Addressing spiritual bypassing
Issues and guidelines for spiritually sensitive practice

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Introduction
The relationship between spirituality and social work has had a long history in the United States, with five broad phases as outlined by Canda and Furman (2010). Preceded by thousands of years of Indigenous ways of helping, the profession’s sectarian origins at the turn of the twentieth century were based primarily on Judeo-Christian understandings of charity and communal service. A period of professionalism and secularisation emerged from the 1920s to the 1970s, during which secular humanistic and scientific understandings of the human condition were viewed as a more valid base for the profession. From 1980 to 1995, the profession witnessed a resurgence of interest in spirituality, which yielded tremendous growth in both knowledge dissemination and organisational efforts dedicated to promoting the integration of spirituality and social work while being firmly positioned within the profession’s core values and ethics.

Canda and Furman (2010) propose that we are currently in a fifth phase, where all previous developments are coalescing and accelerating with a particular emphasis on transcending boundaries – whether these boundaries are religious, spiritual, disciplinary, or national in nature. They point to similar developmental stages regarding spirituality and social work in other countries, but hasten to point out that specific Indigenous, sectarian, secular and socio-cultural influences and histories have created unique trajectories within each nation. For example, other world religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Shamanism and Daoism; post-colonial responses to the suppression of Indigenous spiritual teachings; and non-sectarian perspectives, such as humanism, deep ecology and transpersonalism, have all had varying impacts on the profession in different regions of the globe (Canda 2009).

While it is apparent that the topic of spirituality is achieving legitimacy in varying degrees within the profession worldwide, this accomplishment has generally occurred by highlighting its relevance and positive role in clients’ lives. Over the past 20 years, the social work literature has exploded with both conceptual articles and empirical studies on integrating spirituality within fields of practice (Canda 2009). The evolution of this knowledge base has been vital for the on-going development of effective and ethical spiritually sensitive practice.
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However, it is important to recognise what Pargament (2007) observed in his book on spiritually integrated psychotherapy: spirituality can be a source of problems as well as solutions. This chapter explores a particular aspect of this critical observation known as spiritual bypassing.

Defining spiritual bypassing

The term *spiritual bypassing* was first coined by John Welwood (1984) to describe avoidance (or ‘bypassing’) of psychological work by focusing solely on the spiritual. This bypassed work may include issues at the physical, cognitive, emotional, or interpersonal levels (Cashwell *et al.* 2007) and often involves unfinshed developmental tasks (Welwood 2000). Spiritual bypassing is also referred to as *premature transcendence* (Harris 1994; Welwood 2000), as it represents an attempt to rise above the complex and often messy nature of being human. It occurs when ‘spiritual’ concerns are elevated, while ‘human’ issues are deemed unimportant, often resulting in neglect of significant aspects of daily life.

Masters (2010) describes spiritual bypassing as a kind of spiritual tranquiliser that results in avoidance of the problem at hand. He further points out that our current day societies don’t provide much guidance for facing painful realities at either the individual or collective level: ‘spiritual bypassing fits almost seamlessly into our collective habit of turning away from what is painful, as a kind of higher analgesic with seemingly minimal side effects’ (2010: 1). Indeed, many of our modern solutions to problems seem to be about numbing pain rather than confronting it, whether through pharmaceuticals, denial, or distractions of all kinds, including spiritually related activities.

Spiritual bypassing is indeed harmful for both psychosocial development and spiritual growth (Welwood 2000). From a psychological perspective, such bypassing cuts off the opportunity to address and resolve important intra- and interpersonal issues. Although initially used to compensate for various challenges, such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, or dependency issues, bypassing creates new problems as the person attempts to live out a spiritual persona that is not grounded in reality. For example, someone may try to avoid fears of intimacy by practicing detachment and renunciation in search of higher spiritual goals. Rather than addressing underlying relational wounds, the person is simply borrowing the cloak of spiritual truths to feel less vulnerable in human relationships.

Concurrently, spiritual bypassing also produces impediments to authentic spiritual growth. First, it truncates the process of spiritual development by trying to jump over key stages to a higher plane, leaving development incomplete (Masters, 2010). Strikingly described by Clarke *et al.* (2013: 88), ‘clients in spiritual bypass are figuratively trying to stand on the top rung of a ladder with broken, incomplete, and unstable lower rungs’. This often occurs when spiritual beliefs and practices are used in the service of denial or defence against real-life human issues. As a result, spirituality becomes compartmentalised and remains un-integrated within overall functioning (Welwood 2000). Second, spiritual bypassing can also lead to an unbalanced spirituality where one aspect of a polarity is favoured over others: ‘Absolute truth is favoured over relative truth, the impersonal over the personal, emptiness over form, transcendence over embodiment, and detachment over feeling’ (Welwood 2011: 1). The result is ‘an ungrounded, partial, and lopsided version of spiritual awareness’ (Caplan 2009: 122). Thus, contrary to the intended outcome, spiritual bypassing can derail or even undo strides that have been achieved as a result of deeply committed spiritual practice.
Eight faces of spiritual bypassing

Spiritually sensitive social work facilitates healing and growth within a holistic and integrated approach (Canda and Furman 2010). This approach often requires direct, yet sensitive exploration of spiritual bypassing in its various guises in order to support overall healthy development and functioning. The following provides descriptions of eight manifestations of spiritual bypassing.

**Quest for perfection or compulsive goodness**

One ‘face’ of spiritual bypassing is a striving for perfection or unrealistic goodness. All religious and spiritual traditions point to virtues that followers strive to develop within themselves (e.g. the mercy of Jesus Christ, the compassion of the Buddha, the integrity and sincerity of the Prophet Muhammad). While providing important models for life, turning spiritual ideals into rigid prescriptions can be an indicator of spiritual bypassing. Welwood (2011) refers to this as ‘the spiritual superego’ – a harsh inner voice telling the individual how they should always think, speak or feel and what they should always (or never) do. Welwood explains that when the singular goal of spiritual practice is to ‘be good’, it is being used as a defence against an underlying sense of deficiency or unworthiness and represents a kind of inner violence. That which is not seen as part of the ideal is deemed unacceptable and relegated, in Jungian terms, to the ‘Shadow’ (Cashwell et al. 2004). A false spiritual persona is shown to the world, while the true self is denied (Caplan, 2009).

**Avoidance/repression of undesirable or painful thoughts/emotions**

Closely related to striving for perfection and goodness is the second face of spiritual bypassing: avoidance or repression of difficult or unwanted thoughts and emotions (Cashwell et al. 2004; Masters 2010; Welwood 2000). When these don’t align with the spiritual persona that is being cultivated, they are not acknowledged or allowed to exist. Compassion, forgiveness and generosity are allowed; anger, jealousy and fear are denied. When this splitting of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cognitions or affects occur, the person loses the opportunity to use them for work on developmental tasks, unresolved emotional issues, or guides to deeper truths (Welwood 2011). Unacknowledged thoughts and emotions cannot be worked through, leading most often to unconscious, reactive behaviour versus mindful, constructive responses to life.

**Fear of individuation and avoidance of responsibility/accountability**

Individuation, or the process of becoming a differentiated human being with one’s own beliefs and ideals separate from those of parents and society, is required for both personal development and spiritual growth (Welwood 2000). When spiritual practices or beliefs are used to avoid the fear of becoming one’s own person and sidestep responsibility or accountability for one’s actions, it represents a bypassing of important developmental tasks. This is different than turning to prayer, contemplation, or spiritual advice as a positive use of spirituality. Rather, it is an abdicating of one’s role in decision-making and discounting the necessary collaborative nature of relationship with a divine source. As one Alcoholics Anonymous slogan reminds us, ‘It’s fine to pray to God for potatoes, but you also need to get out a hoe’. This kind of spiritual bypassing can also lead to what Caplan (2009) calls *mutual complicity*, a kind of spiritual co-dependence with religious leaders or spiritual teachers that relieves us from taking responsibility for our own lives.
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Fear of intimacy, closeness, vulnerability

The fourth manifestation of spiritual bypassing focuses on avoiding challenges or difficulties in relationships. Welwood (2000, 2011) states that this is because most of our unresolved psychological wounds are relational and generally initially formed through our relationships with early caregivers. A basic human need is to be loved and to know that we are lovable. When we experience inadequate or harmful love as a child, our ability to value our self and others is damaged—what Welwood calls a ‘relational wound’ or ‘wound of the heart’ (2011: 2). Misappropriation of spiritual teachings is used during spiritual bypassing to avoid dealing with this wound or feeling the pain of it. Sometimes there is flight into spiritualised detachment, protecting the person from the openness and vulnerability that real intimacy requires. Other times there is a rush toward fusion, or spiritualised communion, in order to deny the separateness and differences that are an inherent part of any relationship. Although seemingly different when viewed from the outside, both strategies are an attempt to provide a buffer against additional relational wounding while parading as a spiritual virtue or experience. And both serve to circumvent the personal work on capacities needed for healthy relationships (e.g. maintaining appropriate boundaries, negotiating closeness and distance, honest communicating of needs and wants).

Spiritual obsession/addiction

The fifth face of spiritual bypassing can be described as obsession or addiction to spiritual pursuits as a way to avoid facing the challenges of everyday life (Cashwell et al. 2007). The behaviours displayed by this type of bypassing are many. It may be constant engagement with religious or spiritual books, tapes or videos; essentially spending one’s life in conceptual or virtual space while seldom emerging into real life. It may involve constantly chasing a spiritual high from one spiritual workshop or talk to the next while failing to integrate learning into new perspectives and behaviour. Or it might include continually ramping up spiritual practices as if training for a marathon while ignoring responsibilities in other areas of life. Rather than engaging in spiritually-based behaviours to advance understanding and spiritual growth, these kinds of activities are used as a way out of facing uncomfortable realities or engaging in difficult change. As with all addictions, spiritual bypassing activities are used to self-medicate versus working through issues.

Blind faith in charismatic leaders/teachers

The sixth form of spiritual bypassing is perhaps the best known, as we are generally aware of stories where followers have been deceived and harmed by unscrupulous charismatic leaders or teachers (Caplan 2009). Welwood (2000) points out that sometimes followers with unresolved family issues will project onto spiritual teachers the qualities they wished their own parents had possessed. In such cases, there is the attempt to heal earlier wounds or trauma through winning the approval or love of the spiritual leader. Spiritual bypassing in these instances abdicates the believer’s responsibility for reflection and discernment of both the teachings and the teacher. In the worst-case scenario, a tragedy occurs, like that of Jonestown and cult leader, Jim Jones, where hundreds of people lost their lives in a mass murder–suicide. At the very least, this form of spiritual bypassing stunts psychosocial development and hinders authentic spiritual growth.
Spiritual narcissism or ego inflation

Using spiritual practices or beliefs to elevate oneself, especially in comparison to others, is a type of spiritual bypassing known as spiritual narcissism or ego inflation. It is perhaps best described as a kind of ‘I’m enlightened [or saved] and you’re not’ syndrome (Cashwell et al. 2010: 163). This ego-centred spiritual elitism is an attempt to shore up a shaky sense of self (Welwood 2000). While displaying a façade of high religious or spiritual attainment, the internal reality is often a fear-based sense of inadequacy or unworthiness. As with other forms of spiritual bypassing, there are negative consequences to the person due to avoidance of necessary work in other areas. But this face of spiritual bypassing is also particularly dangerous to others in the orbit of the person engaged in the bypassing. Spiritual narcissism and ego inflation is often one of the major dynamics at play when clergy or spiritual teachers violate their sacred authority and engage in physical, sexual and psychological abuse or coercion of their parishioners or followers (Caplan, 2009). In these cases, the unaddressed wound of the religious or spiritual leader leads to the egregious wounding of others.

Flight into humanitarian causes

One of the hallmarks of mature religious faith or spirituality is attention to the suffering of humankind and other beings (Fowler 1981). But commitments of this kind can also be used to avoid personal challenges and situations as well as enhance the wellbeing of others. Flight into humanitarian causes, the final face of spiritual bypassing, can be difficult to discern because by its very nature it appears to be highly virtuous (Welwood 2000). This can occur on a relatively small stage, as the woman who takes care of everyone else in the neighbourhood to avoid facing her own unmet needs. Or it can operate within a much larger sphere, as with the social justice leader who mounts heroic actions against injustice affecting thousands, while ignoring the plight of his own children. Similar to the other seven forms of spiritual bypassing, the dividing line between healthy and unhealthy use of spirituality here is more about the underlying function and consequences of the avoidant behaviour than the particular action itself.

Case examples

The following composite cases are offered here for the purpose of illustrating the various faces of spiritual bypassing described previously. As composite cases, the names and identifying information do not represent any one particular individual.

The Dutiful Daughter

Helen was the oldest of three children born to a Methodist minister, Thomas, and his school-teacher wife, Sarah. Both parents emphasised devotion to God and excellence in education. Helen strived for perfection in both areas and was generally rewarded for her efforts both within and outside of the family. She was often praised for giving help to others, from caring for her mother during her migraine headaches, to keeping her younger siblings quiet while her father prepared his sermons, to helping her teachers during Sunday school. Teachers, neighbours and members of the church all remarked on what a good and dutiful daughter she was, sometimes saying ‘she was too good to be real’.

While the external picture of the family was one of harmony and happiness, the internal, day-to-day reality was quite different. Sarah had initially been drawn to Thomas because of his clarity about how to live a good, Christian life. But early in their marriage, she found herself
chafing at Thomas’s insistence that he knew what was best about everything – from handling finances to raising children to managing their marital relationship. After a brief period when she fought to have her own views and needs heard, Sarah acquiesced to her husband’s dictates, given that he was ‘a man of God’. She eventually withdrew from genuine interaction and intimacy with Thomas, often citing the need to recover from her frequent headaches. By the time Helen was three, her parents marriage was one of strained co-existence, covering up a myriad of intense emotions and disappointments. She learned to bring home ‘blue ribbons’ (e.g. gold stars on school papers, perfectly memorised Biblical passages) in an attempt to make her parents happy and alleviate the sadness and unease that was the underlying climate of the household. She also learned to tamp down any thoughts, emotions, or behaviours that did not fit the image of a good and dutiful daughter.

Helen’s childhood survival strategies of hyper-vigilance, people-pleasing and denial of her own self were carried into her own marriage and family, as she, too, worked to create a home life that was well-ordered and guided by religious tenets. She concentrated on taking care of the needs of others and continued to deny or push away thoughts and emotions that did not align with her picture of herself as a good wife and mother. This self-view was threatened, however, when she learned that her husband was having an affair. Unable to handle the intense feelings of betrayal and anger she felt toward both her husband and God, Helen turned to her minister for guidance. As her husband had ended the affair and was pleading for forgiveness, this religious leader instructed her to pray for the ability to forgive and focus on mending her marriage. Although she diligently tried to follow this advice, and told her husband that she forgave him, she was deeply troubled by vindictive thoughts and feelings of rage that she could not seem to dispel, chiding herself that if she were ‘a better servant of God’ she would not be having these reactions. She eventually found relief by busily engaging in church activities, which took up more and more of her time. As time went on, she found herself estranged from her husband, emotionally detached from her children and plagued with physical problems – repeating the same dynamics of her family-of-origin.

Helen’s story illustrates several faces of spiritual bypassing. Although her early experiences with religion provided structure, security and clear guidance for living, her parents’ inability to deal with their own or their children’s emotional needs contributed to Helen’s development of a false spiritual self, or the tendency to act as one imagines a spiritual person would (Caplan 2009). Helen’s efforts at being the perfect daughter reflect the first type of spiritual bypassing, the quest for perfection and compulsive goodness. She cultivated this persona in order to cover up other unwanted aspects of herself. This persona was supported by her avoidance and repression of undesirable or painful emotions, the second face of spiritual bypassing. When she could not deny the intense feelings she had as a result of her husband’s affair, it created much suffering for Helen, which led to engagement in another aspect of spiritual bypassing: fear of intimacy, closeness and vulnerability. Really confronting her feelings about the affair would have required Helen to be open and honest with herself and her husband about its impact. Additionally, Helen’s increasing busyness in church activities as an avoidant coping strategy reflects a fourth face of spiritual bypassing: fear of individuation and avoidance of responsibility/accountability. Rather than do the hard work of discerning what she really thought and felt about the affair and what she truly wanted in her marriage, these activities served as a distraction and way to avoid this work. With the support of a spiritually sensitive social worker, helping her face these challenges while respecting her faith, Helen may have come to a deeper understanding and perhaps a more solid commitment to both her marriage and her religion. Unfortunately, the guidance from her minister unwittingly diverted her from the spiritual and psychological growth that may have resulted from a more holistic approach.
The Ceaseless Seeker

Marcus grew up the only child of a mother, Louise, who struggled with depression and abuse of prescribed medications. When his father left when Marcus was two years old, he became his mother’s sole confidant and reason for living. When his mother was in a good emotional space, they had many great times together, but when she was in a depressed state, life was very difficult. She would alternately demand attention from Marcus and then order him to leave her alone, leaving the boy confused and fearful. When Louise was high on medication, she could be very expansive and flattering of Marcus, telling him he was the most wonderful son in the world. During times when she abstained from taking pills, she became harshly critical, telling him that he was no good and would never amount to anything. His own sense of wellbeing ricocheted between glorious highs and despairing lows, all dependent on how his mother was treating him. He learned to wear a mask with her, closely reading her cues as to what his responses should be at any given moment.

Early on, Marcus found respite in books, walks in nearby woods and drawing in scores of notepads he kept hidden under his bed. He was drawn to tales of heroic adventures and other worlds, picturing himself as the lone voyager overcoming evildoers and harsh surroundings. By adolescence he found books on spiritual journeys and mysticism, which bolstered his sense that there was more to life than what the world was telling him. He eventually found one friend, Darius, who shared his passion for the mystical, with whom he spent many hours in deep conversation and debate. He felt these interactions were the only times he felt ‘real’ and felt truly lost when Darius and his family moved away.

Marcus eventually left for college and really enjoyed his courses in philosophy and religious studies. He tried to make new friends, but he found interacting with others his age difficult. His peers seemed superficial and frivolous, and he couldn’t seem to connect with girls that caught his interest. In his sophomore year, he decided that the conventional path of college and career was not for him and he began his spiritual search in earnest. Drawn to Buddhism, Marcus spent the next several years exploring various paths in this tradition and developing a set of daily spiritual practices. He frequently changed course, however, as various teachers failed to yield what he was looking for. After many attempts to find the right path, he finally found a teacher that seemed to hold the key to what he was seeking. This teacher required celibacy and detachment from worldly pursuits, which Marcus agreed to readily. He vowed to turn his life over to supporting this teacher and his teachings. He became a trusted confidant and was given more and more responsibilities for the spiritual community. Marcus felt that he had found his true home at last.

This peace was challenged whenever Marcus had contact with his mother, who had many health issues and was imploring him to come home and take care of her. At times, he felt guilty for what he thought was a lack of compassion for his mother, but told himself he had a higher calling. He finally cut off all ties with his mother with the support of his teacher. Marcus decided that his life purpose was to help lead others to enlightenment and that attachment to any one person was a renunciation of this purpose. He ignored whispers and concerns about his teacher’s harsh treatment and financial demands of devotees and chose to believe that those who were critical must be at a lower level of spiritual development than he was. Whenever doubts about his teacher arose, he increased his spiritual practices.

Marcus’s story reveals aspects of the same faces of spiritual bypassing that is evident in Helen’s story, including attempts at perfection; avoidance of painful thoughts and emotions; apprehensions about engaging in real human intimacy; and fears of individuation and personal responsibility. But his narrative also contains elements of other manifestations of bypassing, as well. The
solace that his early spiritual leanings provided for Marcus as a child became *spiritual obsession and addiction* later in his life. Rather than supporting his life purpose, his spiritual seeking became a substitute for living. We also see elements of *blind faith in charismatic leaders/teachers* as Marcus eschewed undertaking a discerning look at his teacher’s behaviour and avoided determining his own core values and framework for living. There are also features of *spiritual narcissism or ego inflation* in Marcus’s reaction to others’ concerns about his teacher’s shortcomings. By holding himself as more ‘spiritually evolved’ than others, he was able to feel special and important while repressing feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness – as well as deny uncomfortable truths about his teacher. Finally, while his goal of assisting others on their spiritual path was a virtuous one, it could be viewed as a *flight into humanitarian causes*. By focusing on the development of others, he was able to circumvent taking full responsibility for his own growth. It is unlikely that Marcus would seek professional help unless some facet of his carefully constructed life shatters, but if and when he does, a spiritually sensitive social worker could help him face the realities of his past and current circumstances while supporting a fuller and more balanced integration of spiritual principles and practices into his daily life.

### Preliminary guidelines for addressing spiritual bypassing

Both of the cases described highlight the need to address the negative as well as positive use of spirituality in clients’ lives. A review of 26 studies of social workers suggests that practitioners struggle with this area: ‘in terms of assessing clients’ particular support systems, beliefs, and/or practices, social workers appear to be more comfortable helping clients consider how these are *helpful* rather than *harmful*’ (Sheridan 2009: 118). Although this discomfort is understandable, social workers must not turn away from their responsibility to address these issues as part of ethical practice. Being a spiritually sensitive social worker does not mean ignoring the potential negative or harmful aspects of spirituality. We must determine how to address such issues while affirming the relevance and positive role of spirituality in clients’ lives. The following three practice principles are offered as possible guidelines for how we can begin to meet this challenge.

#### Understand the role of spirituality in clients’ lives

Acknowledgement of the relevance of spirituality in clients’ lives is central to spiritually sensitive social work. In the context of addressing spiritual bypassing, it reminds the practitioner to be mindful of the multi-faceted function of spirituality in clients’ lives – to remember and honour the positive even while exploring the negative. For example, if a caregiver of an elderly parent uses their faith to provide meaning and positive coping strategies in their caregiving situation, it would be a mistake to dismiss these important functions and focus only on the use of spirituality to avoid painful feelings. Likewise, it would also be detrimental to the client to sidestep exploration of this type of spiritual bypassing. The practitioner should find ways to support the positive functions while broaching the negative aspects with sensitivity and respect, which may require careful timing. It would be undoubtedly unhelpful to address the bypassing of difficult emotions at a particularly intense period of caregiving when the client is relying on spirituality to maintain functioning. Instead, the practitioner can address this issue at a later point or when the client provides an opening for discussion of this area. Keeping issues of timing in mind, a truly holistic approach to practice means addressing both helpful and harmful aspects.
Be aware of possible bias in determining spiritual bypassing

Continually reflecting on one’s own bias is an essential element of spiritually sensitive practice. In the area of spiritual bypassing, it requires the practitioner to discern whether identifying a particular belief or practice as ‘bypassing’ is taking into account the cultural context of the client or whether it is based on their own bias. For example, repeating a particular prayer several times a day could be seen as an avoidant strategy if the practitioner had a negative or uninformed view about this spiritual practice. In assessing whether an activity is reflective of spiritual bypassing or not, the practitioner must consider the effects of the activity versus their own unfamiliarity or discomfort with the practice. Is it allowing the person to function within the rest of their life or is it getting in the way of functioning? Is it helping them face a particular situation or is it helping them avoid it? Awareness of potential bias is particularly important when working with clients who have a different cultural or national background than the practitioner. Consultation with others, including religious or spiritual leaders, who are grounded in the client’s lived experience is warranted in instances where the practitioner lacks relevant knowledge.

Upholding the value of self-determination

Self-determination is a core value of social work practice that often presents challenges to practitioners. When addressing spiritual bypassing, the task is the same as in any circumstance when a social worker needs to uphold the right of clients to make their own choices even when that choice may not seem optimal in the eyes of the practitioner. For example, a practitioner may view a client’s decision to join a religious group or follow a spiritual teacher as evidence of a type of spiritual bypassing known as ‘blind faith’ or ‘avoiding personal responsibility’. In this situation, the practitioner may wish to adamantly point out that this is an unwise decision. Conversely, it may be tempting to avoid discussion with the client even though the practitioner is concerned about it. Upholding the value of self-determination while addressing the possibility of spiritual bypassing requires a mid-way response; one that involves exploration of the practitioner’s concerns while ultimately affirming the client’s right to make life decisions. Of course, determination of harm to self or others must be part of the practitioner’s deliberation here as it would be in any other practice situation.

In closing, it should be noted that the majority of social workers report they receive little or no instruction on any aspect of spirituality and practice within their educational programmes (Sheridan 2009). It is hoped that this chapter will spur discussion and dialogue about the need to include content on spiritual bypassing as the profession attempts to rectify this deficit in social work education. Thorough and balanced attention to the role of spirituality in clients’ lives – including the negative as well as the positive aspects – is needed in order to support ethical, effective and spiritually sensitive social work practice.

References

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