Ultimate concerns and human rights

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How can practice sensitive to spirituality and religion expand and sharpen social work capacity to challenge social injustice?

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Introduction

Spirituality and religion are among the very last human rights to be implemented in social work. However, there is a difference between a right in the Conventions and Codes of Ethics and grounding that right in social work praxis. Understood as a human right possessed by individuals, spirituality and religion are, nonetheless, increasingly esteemed as important aspects of culturally competent social work practice, i.e. that social workers are cognisant of diverse ethnic groups’ religious affiliations and practice. Consequently, an intention to progress and deepen anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice is a key motivation for including spirituality and religion in social work literature and practice.

Social work is now facing unprecedented challenges in a post-secular (Habermas 2006), globalised world, where the impact of globalisation on those individuals, groups and communities who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable leaves social work to pick up the pieces (Dominelli 2010). This chapter argues that social work practice that is alive to spirituality and religion can construct a critical practice that expands its capacity to galvanise social justice. Spirituality and religion, through their potential to bring together ‘situated’ contextual knowledge of people’s ‘glocal’ needs, ultimate concerns, oppression and forms of resistance, can be a significant catalyst in social work practice for inspiring and motivating social justice. Nevertheless, the claim that religion and spirituality can challenge oppression and disadvantage arising from social processes including globalisation remains at the level of the romantic unless the ‘knowledge from the margins’, which this chapter argues they can deliver, has a conduit for practice.

An established discourse in social work practice, human rights, offers an important conduit for the application of such ‘glocalised’ knowledge in progressing social justice. Human rights’ key characteristics of universality (rights belong to everyone) and indivisibility (i.e. rights come as a package; no one right ‘trumps’ another) (Ife 2012: 10–11) enable it to address universalised, globalising discourses. At the same time, religion and spirituality as contextualised knowledge takes account of ‘syncretic practice of cultures and religions and the ways in which people are located at the intersection of multiple axes’ (Dhaliwal, 2012: 317), enabling ‘glocal’ differences to enrich the human rights frame. This concurrence can enliven social work to be powerfully instrumental in its contemporary practice context: that of a globalised, post-secular world.
Religion or spirituality: implications for social justice

Spirituality and/or religion are sculpted by a lens of history, cultures, life circumstances, society and power relations: they are significant for understanding intersectionality and accessing ‘knowledge from the margins’ (D’Amico 2007: 38). However, the way spirituality and religion are often constructed and addressed in social work literature and practice reveals itself as insufficient and problematic for critical social work. This next section of the chapter argues that a broader, more inclusive definition than that often used in social work literature is more consistent with a critical social work approach.

Much social work literature on spirituality and religion converges in emphasising ‘spirituality’; distinguishing it from religion (Wong and Vinsky 2009). Spirituality is generally depicted as the search for ultimate meaning and purpose ‘which is individualistic in nature’ (Henery 2003: 1111); as a universal quality of human experience; ‘transcending all historical, cultural and ideological discourses and practices’ (Wong and Vinsky 2009: 1349) and sometimes as inclusive of ‘many eras and traditions and containing elements common to all religions’ (Wong and Vinsky 2009: 1346). Spirituality has been taken for granted as ‘transcending … religious beliefs’ although able to be expressed within those beliefs (Wong and Vinsky 2009: 1345). Spirituality, however, supposedly transcends religion’s limitations by severing its cultural, historical and ideological roots, and foregrounding fundamental values and precepts without negative associations or local, archaic or incomprehensible references (Mercadante 2014; Thomas 2006).

Religion on the other hand is seen as an institutional context for spiritual beliefs, customs, tradition, scripture and rituals (Wong and Vinsky 2009). In social work education and practice, religion is often constructed as a ‘communal phenomenon’ (Henery 2003: 1111). Yet the concept of ‘religion’ as stable and precise is a Western folk category (Fountain 2015); as in different traditions the intuitions that support fullness of life may vary (Hense 2014); and the global meaning and expression of ‘religion’ is diverse, dynamic and fluid (Hefferan 2015; Tomalin 2015).

When scrutinising social work texts, Henery finds, it is spirituality they urge should be incorporated in social work education and practice. Thus, spirituality becomes the ‘favoured half of the [spirituality/religion] binary’ in social work (Henery 2003: 1109). Elevating spirituality sets up a hierarchy in which spirituality is favoured and religion often assumed to be more conservative than spirituality. While acknowledging a focus on the spirituality half of the binary may be done with the intention of being inclusive, Wong and Vinsky have questioned:

What ordering of social relations is produced in a discourse of spirituality that is dismissive of history and traditions and what is being asked of people of marginalised and racialized communities who must fight to have their traditions and histories recognised within the dominant culture?

(Wong and Vinsky 2009: 1155)

Accordingly, Henery warns that a spiritual/religion binary can mask and block recognition of significant social and political issues and thus ‘complement rather than counteract dominant social arrangements’ (Henery 2003: 1112). Consequently, elevating spirituality can undermine key elements of critical social work practice and what critical social work stands for. Drawing on Carrette and King (2004), Wong and Vinsky (2009) reveal the term ‘spirituality’ to be a Euro-Christian construct. Rather than being universal, spirituality is an historical construct, which embodies a specific ordering of social relations.

Thus, the apparent cultural inclusiveness the umbrella use of the term ‘spirituality’ in social
work literature is generally intended to offer may actually provide, as Henery (2003) argues, a new expression of Western racism. For many peoples of diverse historical and cultural contexts, the history and tradition of their religious and spiritual experiences and practices are indivisibly grounded in the history of their community for which their religion and spirituality can be a source of support and a source of resistance. Religious and spiritual experiences, beliefs and concerns represent ‘situated knowledge’, ‘knowledge from the margins’, which can offer not only different ways of knowing, but different ways to challenge oppression and disadvantage. In their work advancing social justice and wellbeing of Pakeha, Māori and Pacific Island peoples, the Family Centre of New Zealand are explicit about integrating spirituality and religion, since spirituality and religion are relevant and significant in defining community and culture. Sole parents participating in research at the centre, for example, describe their spirituality and religion as co-existing in symbiotic relationship with their culture (Waldegrave et al. 2011).

Arguments against a ‘spiritual/religion’ binary are further reinforced from critiques of neo-liberalism and interrelated constructs of consumerism and individualism. This line of critique draws on Giddens’ (1991) and Bauman’s work (1997) on late modernity: ‘Commodities for western spiritual consumers’ is the way these critics describe how practices from historically rich and complex Indigenous traditions and Eastern religions are becoming separated from their roots and being commodified in the West into techniques and methods (Gray 2008; Wong and Vinsky 2009). Again, spirituality is frequently presented as consumerist, about individual self-expression and comprising personal experiences and sensations (Gray 2008; Henery 2003). Disengaged from deliberation about public goods, spirituality risks accommodating dominant culture and power relationships rather than being oppositional to them and to structural inequalities (Mercadante 2014).

Ethnic minorities, asserts Henery (2003: 1111), are ‘generally characterized as first religious and only then spiritual’, observing they are often placed in the disfavoured half of the spirituality/religion binary. Wong and Vinsky (2009) agree, observing that minority racialised groups are often represented as more religious than spiritual in social work literature. This binary resonates with what has been described as a revival of ‘civilizational discourse’ where cultures and religions are ordered in hierarchical fashion (Brown 2008). As part of this process, minority groups become stigmatised and ‘contained’. Butler (2008: 14) critiques this process as a cultural assault on minorities.

While religion can be emancipatory or oppressive (e.g. it is sometimes perceived as operating against individuality, suppressing self-expression and placing people in positions of vulnerability to sexual, mental and/or physical abuse (Henery 2003), spirituality can also be oppressive and/or emancipatory (D’Amico 2007: 8). Rather than avoid both, this recognition underscores the need for human rights-based practice, and including, as in any social work practice, a critique of power relations.

Crucially, this does not mean that spirituality and religion should not ever be separated as it can be important to do so, nor, as Wong and Vinsky (2009) hasten to point out, should moves to separate them always be seen as practices of neo-liberal individualism and Euro-Christian ethnocentrism. Rather, the argument is that ‘the spiritual but not religious’ position in social work should not be the dominant and defining discourse, and that it is essential for critical practice to ‘remain … open to the experience of spirituality and/or religion’ in the cultural, historical context as well as local circumstances in the lived experience of service users (Wong and Vinsky 2009: 1356).

This kind of framing of spirituality and religion follows Crisp’s lead (Crisp 2010), avoiding prescription, yet brings together the varied discourses on spirituality and religion through framing discussion around understanding what spirituality and religion means in lived experience.
This, as Crisp points out, allows for shifts that may occur in the kinds of spiritual and religious issues that arise at different points in time for any one person, group or community as well as in different locations. For many, their religion and/or spirituality is sensitive to their social locations and can be influenced by factors including legacies of colonial relations; differentially racialised discourses and social treatment at a national state level and local cartographies of power including the multiple interactions within local urban spaces/neighbourhoods with national and trans-national networks and politics (Dhaliwal 2012). Such a multiplicity of influences articulate with each other to create a dynamic rich ‘glocal’ register (Dhaliwal 2012: 16–17), one expression of which coheres in spiritual and religious commitments and identifications registering a range of global and local concerns and needs.

**Spirituality, religion and human rights discourse: an emancipatory conduit**

Human rights discourse, now expanded beyond its original individual focus, incorporates collective realisation of rights (Twiss 2004). Strongly influenced by a theology of liberation, womanism, a black feminist perspective, for example, emphasises the right to health of people and their communities as the absence of oppression (Musgrave et al. 2002). Human rights, by their nature, Ife (2012) advocates, present a challenge to and combat oppression. Rights, such as the practice of spirituality and religion, understood at a social group level and collectively realised, can challenge those structures and discourses of oppression that position some groups as ‘lesser’ than others.

Children as a group, for example, are often seen as ‘lesser’ than adults, and because of this they frequently have their spirituality unacknowledged or denied. In social work with children, Crompton (2000) argues that supporting children’s rights to spiritual wellbeing is not an optional extra, a fairy tale or a nuisance; rather it is about taking children seriously. Children’s rights not being taken seriously also exemplifies the way genuine universalism has often been absent from customary understandings of human rights: in Ife’s words, ‘not everyone has been thought of as “human”’ (Ife 2012:7); some are viewed as ‘different’ or ‘lesser’ than others.

While achievement of spiritual and religious rights can lead to greater social justice for disadvantaged social groups, at the same time, spirituality and religion can be powerfully instrumental in realising other human rights. Women in Morocco have successfully used Islamic scriptures to argue for and develop a new approach to poverty, which integrates rights to education, improved sanitation and housing (Sadiqi 2006). This is a significant example of where spirituality and religion brought about change: these rights are held by all people everywhere, but needed action to realise and exercise in practice. This action involved constructing spaces for discussion and debate in a public community context. Examples such as this underline the frequently intimate connection between rights and spiritual and religious traditions: as Ife affirms, ‘concepts of human rights are embedded in all major religious traditions and can be found in many different cultural forms’ (Ife 2012: 2). Given the diverse, dynamic nature of many religious traditions, religious communities have summoned and adjusted international human rights frameworks to local and national situations, or have invoked different parts of their religious traditions to further human rights (Peach 2000). Disenfranchised groups may work, in local contexts, to secure greater ‘human rights’ by reinterpreting religious or spiritual frameworks from within, in the interests of social justice (Tomalin 2015). In Egypt, for example, women used the Qur’an to argue against female genital mutilation, maintaining it is not an Islamic practice (Piecha 2016).

While spiritual and religious beliefs may provide an alternative reference point in affirming values of humanity, they may not alone be enough to bring about change (D’Amico 2007). They can, however, not only stimulate engagement with social issues but religious and spiritual
discourses can construct frameworks for creating positive change (Dhaliwal 2012). Gandhi built the campaign against poverty and freedom from colonial rule, for example, on Hindu teachings of ahimsa (Mische 2007).

**Locating spiritual and religion sensitive social work practice in a globalised, post-secular context**

Globalisation definitions generally describe rapidly growing interconnections and interdependence ‘such that the world is … becoming a single place’ (Mittelman 2000: 5) through increasingly swift exchange of ideas, finances, resources and people (Gamble 2012). This is achieved via new information technologies enabling virtual dimensions, affiliations and communities as well as swift, accessible modes of transport that have ‘collapsed time and space’ (Dominelli 2010: 26). The nub for critical social work is that these conventional definitions of globalisation are silent about hierarchies of power (Mittelman 2000). Yet these power hierarchies present critical social work practice with unprecedented challenges.

Experienced at a ‘grass roots level’ the dominant form of globalisation, i.e. economic neoliberalism, has led to a ‘widening gap between rich and poor and deterioration of public social policy that neo-liberalism’ (in the heightened integration of markets in the global economy) has brought and continues to bring about (Mittelman 2000: 4) as well as ‘a loss in the degree of control exercised locally’ (Mittelman 2000: 6). Explicit about the resulting range of consequences, Dominelli (2010: 26) specifies ‘unemployment and reduced service provision’ as well as ‘widespread uneven economic growth, large scale migrations of people, spread of organised crime such as the arms and drug trade and human trafficking and increasing levels of poverty’ that bring distress to individuals, groups and communities. This leaves social work involved, as previously noted, and as Dominelli (2010: 20) points out, in ‘picking up the pieces’.

Resistance to these processes can come in the shape of some spiritual and religious groups taking extremist political and/or fundamentalist forms with closed communitarian characteristics, as they develop in ‘an ever expanding ideological void, as alternatives, in large part to (global) market and consumer led neo-liberalism’ (Dhaliwal 2012: 34). Racism and persecution of minorities including religious persecution and discrimination continue to be frequent reasons for claiming asylum internationally (Fox 2015; The Association of Religion Data Archives and Bar-Ilan University 2016). Social work, in response, can find itself more involved in work in communities to work against immersion ‘in intolerance and exclusion’ (Ife 2012: 20).

At the same time, spirituality and religion can and do act as progressive counterforces to problems associated with globalisation, providing an alternative reference point through affirming an ethics of care; a valuing of humanity and contesting the neo-liberal emphasis on profits. For example, at the inception of Citizens UK, a multi-faith organisation originating from Christian groups, social workers along with researchers and spiritual and religious leaders were funded by the Cadbury Trust to go on training programmes to build the group based on a democratic, multi-faith collaborative approach that also includes secular organisations. The group’s aims are to mobilise local initiatives addressing issues reflecting local and global concerns such as welfare, drug problems, employment and housing scarcities (Jamoul and Wills 2008).

Globalisation has also amplified the ‘post-secularisation’ of society. Increasing spiritual and religious pluralism and new transnational spiritual and religious dynamics are linked, in large part, to large scale movements of people as well as other processes of globalisation (Thomas 2005). This increasing movement of peoples around the globe heightens the relevance of spirituality and religion in social work practice for all social workers (Martin and Martin 2003). Commitment to critical social work practice, Wong (2004) observes, involves commitment to
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diversity and difference and the many different ways of knowing: this is important in challenging the status quo. Fook (2012: 41) similarly argues that critical social work is open to new ways of ‘seeing what knowledge is, how it is generated and expressed and whose perspectives count’.

Alternative ways of knowing can open up consideration of alternative ways of challenging oppression (D’Amico 2007). Post-secularity deconstructs and disrupts secularisation; it imagines the dynamic co-existence of spiritual, religious and secular viewpoints in dialogue (Habermas 2008; Stoeckl 2011). This is significant in post-secular globalised societies where the interfaces between state and civil society represent a dynamic zone where ‘subjectivities, representation and claims making and are highly contested’ (Dhaliwal 2012: 25). Religion and spirituality are central in systems of representation and different groups such as Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus are often differently racialised at national levels and within dominant discourses (Dhaliwal 2012).

The state’s acknowledgement of the rights of minority communities to self-govern may, in some cases, allow structural racism and women’s intra-communal oppressions to occur; for example, occurrences of gender- and honour-based violence and forced marriage in Britain (Patel 2013; Siddiqui 2014). Controversy has ignited around state accommodation of parallel religious laws, which some powerful religious leaders support and some women may effectively utilise, but many survivors and feminists oppose (Patel 2013; Siddiqui 2014). Feminist concerns, for example, may then get discarded on grounds of ‘inauthenticity’ or ‘westernisation’ (Dhaliwal 2012: 27). As Reichert (2011) points out, however, the defining of values and norms is often done by those in power.

Feminists such as Dhaliwal (2012), Patel (2013) and Siddiqui (2014) are wary of this trend in relations between the state and civil society where co-existence can be premised on crude systems of representation and where the position of community leaders can correspond with reification of particular norms and homogenisation of communities, and as a consequence state acknowledged religious and cultural practices can erase the combination of different religious, cultural beliefs and practices or lived reality. Homogenisation tendencies can be further reinforced by ‘glocal’ pressures on minority communities including pressures ‘to assert themselves as alternatives to (global) market and consumer led neo-liberalism’. Such factors can impel ‘religious communitarianists’ to push for strong boundaries and sealed spaces of governance over which they exercise influence and control and become more or less self-managing units (Dhaliwal 2012). Observing that religious and spiritually-based organisations are increasingly ‘acting as a buffer against the welfare state deficit’ (Dhaliwal 2012: 320) as a result of neo-liberal policies and subsequent public funding cuts to welfare services, Dhaliwal (2012: 35) expresses concern that in the UK, for example, some fundamentalist ‘closed’ groups, in making ‘religious incursions into social welfare provision’ could have the effect of access to services becoming based on ‘categorical religious affiliation’ with real consequences for the ability of those that do not subscribe to their definitions to be able to access limited community based public services. Dhaliwal (2012: 29) concludes, ‘It is vital that the range of differences within minority communities are not devalued and undermined by those forces that may promote absolutist, sealed identities’. Similarly, Blakey, Pearce and Chesters (2006) argue that there are many different minorities with conflicting interests and values, and it is important the membership of religious and spiritual groups and organisations also speak for themselves.

Social work practice has involvement in safeguarding the rights of minorities within minorities, for example, women’s rights, LGBT peoples in communities that may be seen as ‘absolutist’ while also, at the same time, ensuring that specialist ethnic and culturally sensitive services and advocacy groups are preserved with equitable access to services. A human rights lens assists the move away from stereotyped, reified religious and spiritual groups’ ‘mono’ identities. Ife and
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Morley (2002) quote the Dalai Lama’s (1993) comment, ‘Rights assume basic human needs common to all humanity’, observing how this understanding undermines hardened stereotypes, moving us away from ‘perceptions of the ‘other’ that exist at national and international levels – while respecting and not denying difference (Ife and Morley 2002).

Undeniably, a majority of spiritual and religious organisations provide services not only for those who share their religious and spiritual traditions, but without proselytising, to all in need, whatever their beliefs. When the Sydney home of a local non-Muslim family was destroyed, for example, and the crisis accommodation offered by state-based welfare too limited, the Muslim Women’s Association (MWA) in Australia provided the family with longer-term housing. The MWA and its Executive Director, a social worker, like a multitude of similar groups, see service provision as not based solely on religious and spiritual identity but, rather, that the fundamental basis for their service is need (Krayem and Moussa 2015).

Rather than simply ‘pick up the pieces’, how can social work initiate social justice inspired change?

Concern with disadvantage and injustice that affects day-to-day lives is integral to both beliefs and practices of many spiritualities and religions (D’Amico 2007). This cannot be reduced to a matter of simply filling in the gaps in the limitations of, for example, state-based welfare provisions, but rather is also about fostering alternative imagined futures, providing hope for achieving something different. As D’Amico explains, one step to dismantling oppression is to be able to envision alternatives (2007); alternatives that, in the context of globalisation, could make the productive potential of globalisation serve the goal of equity (Ife 2012).

Nancy Fraser’s tripartite model of social justice proposes the fundamental question of social justice oriented interventions: ‘is this going to promote participatory parity?’ (Fraser 1996). Benhabib (2002) appeals for a dynamic discussion process between civil society and state institutions, and joins Fraser in calling for decisions affecting the wellbeing of a collectivity to be the outcome of a procedure of free and reasoned deliberation among all people concerned.

Responding to Reichert’s (2006: 29) calls for social work to ask questions such as ‘whose voices are being heard?’ and ‘how can all voices be heard?’, social workers can initiate practices that support and enable the construction of cooperative spaces for active democratic participation from which all concerned can participate on an equal basis (Benhabib 2002). This is crucial, since potential limits of this approach include a tendency to assume ‘the space is flat’ and not recognise that ‘local cartographies of power’ may influence who participates in the debate (Dhaliwal 2012: 258). Such spaces need to offer the opportunity for genuine ‘recognition’ (Fraser 1996) and that all voices, those of minorities as well as those of minorities within minorities, are not muted but have engagement. Consequently, constructing spaces that afford maximum democratic participation and where debate can be guided by an ethics of care that encompass differences (Dhaliwal 2012) is essential for social justice inspired change.

Dhaliwal (2012: 322) observes that spirituality and religion along with ‘secular humanism … flow in the same direction as a commitment to … social justice, towards the collective improvement of people’s lives’. Spiritual, religious and secular alliances exemplify Habermas’ account registering the post-secular nature of our society, and describing the need to respond, in order to progress social justice, through constructing public space that enables parity of participation for all:

The expression post-secular does more than give public recognition to religious fellowships in view of the fundamental contribution they make to the reproduction of motivations
and attitudes that are socially desirable. The public awareness of a post secular society also reflects the normative insight that has consequences for the political dealings of unbelieving citizens with believing citizens.

(Habermas 2006: 46)

Habermas goes on to point out that in post-secular society there is increasing consensus that ‘modernisation of the public consciousness’ involves assimilation and reflexive transformation of both religious and secular mentalities, observing that if all understand this as ‘a complementary learning process’, then they have reasons to take seriously each other’s contributions in public debate (Habermas 2006: 46–7).

This is the context in which social work now practices, and social work has a major stake in both process and outcome.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that social work engages with a social justice-inspired conception of spirituality and religion, and that this potential relationship with spirituality and religion can contribute to transformative social work practice.

Spirituality and religion do not constitute a unified coherent discourse. Yet as a source of people’s desires and meaning-making, spirituality and religion share recurrent understandings of human dignity and solidarity with human rights. Like human rights, they are enduringly occupied with human flourishing and social justice. By incorporating knowledge that is ‘grass-roots’, ‘glocal’ (global and local) and ‘from the margins’, they inform and embrace humanity and critique globalisation’s miseries. Retrieving people’s ultimate concerns, they assist the transformation of traditional power relations. Moreover, in a post-secular world, with religion acknowledged as an organising principle in state governance and civil society, spirituality and religion exert major influence in the way governments respond and resources are invested. They share in a reflexive post-secular dialogue (Habermas 2008).

Spirituality and religion thus engage social work. Not only are they mandated, being fundamental to culturally sensitive social work practice, but they allow local and cultural differences to be acknowledged, thus fulfilling social work’s brief of re-presenting people’s ‘situated’ needs, oppressions, resistances and ultimate concerns and their claims to ‘glocal’ social justice. Spirituality and religion complement social work’s diverse interests and practices, support its inevitably different construction in different locations (Ife 2012) and broaden its relevance to diverse groups outside dominant European and North American cultures.

Social work activities at different levels are characterised by rights (Ife 2012) and social work’s inevitably different construction in different locations accommodates diverse interests and practices, thus benefiting the profession.

Human rights frameworks that act as a conduit for such contextual, ‘situated’ knowledges may tackle the injustices of oppression and disadvantage arising from globalisation, particularly dominant neo-liberal economic globalisation. Furthermore, a universal human rights framework that supports religious and spiritual expression affords opportunities for local and cultural differences to be expressed and heard. Such a human rights framework may provide an institutionalised channel for these local expressions of spiritualities, which in turn can inform the application of human rights principles.

Social work practice exemplifies the potential applications of these processes of discovery. Being informed by universal human rights conceptions and discourses, it explores and anchors these in local contexts, cultures and communities (Ife 2012), and in so doing, it may also avail
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itself of religious and spiritual, situated, ‘glocal’ knowledge. Thus allied with the quest for genuine recognition, representation and re-distribution that is central to achieving social justice (Fraser 1996), social work may construct itself a more locally and globally relevant transformative role, that is powerfully instrumental in its contemporary context, practising in a globalised, post-secular world.

References


