Part II

Regional perspectives
Introduction: religion and spirituality in the Australian context

Technically, Australia is ‘a deliberately secular nation’ (Breward 1988: 99) with no official state church or religion. In fact the only mention of religion in Australia’s constitution is that:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any public office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

(Section 116 in Sawer 1988: 63)

Nevertheless, class differentiation on the basis of religion has been a feature of Australian society for much of the time since British settlement commenced in 1788 as a penal colony. Among the early settlers, the more prosperous military and free settlers tended to be Anglican or Presbyterian, whereas convicts and former convicts, who were far more likely to have experienced poverty, were disproportionately Roman Catholic. Assumptions that Protestantism was essentially the religion of the ruling class held through much of the twentieth century (Dempsey 1983; Greenwood 2005).

In terms of participation, fewer than 10 per cent of Australians report regular attendance at religious services (Bellamy and Castle 2004), down from 33 per cent in 1955 and 19 per cent in 1980 (Wilson 1983). Despite this, the majority of Australians identify with a religion. Almost two-thirds (61 per cent) of all Australians identified themselves with some form of Christianity in the 2011 national census, with the largest groups being Catholics (25 per cent), Anglicans (17 per cent) and Uniting Church (5 per cent). A further 5 per cent identified with a non-Christian religion and 22 per cent stated they had no religion (ABS 2011). While migration is resulting in a diversification of religion in the Australian community, occasional involvement in religious events may be more for cultural reasons rather than religious (Bouma 2006). Hence, Davie’s (1994) concept of a ‘vicarious religion’, i.e. religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number who are happy that a minority are committed to maintaining
religious practice in the culture, is an apt depiction of the place of religion in Australian society. In the Australian context, this vicarious religion presents itself such as:

The people of Australia expect the Churches to be active in the care of people, whether they are members or not. This expectation has been formed, not only by the Churches delivering ministries of care over the centuries, but also by the imperatives contained within the teachings of the Christian tradition.

(Challen 1996: 26)

Although participation in formal religion has never been lower, in recent years it has been argued that Australians are more likely to acknowledge that spirituality, if not religion, has a place in their lives (Boer 2008; Tacey 2003). At the same time, there has been a growing recognition that religion and spirituality are not just concerned with privatised beliefs but play a prominent role in civic life (Boer 2008). As such, in recent years there has also been growing recognition of the spiritual needs of indigenous Australians, for whom the legacy of colonisation by the British resulted in dispossession and loss of their land (Harrison and Melville 2010), leading to disconnectedness from ancestors and other members of their communities (Gray et al. 2010). Consequently, it has been claimed that there are some distinctive aspects of Australian spirituality that impinge on the domains in which social work practice occurs. For example,

Australian spirituality differs from American spirituality in many critical ways. The landscape, the beliefs and practices of the Indigenous people, the history of conquest and subsequent migration, the misuse of natural resources, the development of the labour movement and welfare services, and the current fledgling process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, all have forms unique to Australia and are significant factors in both Australian social work discourses and Australian spirituality.

(Lindsay 2002: 160)

It has further been suggested that an Australian spirituality also reflects historical patterns of immigration that brought a predominantly European community to the Asia Pacific (Hamilton 2005). The early immigrants not only disregarded the rights of the indigenous people who had a spiritual relationship with their land, but believed it was their moral and religious duty to take over the land and turn it into an outpost of European agriculture (Pascoe 2014; Watson 2014).

As the place of religion and spirituality have developed in particular ways in the Australian context, so too has social work. While there is a long tradition of drawing on both British and American versions of social work (Miller 2016; Napier and George 2001), the ways these, along with other influences, have been combined has resulted in a distinctively Australian version of social work, which reflects the nation’s history, health and welfare systems, economic and social policies, as well as the experiences and expectations of social workers (McCallum 2001).

Social work practice, religion and spirituality

As in many other countries, prospective social workers in Australia may be drawn to a profession they perceive provides a way of working congruent with their own religious beliefs (Crisp 2014). However, a survey of Australian social work educators in 1999 found two-thirds claiming no religious affiliation, compared to less than one-third of the wider Australian population at the time (Lindsay 2002). While social work educators are not necessarily representative of the wider profession, they are entrusted with the nurture of future generations of practitioners. Although there is anecdotal evidence that social work educators in Australia are now more open
to incorporating relevant content, particularly in respect of spirituality, generations of social work students recall little mention of matters associated with religion or spirituality except as an exotic feature of a case study (Lindsay 2002; Crisp 2015). Furthermore, social work students in many Australian universities who have had a particular interest in religion or spirituality, have often not been able to take elective units on these from elsewhere in their universities, given many Australian universities do not have a religious studies programme from which they can select units of study as part of their social work degree (Boer 2008). Consequently, Australian social workers often have very limited, if any, knowledge of the key beliefs and practices of other religions, and sometimes even of the religions they nominally identify with (Crisp 2015).

In the twenty-first century, academic interest in religion and spirituality has grown considerably in Australia. Much of this has been concerned with spirituality, sometimes not differentiated from religion (Lindsay 2002) but increasingly recognising that people have spiritual needs whether or not they identify with a religion (Carrington 2010; Crisp 2010a; Gardner 2011; Gray 2008). Associated with this, there has been scholarly work conducted by social workers around mindfulness (Lynn and Mensinga 2015) and yoga (Mensinga 2011). Some of this work is reported in other chapters in this volume; by James Lucas (Chapter 30), Ann Carrington (Chapter 32) and Fiona Gardner (Chapter 33).

The extent to which Australian social work literature on spirituality is being produced that is not explicitly religious, certainly distinguishes it from much of what is being published in many other countries where there is much less differentiation between spirituality and religion. This not only reflects the disproportionate interest in spirituality over religion in the broader community as previously discussed, but also the challenges for social workers in broaching spiritual matters in an allegedly secular nation, in which most welfare funding is provided by government on the basis of secular service delivery.

In the welfare arena, the historical involvement of religious organisations in now discredited practices has also potentially alienated many potential service users from matters associated with religion. These include removal of indigenous children from their families and communities resulting in what has become known as the ‘Stolen Generation’, forcing unmarried mothers to relinquish babies for adoption, and the mistreatment of child migrants sent from residential care providers in the United Kingdom (Crisp 2014).

Expectations of secular service delivery can create conundrums for non-government service providers. Almost all of the largest 25 Australian charities are linked to organisations that also have a religious focus (Lake 2013). Hence, it is not surprising that given the prominence of faith-based agencies in service provision, Australian social work researchers have also been exploring the contribution of these organisations to the welfare sector (Camilleri and Winkworth 2004; Crisp 2014).

It is not just among academics that the places for religion and spirituality have been legitimated. The Code of Ethics of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) was revised in 2010. Compared to its predecessor, which acknowledged requirements to prevent discrimination on the basis of religion, the need for social workers to remain aware of conflicts of interest on the basis of religion and the need to be aware of their own religious values (AASW 1999), the current code retained these points but added several new clauses. These include an expectation under the heading of ‘Respect for human dignity and worth’, that:

Social workers will respect others’ beliefs, religious or spiritual world views, values, culture, goals, needs and desires, as well as kinship and communal bonds, within a framework of social justice and human rights.

(AASW 2010: 17)
The Code of Ethics also recognises the right for social workers to have their religious or spiritual beliefs respected within the workplace:

In carrying out their professional practice responsibilities, social workers are entitled to reciprocal rights, which include the right to … hold cultural, religious or spiritual world views and for these to be acknowledged in the workplace and professional contexts to the extent that they do not impinge on the other guidelines in this Code.

(AASW 2010: 16)

A further requirement is an expectation that social workers be respectful of faith-based agencies:

Social workers will recognise, acknowledge and remain sensitive to and respectful of the religious and spiritual world views of individuals, groups, communities and social networks, and the operations and missions of faith and spiritually-based organisations.

(AASW 2010: 18)

Despite the multiple references to religion in the Code of Ethics, many social workers remain ambivalent, if not antagonistic, that they might now be required to consider religious or spiritual beliefs and practices as relevant in their work with service users (Crisp 2011). However, while the place of religion and spirituality may well have been legitimated within Australian social work practice, unless social workers have a personal interest, their professional knowledge about these important life domains tends to be extremely limited (Crisp 2015).

**Faith-based organisations**

In a supposedly secular country, Australians are highly dependent on the services provided by faith-based organisations, particularly in respect of services provided to children and families and in aged care, but not confined to these (Swain 2009), although there are some differences between states (Murphy 2006). Conversely, services for people with a mental illness and prisoners are more likely to be provided by the state, although some exceptions occur (Swain 2009).

The expansion of British settlement in the early nineteenth century saw religious groups seeking to respond to the needs of their members and established welfare organisations similar to those operating in Britain at the time. While in part this reflected a general need for services, religious groups that had experienced persecution, such as Catholics and Jews, were often wary of services provided by others (Jupp 2009). During the twentieth century, many of these services became partially, if not fully, funded by the Commonwealth and state governments, but operated by faith-based organisations. Indeed, it has been suggested that their expertise in running community services means faith-based organisations are frequently the preferred partner of governments seeking to extend the range of services available in local communities (Crisp 2014).

While the stated rational for faith-based organisations being preferred service providers is often concerned with having existing links into communities, it may also be a cost-cutting measure. Non-government organisations typically receive funding for staffing and programme costs but often rely on funded organisations subsidising these, sometimes quite considerably (Crisp 2014; Gardner 2011). Furthermore, there have been several occasions in recent decades when conservative governments have sought to reduce welfare expenditure by suggesting services be provided by organisations associated with the various religions (Lake 2013). At times, governments have even announced that particular services would be devolved to named faith-
based organisations, without consulting them (Holden and Trembath 2008). However, despite the public announcements, some faith-based organisations have refused to become involved in programmes they regard as immoral, particularly those involving harsh sanctions for social security recipients (Davis et al. 2008).

Instead of being delegated by government to implement unpopular programmes, many faith-based organisations have regarded it as their role to initiate new services that meet the needs of the most disadvantaged members of the community (Winkworth and Camilleri 2004). For example, in the late nineteenth century, it was the Salvation Army in Australia which established the first labour bureau open to all unemployed Australians as well as the world’s first programme for released prisoners (Salvation Army 2013). And at the end of the twentieth century, it was faith-based organisations that not only supported the development of, but auspiced the country’s first medically-supervised injecting centre (Crisp 2014).

In order to undertake the work they identified as needing to be done, religious organisations have been pivotal in the development of professional social work in Australia. The Catholic Church in 1928 sponsored scholarships for two students to undertake social work training at the Catholic University of America, who on their return were credited as being Australia’s first trained social workers (Gleeson 2000). Since then, faith-based organisations were the first non-government organisations in Australia to employ professional social workers (Holden and Trembath 2008), and in the 1950s were the first to insist that government-funded counseling programmes employed qualified social workers (Gleeson 2008). Faith-based organisations remain a major employer of qualified social workers into the twenty-first century (Camilleri and Winkworth 2004).

In addition to developing and implementing innovative services, some of the larger faith-based organisations are active in the social policy space. The Brotherhood of St Laurence, an Anglican welfare agency in Melbourne, was in 1943 the first non-government welfare organisation in Australia to employ a research officer and has continued to employ social researchers ever since. Many of these have been qualified social workers (Holden and Trembath 2008), and this reflects the Australian understanding that both research and social policy analysis and advocacy are core social work roles (AASW 2010). Having come to regard its research and advocacy function as integral to its service delivery to disadvantaged individuals and communities, the Brotherhood of St Laurence is widely known and respected internationally for its work in the areas of poverty and welfare reform (Davis et al. 2008).

It has not just been in what and how they deliver services that faith-based organisations have had to adapt. While there have always been some organisations that are independent or unaligned, most Australian faith-based welfare services are associated with major religious groupings that have strong regional, national or even international structures. In order to remain both competitive and compliant with the conditions of government funding, many of the welfare agencies of the major Christian churches in Australia have formed alliances with similar agencies in either the same or from other regions during the last decade of the twentieth century. This has led to the establishment of some large organisations, some under a common management structure and others retaining a local focus but sharing resources and a common name under a federated structure (Crisp 2014).

Although the ability to adapt and change has ensured that the work of many faith-based organisations founded in the nineteenth century continues today, questions of identity form a challenge in the twenty-first century, particularly for organisations substantially dependent on government funding. State funding typically requires services to be provided to all members of the community and without any requirement that service recipients engage in any religious activities (Crisp 2014).
While some small religious organisations choose to forego state funding, so that they are not required to separate their religious and welfare delivery functions, most Australian agencies in the faith-based sector align with Torry’s (2005: 3) definition of being ‘firmly related to a religious tradition but which do not have a religious activity as their primary aim’. Hence, many adopt the role of being ‘the quiet voice of God’ rather than the ‘mouthpiece of God’ (Pessi 2010: 88), or in other words consider their primary role to be a presence in the community through service provision rather than engaging in religious teaching. To this end, some faith-based organisations have sought to distance their public identity from their religious connections (Swain 2009). Despite being an issue generating considerable discussion within some faith-based organisations (Crisp 2010b), there is evidence to suggest such tensions date back to the nineteenth century (Swain 2009).

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Tensions about the relationship between religion and welfare have arguably been most apparent concerning issues of sexual abuse in religious contexts. In late 2012, the Australian government announced a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Ostensibly this was in response to growing community anger and frustration with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which it was alleged had fostered a culture where sexual abuse of minors was widespread. Moreover, the care and protection of clergy offenders was alleged to have frequently taken precedence over appropriate responses to those alleging abuse (Middleton et al. 2014). In fact, the Catholic Church in 2012 acknowledged cases of sexual abuse involving 620 children in the State of Victoria over the previous 80 years (Catholic Church 2012).

Unlike in Ireland where the Ryan Commission restricted its inquiries into cases of abuse in residential care in Catholic institutions, the Australian Royal Commission has been concerned with sexual abuse in all institutional environments, including those operated by religious organisations, other community groups and government (Middleton et al. 2014). Specific inquiries have been undertaken about abuse cultures and responses to abuse in settings including residential care settings, schools, churches, scouting organisations and sport. While some of these involve children who were in the care of the state, e.g. children in residential care, by not limiting itself to the welfare sector, the Royal Commission has also sought to uncover abuse in community settings that provide services to a broad cross-section of children in the community (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2014).

Having commenced public inquiries in 2013, it was initially anticipated the Royal Commission would be completed by 2015; however, due to the sheer amount of material being dealt with, it is now anticipated that the work will not be completed until 2017. Rachel Lev’s reflection about the need to provide opportunities within the American Jewish community to talk about experiences of abuse is equally important in the context of the Royal Commission:

We bear witness in part by listening to survivor stories. Then we address the questions: How do we help people heal? What do we do to stop these abuses? Where do we start? Simple answers will not work. Blaming and shaming won’t work even though they’re tempting. Healing and prevention happen together when we listen to the stories that must be told, then share resources and a commitment to peaceful relationships.

(Lev 2003: xxvii)

In addition to public hearings, a large research programme has been commissioned to support the work of the Royal Commission and to inform its findings and recommendations for
changes in practices, policies and legislation. Despite being far from complete, it is already clear that there will be difficult truths to be faced by organisations that are, or have been, involved in the care of children. While the public emphasis had previously been overwhelmingly on the Catholic Church, many members of the Australian community have been shocked to discover the extent of child abuse in non-Catholic institutions. For those involved in religious or faith-based organisations, the following statement, although originally written about the place of women in the Church of Sweden, may well apply:

Questions posed include how to deal with the shifts in perceptions of authority which challenge old, hierarchical patterns of governance. They also include how to deal with the fact that churches, in spite of their claim to be transmitters of justification and forgiveness, regularly fail in their practice to be just communities of equal and responsible citizens.

(Edgardh Beckman 2001: 12)

There will be expectations that faith-based welfare organisations will address, if they have not already done so, procedures that did not safeguard against sexual abuse. It can also mean having to have difficult conversations both within the organisation and with community members, including former service users. While the following reflects the experience of one faith-based welfare organisation that dates back to the nineteenth century, it is likely that there are many other faith-based organisations that have yet to meaningfully acknowledge past wrongs:

[Organization’s]’ leadership has talked a lot about how we have failed people as an organization in the past, and some reference to some dark things which have happened in the name of the orders. And I think a genuine desire to want to do anything in our power to make right the wrongs of the past. … The organization does a lot of work with past residents and acknowledging the abuse that has happened and the care practices of the past that wouldn’t be acceptable today. And I think that’s a credit to the organization that we’ve tried to be upfront and honest about that and taken responsibility for those sensitive things that have happened.

(in Crisp 2014: 132)

Conclusion

One of the options Facebook users have to describe their relationship is ‘it’s complicated’. In many ways this depicts the relationship between social work, religion and spirituality in Australia. Australians have a strong sense of spirituality but in the main are somewhat ambivalent about formal religion. Nevertheless, social welfare delivery is highly dependent on the faith-based sector, and governments show great willing to fund this sector to provide community services, just as long as they do not have a religious element. This potentially places faith-based organisations in a state of ambiguity if they cannot resolve the question of how they express their religious identity without violating funding agreements.

The relationship between social work, religion and spirituality is further complicated by the fact that it is constantly changing and evolving. The outcomes of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse may well result in further changes to the relationship, although many faith-based organisations have already taken steps to ensure many past practices are no longer tolerated. The other change is that the profile of faith-based welfare organisations tends to reflect the religious profile of Australians in previous generations and it will be interesting to see in coming years whether increasing numbers of Australians
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who identify as Buddhist or Muslim leads to growth in faith-based organisations with these affilia-
tions.

References


