Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a growing interest in the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice in many countries, including places where for much of the twentieth century, social work sought to distance itself from its religious roots. Indeed, all 40 chapters in this volume were authored or co-authored by social workers, enabling the expression of explicitly social work perspectives on religion and spirituality. This includes chapters contributed by authors whose professional legacy included having made a significant contribution to this growing recognition of the legitimate place that religion and spirituality have in professional social work, including Alean Al-Krenawi, Sara Ashencaen Crabtree, Ed Canda, Philip Gilligan, David Hodge and Michael Sheridan. However, readers with a keen knowledge of this field may also have observed some significant omissions from the author list, which reflects that several of those who have pioneered this work over the last two decades are reaching the age of retirement from professional work and were, for various reasons, unable to be part of this project. Nevertheless, the impact of their work is evident in both explicit discussions of the work of John Coates by Mishka Lysack, and also by Fred Besthorn and Jon Hudson, and also in the lists of references of many chapters, where readers will find evidence of the influence of scholars such as John Graham and Margaret Holloway.

There is always the possibility that once a group of prominent scholars who have been passionate about a field of research move on, that work in this field falls away. This volume includes several contributions from emerging social work researchers, many of whom have only recently completed doctoral studies, and whose contributions are expanding the dimensions of our understandings as to the relationship between social work and religion and spirituality. Contributions by early career researchers include chapters by Linda Benavides, Heather Boynton, Patricia Carlisle, Malabika Das, John Fox, James Lucas and Claudia Psaila. It should be noted there were other early career researchers who indicated a desire to be involved in this international project but were told by their employers that any publishing efforts should only be in journals, even if these were aimed at a national, rather than international, readership. Thankfully, this only applied to a few potential contributors, but contributes to the difficulty in creating international dialogue among social workers researching religion and spirituality.
Despite there now being a much wider recognition that religion and spirituality can make a very positive contribution to wellbeing for individuals and communities, the professional imagination as to what this might involve has frequently been confined by the known worlds of those social workers engaged in this quest to legitimise the place of religion and spirituality within the profession. Hence, much of the professional literature on religion, spirituality and social work has focussed on particular situations, stages of life or fields of practice:

- end of life care and bereavement
- treatment for substance misuse
- issues in migration, including issues for refugee and asylum seekers
- religion as problematic particularly in respect of mental health, providing care to children and hindering health promotion efforts associated with sexuality and sexual behaviours
- attitudes of religious social workers/social work students, which are conservative, judgmental or oppressive.

To a large extent, these emphases reflect the concerns of social workers in North America and the United Kingdom, whose voices dominate the international social work literature more generally (McDonald et al. 2003) and where, perhaps unsurprisingly, much of the readily available writing on religion, spirituality and social work to date has originated. While we have to thank authors in these countries for what many consider some of the seminal books and articles in this field, the extent to which their writings apply to ethnic and religious minorities in their own countries has been questioned (Regan et al. 2013).

Once implicit expectations of the homogeneity of social work practice between countries (Healy 2007) are increasingly acknowledged as unrealistic (Hugman et al. 2010). Furthermore, in many countries, social workers now accept that uncritical adoption of ideas about social work from North America and the United Kingdom can readily result in the privileging of Western values concerning social work (Mwansa 2011; Singh et al. 2011), even though this may be unintentional. This is most apparent when these values clash with those of another society in which the dominant religious culture is not Christianity (Holtzhausen 2011).

In seeking to provide an overview of the literature on religion, spirituality and social work, this volume seeks to challenge and extend the dominant paradigms by including authors from a broader range of countries rather than ‘replicating a familiar process of colonial and post-colonial transfer of policy knowledge, processes, and practices’ (McDonald et al. 2003: 193). Notwithstanding the need for social workers to take account of culturally-specific factors that impact on practice in their local context (Gray and Fook 2004), by offering an examination and discussion of new perspectives, it is envisaged that this volume will stimulate and provoke the social work community to further develop its thinking and practice regarding religion and spirituality. However, for this hope to be realised, readers may need to engage with ideas that may be unfamiliar, and even uncomfortable:

To accept and incorporate other worldviews into one’s frame of reference is difficult. It is necessary to move beyond “sensitivity” to the cultural views of others. This relates to an introductory comment concerning my own efforts to grapple with the question of the extent to which social work values can be held to be universal. A central challenge is in seeking to identify those aspects of social work that are universal and those which can be accepted as indigenous, including indigenous to the Western world. There may be defining characteristics of social work that hold true in most contexts and there may be defining features of social work that only hold true in a specific context. For example, social work, universally, has concern for those in society who are marginalized, but the ways in which...
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society and social work respond to need varies according to contextual factors including
time, history, place and stage of development.

(Brydon 2012: 160–1).

Nevertheless, social workers often readily assume that their local experiences of how social work
is practiced are universal (Brydon 2012; McCallum 2001). Consequently, despite not being in
the original aims for this volume, inclusion of contributions from diverse countries, probably
inevitably, results in the question emerging as to what is social work per se, and not just in rela-
tion to religion and spirituality. The various perspectives reflect ‘a growing lack of agreement
around the world about what social work is’ (Gray and Fook 2004: 627). For example, readers
may observe differences as to the involvement of social workers in different types of work,
including different roles and involvements of social workers (Norman and Hintze 2005) and
which issues or fields of practice are considered the domain of professional social work (Weber
and Bugarszki 2007). The varying role of the state versus other providers in welfare provision
(Liedgren 2015) is also apparent. Moreover, although the details may vary between countries, a
not uncommon situation is that there are fields of social work practice that are typically regarded
as ‘secular’ and others where a place for religion is considered legitimate.

Despite English being the most widely used language in the academic community (Obst
and Kuder 2009) and frequently, the language in which non-Anglophones who speak different
languages communicate with each other (Harrison 2006), language tends to be ‘the forgotten
dimension’ (Ruzzene 1998: 17) in international social work projects. For example, Edward
Canda, Jungrim Moon and Kyung Mee Kim note spirituality is a foreign concept and not well
understood in Korea.

Many of the key concepts in social work have been framed in English, but adoption in other
languages has not always been straightforward (Harrison 2006). It is quite plausible that an even
broader range of perspectives could have been presented had there been the resources available
to translate contributions from authors who were not able to write in English. Among social
workers, there are also some English words that have acquired meanings or connotations that
are country-specific (Gray and Fook 2004; Heron and Pilkington 2009). Moreover, there are
differences between countries as to what is deemed acceptable or appropriate terminology by
social workers (Norman and Hintze 2005; Simpson 2009), and although standardised terms
could have been adopted throughout this volume, this becomes another form of colonisa-
tion, which projects such as this are striving to overcome. Moreover, local differences are more
apparent when indigenised vocabularies are given voice. This is particularly relevant when it
comes to definitions of religion and spirituality.

As Fran Gale and Michael Dudley note, how social workers construct religion and spiritual-
ity is a significant factor as to whether religion and spirituality are able to be incorporated into
emancipatory forms of social work. While editors can propose definitions that all authors are
required to comply with, one of the drawbacks of this approach is that it can lead readers to
assume a false homogeneity of understanding about these concepts, by prioritising a viewpoint
from a particular country (e.g. Miller 2012). But while more messy for the reader who must
engage with multiple understandings, this approach is arguably more meaningful in opening up
an international dialogue (Cobb et al. 2012).

Regional perspectives

In their chapter, Arielle Dylan and Bartholemew Smallboy refer to a comment by Edward Said
(1993: 7) in which he reflected that ‘none of us is outside or beyond geography’. Collectively,
the four chapters in Part II of this volume demonstrate some very different regional contexts in which social workers are grappling with issues of religion and spirituality. The first of these chapters provides a perspective on the complicated relationship between social work, religion and spirituality in Australia, which is the context in which the proposal for this volume was conceived and where much of the work to bring this volume to completion was undertaken. Although a particularly Australian form of social work has developed in response to contextual factors, remnants of the ideologies and models of welfare imported by the early British colonists linger:

most contemporary accounts of welfare tend to privilege the role of the nation state in shaping welfare systems rather than pointing to the role of colonial expansion and other transnational influences. … processes of colonization and decolonization are still prominent in the lives of many people around the world.

(Harrison and Melville 2010: 5)

In Australia, religion was intimately associated with the establishment and maintenance of social and political elites for much of the first two centuries of European colonisation. However, whereas Protestantism was associated with the ruling classes in Australia, its influence in Korea grew as nationalist movements opposed the occupation by Japan and the influx of Christian missionaries after the Korean War. Although religion can be linked with the return to peaceful society after conflict, the division of society and decades of civil unrest and violence in Northern Ireland was marked by religious identification, as Patricia Carlisle discusses in Chapter 4. Then in the final chapter of Part II, Claudia Psaila considers the impact on religious experience on Malta, and how the role of the Roman Catholic Church has seemingly diminished since Malta’s accession into the European Union.

As each of the authors in Part II demonstrate, the local religious culture has implications for social work practice, and comparisons between Australia and Korea demonstrate this. In both Australia and Korea, a majority of individuals acknowledge an affinity with one of a range of religious groups, with no one form of religious belief and expression dominating, and there also being a substantial minority of the population who do not associate with any formal religion, some of whom may nevertheless be partial to forms of spirituality. Furthermore, in both countries, religious organisations play a substantial role in the provision of social welfare services in the broader community and not just to their own members. Reflecting the religious characteristics of the population, in Korea, both Buddhist and Christian welfare organisations are actively involved in welfare provision, whereas in Australia, most welfare provision associated with organised religion has a Christian auspice. Scholarship around spirituality and social work is also developing in both Australia and Korea, but whereas in Korea this tends to be associated with a religion and there are a number of schools of social work that are teaching social work aligned with particular religious viewpoints, Australian social work scholars are almost all located in secular institutions and many are interested in spirituality that transcends or is outside formal religions. Interestingly, the Australian Code of Ethics is much more explicit in its inclusion of religion and spirituality than its Korean counterpart.

Despite religious and spiritual diversity in both Australia and Korea, over the last two decades there has been a growing acceptance as to the legitimacy of religion and spirituality in social work practice. In contrast to these two countries, in which Christianity has become a dominant force only in the last two centuries, Malta and Northern Ireland are both places where Christianity became entrenched early in the Common Era, and both countries in which there is remarkably little social work literature about religion and spirituality. Marginalisation of mat-
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ters religious or spiritual is common practice in social work in both of these countries, though for very different reasons. In Malta, as was previously the case in Australia, separation from its religious and spiritual roots has been part of the quest for the recognition of social work as a profession. Consequently, religion and spirituality are considered to be private, and religious and spiritual needs as not relevant to social work practice. By way of contrast, social workers in Northern Ireland may well recognise the impact of religion on wellbeing, but the close association between conflict and religion in that country has resulted in social workers considering issues of religion and spirituality too sensitive to raise with service users.

Many other chapters also provide glimpses as to why local concerns and the role of religion and spirituality in the culture must be taken into account by social workers. These include Alean Al-Krenawi’s consideration of social work among Palestinians, Eva Jeppsson Grassman’s discussions of the implications for social worker practice of the Church of Sweden ceasing to be a state church as well as chapters from a number of authors from Hong Kong. Notwithstanding the specific local factors discussed in these chapters, many raise questions that have much wider relevance, such as how social workers respond to and work with religious and spiritual diversity, what is the role of religious organisations in providing social work services, and perhaps most importantly, what are the implications of social workers ignoring religion and spirituality when they work with individuals, families and communities.

Religious and spiritual traditions

In line with seeking to avoid a north Atlantic Anglophone imperialism, it has been important to include contributions from a wide range of religious and spiritual traditions. Hence, this volume includes contributions concerning a range of religious traditions including various forms of Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, as well as from a range of spiritual perspectives not aligned with formal religions. Several of these traditions are discussed by multiple authors from very different contexts and perspectives. Having practice knowledge about a particular religious or spiritual tradition is not the same as understanding how associated beliefs and/or practices manifest themselves in the lives of particular individuals (Clark 2006). For instance, the lived experiences of Judaism for the Haredi women who live in closed communities in Israel, about whom Nehami Baum writes, are very different from the Jewish holocaust survivors in Melbourne whom John Fox notes are actively seeking to engage people of other religions or none, in their community education programmes. These varying perspectives, which highlight the complexities, and even contradictions, that occur among the people of a religion, challenge the simplistic stereotypes associated with particular religions (Anderson-Nathe et al. 2013).

Part III begins with three chapters concerning very ancient spiritual and religious traditions. Arielle Dylan and Barholomew Smallboy introduce the reader to the spirituality of indigenous peoples in Canada and demonstrate the continuing consequences of the disrespect of the early European settlers for Aboriginal Canadians and their spirituality. That this indigenous spirituality has survived despite colonisation is also an important message in Raisuyah Bhagwan’s chapter on African spirituality. This desire to maintain long-held traditions and lifestyles, despite immense outside pressures to modernise, is also an issue for the Haredi women in Israel, who are the focus of Nehami Baum’s chapter.

The next two chapters focus on two Asian religions, both of which date back approximately 500 years BCE. Whereas the chapters by Dylan and Smallboy, and Bhagwan, note the negative impacts on indigenous spiritual traditions as a result of Western colonisation, Caroline Humphrey reminds us that Buddhism, which originated in Asia, has exported itself back to
many Western nations. However, as Humphrey notes, many more Westerners adopt some Buddhist practices than becoming Buddhists *per se*. Like Buddhism, Daoism, which originated in a similar period in China, also places a strong emphasis on body, mind and spirit and the need to achieve a balancing of these dimensions. Yet as Celia Chan and colleagues point out, as with some other religious and spiritual traditions, taking seriously the tenets of Daoism may require social workers to reconsider what is appropriate professional practice.

Although it is estimated that more than half the world’s population are Christian (31.5 per cent) or Muslim (23.2 per cent) (Pew Research Center 2012), these religions represent the newest of the traditions in Part III. Several chapters throughout this volume provide just a glimpse of the many expressions of Christianity influenced by both socio-religious cultures and the differing spiritualities. Laura Béres provides an introduction to Celtic spirituality, which emerged as the result of the indigenisation of Christianity in Ireland, where paganism was widespread in the early medieval period. While Celtic Christianity remains distinctive to this day, interest in Celtic spirituality transcends the traditional bounds of religion, with many aspects also appealing to those with more affinity to new age thinking.

The early period of Christianity also saw the emergence of Gnosticism. As Russell Whiting notes, there is no consensus as to whether Gnosticism should be regarded as a form of Christianity, Christian heresy or a separate religion. For social workers, such debates may well be superfluous as service users are unlikely to identify themselves as Gnostics, and the term itself maybe unfamiliar. Nevertheless, as Whiting notes, aspects of Gnostic thinking are readily found today. In particular he suggests that an understanding of Gnosticism can assist practitioners to understand conditions, such as anorexia nervosa, in which the relationship between mind and body have become disordered.

Part III concludes with two chapters concerning Islam. Sara Ashencaen Crabtree considers the experience of being Muslim in Britain, where not only is Islam a minority religion but frequently problematised, producing stereotypes that are unhelpful and fail to recognise the diversity of Muslims in Britain. By way of contrast, Alean Al-Krenawi explores the experiences of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, most of whom are Muslim. Despite being the majority population in these regions, Palestinians experience the negative impact of Israeli (i.e. Jewish) occupation on a daily basis.

As social workers and the organisations in which they work may need to be able to work with individuals, families and communities from a broad range of religious and spiritual traditions, the chapters from David Hodge and Adam Dinham in the section about social work practice address the practicalities of engaging with religious and spiritual diversity in a meaningful way. However, as Arielle Dylan and Bartholemew Smallboy point out, reducing peoples to their religion or spirituality and ignoring other fundamental needs is problematic and must be avoided.

**Faith-based service provision**

Prior to the twentieth century, religious groups were the main providers of welfare services in many countries. Despite social work services now being closely, if not totally, aligned with state provided services in many countries (Crisp 2013), the emergence of welfare state models may have altered the roles and services provided by religious welfare organisations but did not completely supplant their work (Crisp 2014). Indeed, a number of chapters in Sections 2 and 3 discuss the provision of charitable or welfare services as one of the characteristics that many religious traditions share, and faith-based service provision is the focus of Part IV. Today, the scope of services provided by churches and other faith-based agencies is likely to vary depending on the model of welfare state (Bäckström and Davie 2010), and expectations as to what services
are considered appropriate for such agencies to provide vary considerably between countries (Crisp 2013).

Linda Plitt Donaldson provides an introduction to Catholic Social Teaching, which has been regarded as ‘the most systematic and thorough attempt by a religious faith to articulate its position on social policy’ (Brenden 2007: 477), and has been influential in informing understandings of social responsibility and welfare provision in other Christian traditions (Campbell 2012). Yet, notwithstanding the extent of its influence, the articulation of Catholic Social Teaching has not in itself ensured Catholic welfare organisations have provided appropriate services, as Mark Smith reflects in his chapter about residential childcare services provided by Catholic orders in Britain. Yet, despite the fact that some organisations provided care that is now considered scandalous, Smith reminds the reader that much good also came from services provided by the Catholic orders, and often the alternative had been no service at all.

Like the Roman Catholic Church, The Salvation Army is also present as both a religious organisation and service provider in many countries across the globe. As Michael Wolf-Branigin and Katie Hirtz Bingaman note, The Salvation Army has also been accused of scandalous behaviour in recent times, particularly in respect of its stance towards gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual individuals in the United States. In terms of drug and alcohol treatment, Salvation Army services typically take an abstinence approach, adopting principles consistent with groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. This approach considers addiction to be a disease for which the only way to recovery is to abstain completely. However, this is not the only way in which faith-based organisations respond to the needs of service users who engage in substance misuse. For example, in Australia, the first medically supervised injecting room was set up under the auspice of another Christian church (Crisp 2014).

A very different philosophy is outlined by Samta Pandya, who provides an overview concerning the role of social service delivery in guru-led movements, which have their roots in Hindu traditions. As she points out, much of this service provision is financially dependent on the philanthropy of adherents and supporters in contrast to some other countries where service delivery organisations, despite their religious auspice, receive much of their funding from the state (Crisp 2014).

Issues relating to funding are noted by several authors in respect to faith-based organisations. Historically, both Catholic orders and The Salvation Army were strongly reliant on their members who had dedicated themselves to a life of service and a life of poverty. In turn, low costs have resulted in some state instrumentalities recognising that it is cheaper to contract with faith-based organisations than provide services themselves. While such contracts may be fair to all parties, there are also numerous examples of states failing to adequately resource faith-based organisations and having no qualms about exploiting their goodwill (Crisp 2014).

In addition to direct service provision, faith-based organisations have played an active role in the development of professional social work in some countries, as noted in both my chapter about Australia and Linda Plitt Donaldson’s contribution to this volume. John Fox in his chapter about the work of the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne gives an example of how an organisation that provides critical services to members of the local Jewish community also makes an important contribution to educating the wider community about the suffering that continues to this day as a result of the Jewish Holocaust during World War II.

The notion of change and needing to adapt to new circumstances emerges in several of the chapters in Part IV. The Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre recognises that in the near future, the last of the Holocaust survivors will no longer be alive and able to provide personal testimony about their experiences. Although change can present dilemmas, it can also open up new opportunities, as Eva Jeppsson Grassman explores in her consideration of
the options for the Church of Sweden since ceasing to be a state church. These include bidding for service provision contracts, which were not open to the Church of Sweden prior to disestablishment. This in turn raises questions that are being asked in faith-based organisations in many countries, as to how to balance religious identity with expectations that emerge with state funding.

Religion and spirituality across the lifespan

It would be fair to say that for some social workers, the only time when religion and/or spirituality have a legitimate place is when death is approaching or has recently occurred. In their contributions, Martha Wiebe and Irene Renzenbrink certainly emphasise the importance of social workers taking account of spiritual needs in the face of death. However, as the contributions in this volume attest, religion and spirituality can be of critical importance at any life stage, and social workers need to recognise this.

Heather Boynton and Jo-Ann Vis have contributed the opening chapter in Part V, in which they consider the need for spiritual requirements to be recognised by social workers at all stages of life, recognising that these may manifest themselves very differently as one moves from childhood to old age. This is particularly important in the aftermath of traumatic events, when the capacity to engage with and express one’s spirituality may be critical in the process of moving on. As Linda Benavides reflects in the subsequent chapter, encouraging spiritual development among children and adolescents can act as a protective factor, which facilitates resilience. Despite religious teachings that promote the prevention of child abuse by emphasising the duties of both parents and the community in caring for children (Bunge 2014; Dorff 2014), unfortunately, as Philip Gilligan writes, such potential has too often been destroyed by the sexual abuse of children in religious settings.

When asked what they meant by ‘spirituality’, over half the residents of the English town of Kendal provided answers associated with relationships (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Indeed, marrying, or living in a marriage-like relationship, and having children together, are the expectations of the majority of the world’s population on becoming an adult (Crisp 2010). Yet, as Mark Henrickson reminds us, this includes many people who do not identify as heterosexual, who often find themselves having to navigate their relationships in the face of vehement religious disapproval. Yao Hong and Celia Chan also explore the pressure to conform to societal expectations and the spiritual dilemmas this raises in their chapter about the experiences of couples seeking treatment for infertility. However, the birth of a child can lead to religious or spiritual questions, particularly if the child is considered to have a disability:

In Kuwaiti culture, the disability of a family member has a stigmatising effect on the immediate and extended family … There is also the common traditional belief that disability is related to (1) God’s will that the parent should have a child with a disability, (2) God punishing the parent, (3) God testing the parent, or (4) God selecting the parent for an unknown reason.

(Al-Kandari 2015: 66)

While the experience of the previous writer is extreme, it is not uncommon for religion and disability to form an interrelated system of oppression (Bjornsdottir and Traustadottir 2010). Consequently, despite claims to being concerned about the whole person, social work practice frequently focuses on discrete problem areas of pressing concern. Hence, religious or spiritual needs are readily disregarded. For example, Delich (2014) notes an absence of social work lit-
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Social work practice

Although national differences shape the local practice of social work (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008), the various authors in Part VI provide a wealth of perspectives and suggestions for social workers and the organisations that employ them, as to how religion and spirituality could or should be taken into account. Holding religious beliefs, and fearing that religious practices associated with these may not be appropriately respected, may lead to people not seeking out services that may benefit them (Regan et al. 2013). Hence, this section commences with a series of three chapters concerning the management of services. Adam Dinham begins with a contribution about the need for service provider organisations to have policies and practices that respect and acknowledge the religious diversity of service users. Janet Melville-Wiseman then goes on to explore the responsibilities of service providers in ensuring that service users are protected from the religious viewpoints of employees, particularly those that are potentially harmful. However, employers also have a responsibility for the care of their staff as well as for service users, and James Lucas suggests how mindfulness, when incorporated into professional practice, might promote resilience among the professional workforce.

The next five chapters are concerned with approaches to direct practice with individual service users, which for some readers is synonymous with social work practice. David Hodge proposes that effective practitioners must be equipped to competently respond to service users from varying religious and spiritual traditions. Importantly, this requires social workers to identify their own assumptions concerning religion and spirituality and recognise the impact of their own experiences in forming their viewpoints. In the following chapter, Ann Carrington does what Hodge recommends and provides an example as to how the theoretical approaches that inform her practice can be informed by and do not have to be in competition with practice, which takes seriously the place of spirituality as an essential element in the human condition. Like Ann Carrington, Fiona Gardner also draws on critical theory and postmodern ideas and has developed a framework that she argues enables ‘the integration of the critical, the reflective and the spiritual into a coherent approach to practice that is holistic, inclusive and addresses issues of social justice’.

Holistic practice for a number of contributors in this volume requires an approach that enables integration of body, mind and spirit. For example, Malabika Das establishes that for survivors of conflict-induced trauma, an inability to address spiritual concerns represents a failure to understand the relationship between spirituality and both physical and mental health. Addressing spiritual concerns can facilitate improved health outcomes and also enable service users to explain their objections to certain health treatments or interventions (Hughes et al. 2015).

An emphasis on social work values and concepts such as ‘self-determination’ or being ‘client-centred’ may assume a level of choice for service users, which is not equally present in different countries (Tunney 2002) or even for all service users within a country. While recognising that social workers everywhere are subject to organisational, legislative and policy constraints on the ways in which they practice, facilitating service users to express their needs remains a universal concern. Arts-based approaches are advocated by several authors in this volume as providing vulnerable individuals with a method for expressing their needs and desires, particularly concerning spiritual and religious needs. Chapters that discuss arts-based approaches include those by Linda Benavides, Irene Renzenbrink, Martha Wiebe and Diana Coholic.

In addition to working with individuals, families and small groups of people, social workers
in many countries are involved in the development of social policy. However, incorporating religion or spiritual components in such work is far less common than in direct practice. Mishka Lysack identifies how social workers can utilise religious teachings in the development of ethical principles to guide policy work around climate change. Fred Besthorn and Jon Hudson take these ideas further and argue that for ecosocial workers, commitment to addressing climate change is integral to their spirituality.

The final two contributions to Part VI remind the reader that while incorporating religion and spirituality into social work practice can be beneficial, care must be taken to ensure that harm is not an unintended outcome. Fran Gale and Michael Dudley note that all too often ‘the claim that religion and spirituality can challenge oppression and disadvantage arising from social processes including globalisation remains at the level of the romantic’. Finally, Michael Sheridan alerts readers to the possibility that for some service users, their religious and spiritual beliefs and commitments may act as a cocoon, which prevents them from confronting issues in their life and hence hinders their development. While Sheridan does not go as far as the authors of a recent paper, who advocated that service users undergo a six-week ‘religious abstinence’ as part of the process of ceasing alcohol or other drug use (Cogdell et al. 2014), she reminds us that there will be times when social workers have an ethical responsibility to challenge service users about their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

In recent years, handbooks on the state of religion and spirituality research have been building international dialogues in areas related to social work such as healthcare (Cobb et al. 2012) and policy studies (Haynes 2009). This volume seeks to do the same for social work, and the final chapter will identify key challenges and opportunities for developing both social work scholarship and practice that engages with religion and spirituality. There are many gaps in our knowledge and this volume will probably raise more questions than it answers. Rather than viewing this as a shortcoming, it is hoped that readers will feel challenged to continue the undertaking of this volume and either begin, or persist in, contributing to the ongoing development of an international dialogue on the place of religion and spirituality in social work.

References

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