, Operation Rescue, noted for aggressive efforts to stop abortions, has as its byline, “Using Biblical truth to bring an end to the Holocaust of abortion.” The anti-gay activist, Fred Phelps, notorious for demonstrating against homosexuality at the funeral for Matthew Shepherd, is a Baptist preacher from Topeka, Kansas. The website for his effort is www.godhatesfags.com. Some social workers may assume that these groups represent all Christians.

Religious Tyranny

A third source of tension between social work and Christianity results from a phenomenon I will call religious tyranny. Religious tyranny, like other types of tyranny, imposes one way of doing things on others. It ignores diverse perspectives and may even be threatened by them. Whether the social policies are unintentionally insensitive to diverse groups or intentionally controlling, the result is the same; a second class of citizenship results.

One form of religious tyranny stems from a belief that the United States is or should be a Christian nation. Elsen (1954) illustrates this conviction:

Let us be honest. Our kind of democracy depends on religion. It depends on the Christian religion. Its ideas are Christian ideas. Its ideals are Christian ideals. Its goals are Christian goals. Allow Christian faith and practice to languish, and democracy as we know it begins to disintegrate. (p. 175)

Numerous American colonies in the eighteenth century (Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Vermont) had laws that were deferential to Christianity. The South Carolina constitution, for example, stated, “The Christian Protestant religion shall be deemed, and is hereby constituted and declared to be, the established religion of this State” (Gaustad, 1993, p. 171). Numerous colonies limited public offices to persons who would affirm Christianity. Pennsylvania, for example, required the following:
Each member [of the legislature], before he takes his seat, shall make and subscribe to the following declaration, viz: ‘I do believe in one God, the creator and governor of the universe, the reverter to the good and punisher of the wicked. And I do acknowledge the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by Divine inspiration’ (Gaustad, 1993, p. 170).

State-sponsored religion was declared illegal for the entire nation in 1868 when the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted. The Fourteenth Amendment required that states honor the Constitutional bill of rights including freedom of religion in the First Amendment which states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (Gaustad, 1993, p. 44).

Neither the First Amendment nor the Fourteenth Amendment, however, have eliminated the belief for some that Christianity should be the preferred religion and that laws and legislators need to be consistent with it. The most visible advocate in recent years is Pat Robertson, the president of the Christian Broadcast Network, who ran for president in 1992. He states in a recent book, “There is absolutely no way that government can operate successfully unless led by godly men and women operating under the laws of the God of Jacob” (Robertson, 1991, p. 227).

This issue is, for some Christian social workers, one of the most troubling dilemmas. The NASW Code of Ethics calls on social workers to be dually committed to clients and to the general welfare of society (e.g. NASW Code of Ethics, 1.01, 6.01). Consequently, if one believes that Christianity is the one true religion and that biblically supported lifestyles are necessary to achieve a healthy society, there is a sense of obligation to advocate for Christian ways of doing things. At the same time, the Code of Ethics calls for respect for diversity. These two standards result in a perplexing ethical dilemma for some.

It needs to be pointed out that this is not just a Christian dilemma. All social workers have a vision of what constitutes the general welfare of society. Each social worker must wrestle with the tension between the patterns which are consistent with this vision and ideas or practices that are at odds with it. This tension was illustrated most clearly at a seminar focused on religious fundamentalist families. A social worker convinced of the rightness of egalitarian family structure indicated that she would never be able to work with a family that had a hierarchical structure. Her vision of what constitutes a healthy family system was at odds with a model that others embrace. Her dilemma was fundamentally the same as that faced by many Christians.
Oppressive Aspects of Social Work

There is, however, another side to the social work and Christianity tension that is less frequently acknowledged in the profession. The tension between social work and Christianity can also stem from social work thought and action that is religiously oppressive and lacks commitment to religious diversity. Ironically, some social workers, in their attempt to pursue social justice for certain groups, condone prejudice and discrimination against certain religious groups with whom they disagree. Just as there are problematic areas that stem from Christian theology and practice, there are problematic ideologies and practices by some social workers in the profession. This includes social work secularism, religi-phobia, and social work tyranny.

Social Work Secularism

Secularism is a way of thinking that denies or ignores the spiritual dimension of life and discredits the value and contribution of religion. While there is widespread agreement that social work has a religious foundation (Niebuhr, 1932; Marty, 1980; Goldstein, 1987; Loewenberg, 1988; Midgley, 1989; Keith-Lucas, 1989), it is also clear that social work was significantly influenced by the progressive mindset of the late nineteenth century which promoted a positivist worldview and devalued spirituality and religion. Empirical evidence and logic, the twin pillars of science, were embraced in the social sciences as superior ways of knowing.

Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud, key social scientists upon which social work theory relied during much of the twentieth century, all viewed religion with suspicion and doubt. Religion for Marx was oppressive, for Durkheim was a social construction, and for Freud a neurotic impulse. With respect to social work, friendly visiting was replaced with scientific charity, while religiously motivated compassion and caring gave way to social diagnosis.

Evidence for the secular influence in social work is provided by Cnaan and Wineburg (1997). In reviewing papers given at the CSWE Annual Program Meeting, they found that only 30 out of 1500 (2%) papers given at the CSWE Annual Program Meeting from 1990–1994 dealt with religion and service delivery, with only 2 papers addressing “contemporary concerns of religiously-based social services” (p. 7). Their study found that, with few exceptions, the 20 most popular texts “made no mention of any congregational or sectarian aspect of social work with the exception of the obligatory Charity Organization Societies” (p. 8). Furthermore, their study found that only 10 of 50 social welfare
syllabi reviewed mentioned religiously-affiliated social service provision. Positive sentiments from social work pioneers about spirituality and religion have been largely expunged from historical accounts of social work. Seldom acknowledged, for example, is Jane Addams’ view of the critical role of Christianity in the settlement house movement. Referring to Christian humanitarianism, she states, “Certain it is that spiritual force is found in the Settlement Movement, and it is also true that this force must be evoked and must be called into play before the success of any Settlement is assured” (Addams 1910: p.124, as quoted in Garland, 1994, p.81).

Likewise, little has been said about the positive attitude the renowned Mary Richmond had about the role of the church. She states:

> After all has been said in objection to past and present methods of church charity, we must realize that, if the poor are to be effectively helped by charity, the inspiration must come from the church. The church has always been and will continue to be the chief source of charitable energy; and I believe that, to an increasing degree, the church will be the leader in charitable experiment and in the extension of the scope of charitable endeavor…The church has always been the pioneer in such work. (Richmond, 1899, p. 174-175)

Cnaan and Wineburg (1997) conclude that a “bias of omission” related to religiously-based social service provision exists in social work.

A second aspect of social work secularism is related to the broader church/state legal issue. While there has been no Supreme Court decision that has directly addressed the relationship of religion and social work, the profession has been influenced by the secular philosophy advanced by the Supreme Court in other arenas, the most significant of which have taken place in education. The dominant church/state philosophy endorsed by the Supreme Court in the twentieth century was first articulated by Justice Black in 1947 when he wrote, “The First Amendment has erected a wall between church and state. That wall must be high and impregnable” (Eastland, 1993, p. 67). This philosophy has resulted in Supreme Court decisions that have consistently ruled against religion in the public arena. Carter (1993), in a recent bestseller about politics and religion, concludes that the law has trivialized religion and needs to move towards a more accommodating stance.

Since the growth of the social work profession has been closely correlated with the growth of the welfare state, the “high and impregnable wall” philosophy suggested by Justice Black has had a significant impact on how religion was dealt with by social workers. Namely, religion in publicly funded agencies has been treated as a phenomenon outside
the purview of social work. In order to observe the “high wall” separation of church and state, religious issues, if acknowledged at all, were seen as best dealt with by religious representatives. While no study has been completed to document the impact of the “high wall” philosophy on social work, there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence from social workers in public agencies who report being strictly forbidden to address religious or spiritual issues, to use religious language, or to pray with clients even if it was in the client’s best interest and desired by clients. While dealing with religious issues is surely a complicated professional matter, the principle strategy followed by the profession was to refuse to deal with them.

The secularization of social work practice has gone beyond social workers working in publicly funded agencies, however. Religion-free social work practice has been presented as the only responsible professional position. There have been individuals and organizations over the years that have explored and supported an accommodating philosophy of religion, but with little public acknowledgment and presented only in obscure literature. Most notable among those addressing the relationship of Christianity and social work is the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW), which has been in existence since 1950 and has published the journal Social Work and Christianity since 1974. As for individual contributions, Alan Keith-Lucas was by far the most productive writer on the integration of faith and social work (Ressler, 1992). In general, however, little attention has been given to the relationship of religion and social work even in private agencies not constrained by the First Amendment.

Religi-phobia and Religious Discrimination

Religious prejudice and discrimination are reported with surprising frequency by religiously active social workers. While no study has been completed to evaluate the full extent of the problem, one small study (Ressler, 1997) found that 12 of 18 persons (67%) who placed themselves in the Spiritual and Religious category had experienced prejudice or discrimination within the profession. For example, the respondents reported the following:

They act like you are a fanatic if your religion permeates your life… In a board meeting, I heard someone talking about “those born-again” folks in a derogatory manner. There have been times that born-again [persons] are accused of extreme behaviors and portrayed as lunatics, when in fact, the person may have had
difficulty without born-again affiliation. My religious values, especially my personal interpretation of scripture concerning homosexuality, resulted in my being told by a supervisor that I shouldn’t be a therapist because I couldn’t be objective enough to work with gay and lesbian clients. A vivid memory occurred as an undergraduate when a professor jumped on me in the classroom for including Scripture in a paper. A peer was ridiculed in the classroom for her faith by another instructor. Mostly subtle beliefs that Christian values are somehow different than those of others and should never be expressed.

Religious discrimination has made inroads into some social work institutions, which has resulted in screening out of students with certain religious belief systems. The social work faculty at St. Cloud State University, for instance, in 1992, developed a position paper entitled, “The S.C.S.U Social Work Department’s Position on Attitudes Towards Gay and Lesbian People” (St. Cloud State University Department of Social Work, 1992). Referring to themselves as gatekeepers for the profession, the position statement attempted to outline what was expected of students related to gay and lesbian people. The initial paper stated,

The only legitimate position of the social work profession is to abhor the oppression that is perpetuated in gay and lesbian people and to act personally and professionally to end the degradation in its many forms… Many of our students come from religious backgrounds that do not accept homosexuality…It is not okay in this case to “love the sinner and hate the sin”…Students who have predetermined negative attitudes towards gay and lesbian people, and who are not open to exploring these values, will not find this program very comfortable and should probably look elsewhere for a major (p. 2).

The social work program also required that student applicants participate in an admission interview that “made a point of examining students’ attitudes towards homosexuality” (Hibbard, 1994, p. 1). With the support of the Christian Legal Society, the American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, the Center for Individual Rights, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union, the statement and interview was challenged by some students. As a result, the statement was revised and reference to a student’s religion was dropped. The interview has been replaced with an “admissions meeting in which students ‘formally introduce’ themselves to the department” (p. 1).
Social Work Tyranny

Hidden in the question about religious values being in conflict with social work values is an issue which the social work profession needs to address. Some social workers advocate a form of professional tyranny with the notion that there is one correct social work worldview and one set of values in social work that all must agree with. Social workers, they believe, who do not accept this worldview and agree with the popular application of social work values should be censured or even banished from the profession.

This argument was made by the University of Buffalo with respect to the CSWE non-discrimination statement on sexual orientation described earlier. The faculty at the University of Buffalo signed a petition that stated,

We, the faculty at the University of Buffalo, are disappointed and outraged at CSWE's proposal to exempt social work programs at religious institutions from nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual and political orientation... If these programs want to receive CSWE accreditation, they must be held to nondiscrimination policies (State University of New York at Buffalo, School of Social Work, 1996).

Linda Jones, in her argument against allowing religious institutions to be exempt from the sexual orientation non-discrimination standard, suggested that programs that did not comply should, among other things, be "explicitly identified by CSWE in its listing of accredited programs" and "should be monitored with particular diligence and asked to demonstrate their efforts in these areas at an additional time midpoint between accreditation site visits" (Parr & Jones, 1996, p. 310). Ironically, her recommendation that there be public identification of those who are different and that there be close monitoring of their behavior is a form of discrimination and oppression, the very behaviors they claim to be opposing. The tone in the NASW lesbian and gay issues policy is similarly intolerant. The policy statement reads,

NASW affirms its commitment to work toward full social and legal acceptance and recognition of lesbian and gay people. To this end, NASW shall support legislation, regulations, policies, judicial review, political action changes in social work policy statements, the NASW Code of Ethics, and any other means necessary to establish and protect the equal rights of all people without regard to sexual orientation (NASW, 1994, p. 163).
There is no recognition of diversity among groups and no room for variation. The position is dictatorial.

Where to From Here

The current tension between social work and Christianity, in other words, has both a Christian aspect and a social work aspect. Reducing the tension involves adjustments from both the Christian community and the social work community.

Christian Adjustments

First, Christians need to embrace a wholistic Christian understanding of creation that acknowledges the spiritual dimension of life but with a balanced view of the world, including the psychological, social, biological, economic, political, and environmental aspects. Christians who have a wholistic theology will likely find much in common with the person in environment framework which undergirds social work.

Second, it is important for Christian social workers to develop a theology of evangelism that does not abandon self-determination. Most Christian theologies view self-determination as a basic human right and one that God has afforded to each of us. If, as most Christians believe, God provided humans with the ability and responsibility to choose, including the freedom to make bad decisions, surely Christian social workers need to allow clients to make their own choices. Self-determination is a sound Christian principle even for evangelicals, as well as a central social work value.

The self-determination dilemma may also involve a mistaken assumption about what self-determination in social work means. Self-determination does not mean that a social worker does not confront and cause discomfort when working with clients. Self-determination means that first, you do what you do with the awareness and consent of the client, and second, that you respect the right of clients to make their own decisions.

Third, Christian social workers will need to develop a confident understanding of their own role and the contribution of Christianity in society while remaining committed to diversity, even if laws and individual behavior do not fully support a Christian sense of morality. This begins with a Christian humility that acknowledges that we “see through a glass darkly” and that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” It further acknowledges that God permits humans to live in ways that violate His intended plans. Finally, the temptation to impose Chris-
Christian values can be reduced by interpreting the Christian role as one of salt and light rather than conquerors.

Having said this, Christians need to be afforded the right of others to participate in public conversation about what constitutes the general welfare and to be involved in the political process.

**Social Work Adjustments**

There are adjustments that the social work profession can make as well to reduce the tension. This involves, first of all, adopting positions on social issues that are inclusive rather than exclusive. Interestingly, on the abortion and euthanasia issues, the social work profession has made a conscious effort to respect and accommodate diverse values. For example, on the abortion issue the 1996 NASW position statement relates that,

> In acknowledging and affirming social work's commitment to respecting diverse value systems in a pluralistic society, it is recognized that the issue of abortion is controversial because it reflects the different value systems of different groups. If the social worker chooses not to participate in abortion counseling, it is his or her responsibility to provide appropriate referral services to ensure that this option is available to clients (NASW, 1994, p. 3).

For the individual, diversity is acknowledged and honored. With respect to social policy, the position is moderate.

> In states where abortion services are not available as one option, those members of NASW who so desire may work toward legalization, planning, funding, and implementation of such services (p. 3).

With respect to the euthanasia position, the NASW policy states,

> In acknowledging and affirming social work's commitment to respecting diverse value systems in a pluralistic society, end of life issues are recognized as controversial because they reflect the varied value systems of different groups. Social workers should be free to participate or not participate in discussion about assisted-suicide or other discussion concerning end of life decisions depending on their own beliefs, attitudes, and value systems (p. 59).

Social worker diversity is respected individually. With respect to social policy, the position is conservative.
It is inappropriate for social workers to deliver, supply, or personally participate in commission of an act of assisted suicide when acting in a professional role (p. 60).

Furthermore, if the profession is going to respect religious beliefs, then it will have to allow for diversity among institutions. This is the position that the Commission on Higher Education has taken in a publication that states,

The Commission respects and honors the diversity of institutions it accredits and recognizes institutional limits created by law, government, or religious tenets. It does not find the diversity of its member institutions incompatible with the principles of equity and diversity within those institutions (Commission on Higher Education, April 1996, p. 1).

**Toward a Common Agenda**

The fact that there are differences between Christianity and social work should not be a surprise to either Christians or social workers. For Christians, the very nature of the created world assumes differences between people and groups by extension. The belief in sin and redemption, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of this world presumes differences between the Christian and non-Christian. Likewise, the social work profession supports the notion of differences through its concept of diversity. Differences are to be expected.

Furthermore, neither Christians nor social workers should be surprised that some differences result in tension. Jesus warned His disciples many times of the likelihood of conflict (e.g. John 15:18-19). Likewise, the NASW Code of Ethics acknowledges the reality of tension between social workers with different points of view. The Purpose of the NASW Code of Ethics includes this statement, “Reasonable differences of opinion can and do exist among social workers with respect to the ways in which values, ethical principles, and ethical standards should be rank ordered when they conflict.”

The reality of tension does not need to lead to destructive interaction, however. Christians are called to live at peace with everyone as much as is possible (Romans 12:18) and to pray for leaders so that “we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (I Timothy 2:1-2). The social work profession, for its part, has a section in the NASW Code of Ethics that requires responsible handling of conflict between colleagues (2.03, 2.04).
Tensions exist in part because the differences reflect differing values. Tensions also reflect the fact that not all things are of equal worth, and policies and actions make a difference in the lives of people in society. Tensions exist over differences because things matter. The goal, therefore, is not to eliminate all differences, since this is impossible. The goal is not even to eliminate all tension, since this, too, is not possible. The goal is to reduce the tension as much as possible and to avoid oppressive behavior while making room for as much freedom as possible.

Reducing tension requires that differing parties respect each other and engage in dialogue about the differences we see and the tensions we feel. It is particularly critical to listen to those who see injustice and feel oppressed. Listening, it needs to be pointed out, does not mean one agrees; nor does it necessarily resolve the tensions. It does, however, provide information, which may lead to wiser, healthier, and more empathic decisions.

Christians must insist on their right to live according to their faith, but they must extend the same right to others. The goal is to find solutions that make room for as many opinions as possible. This can only happen when people with differences learn to work together to find solutions. Resolving conflict in a way that brings people together is a great challenge of life. How can we be one and yet many? How can we find unity in our diversity? These are not simple questions, and there are no simple answers. It seems that social workers and Christians ought to be among those best able to model constructive conflict management. Trying to accomplish this will surely get us closer to living in peace.

Notes

1 Since philosophically, all people are viewed as spiritual much like they are sociological and psychological, the term disspirited is used rather than non-spiritual. The fact that a person has no meaning in life or feels unconnected does not mean they are non-spiritual. It rather indicates a negative spirituality.

2 There is a debate among Constitutional scholars as to whether the First Amendment prohibits favoring religion in general or one particular state-authorized religion. The majority on the Supreme Courts since 1947 have favored the religion in general point of view. There has been a minority point of view that argues the intent of the First Amendment was to prohibit one state-authorized religion.

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