Part VII

Conclusion
Developing the agenda for religion and spirituality in social work

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Introduction

This volume has sought to examine and discuss the place of religion and spirituality in social work with the aim of stimulating and provoking the social work community to further develop its thinking and practice regarding religion and spirituality. It has done so by maintaining an emphasis on examining new perspectives and cutting-edge issues, and by including a mix of well-known contributors and emerging scholars in this field. Any single book or project has its limitations, and some of these were identified back in Chapter 1. Nevertheless, this volume is testimony to the burgeoning growth of scholarship and practice in this field over the last two decades. There remain, however, some challenges and opportunities for developing the agenda for religion and spirituality in social work. In particular, these relate to the perceived legitimacy of religion and spirituality within social work practice, and the need to further develop scholarship in this field.

Establishing legitimacy in social work practice

In the early 1990s, Michael Sheridan and colleagues proposed that as many as one-third of all service users in the United States presented to social workers with issues in which religion or spirituality was potentially an issue (Sheridan et al. 1992). While the proportion of service users this applies to in other countries is unknown and may vary, contributors to this volume from a range of countries would all concur that religion and spirituality are important concerns for many service users.

While there are many areas of social work in which social workers may get away with little or no understanding of the place of religion in the lives of the people they work with, this is unlikely to be so for those working with refugees. For many refugees, the persecution they have fled is directly associated with their religious beliefs (Hodge 2007a). For example, within living memory there were Jews fleeing the Holocaust in Europe and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs all displaced after the partitioning of the Indian sub-Continent. In other conflicts, religion has been entwined with culture and/or ethnicity, such as the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. Wherever they come from and whatever their religion, the lives of many refugees attest to the notion that:
religion in a civil society cannot be ignored, nor can it be privatised, and nor can it be
relegated to the margins. Religious groups contribute to the spiritual and social wealth of
the nation. But religion can also be divisive …

(Bouma et al. 2011: 80)

In particular, there are numerous instances in history when religious beliefs and/or spiritual
practices have been used as justification for violence and abuse:

We live still in a world where religious values are used to justify violence and to impose
life limiting expectations on individuals and communities. This happens at many levels:
continuing warfare in many parts of the world, tensions within communities where there
is religious intolerance; an expectation, for example, that women remain married in spite
of domestic violence; at policy and program levels such as whether funding should be
provided for condoms in AIDS prone areas.

(Gardner 2011: 20)

Arrival in a new country can bring an end to some difficulties, but new ones may emerge in the
form of barriers to religious and spiritual practice:

Voices from minority communities revealed that they were acutely aware of the difficulties
they face in being heard and in practising their religion at times, particularly the difficul-
ties in building schools and places of worship in the face of concerted local opposition,
and reactions to the physical expression of their faith through clothes and appearance.
… members of minority communities indicated that religious minorities’ perception of
“accommodation” is not that accommodations challenge core values but rather they allow
for different religious expressions; for example, permitting Sikh boys to have long hair at
school or Muslim girls to wear the hijab.

(Bouma et al. 2011: 24)

However, apart from groups such as refugees where issues associated with religion and spiritual-
ity may be impossible to avoid, social workers often fail to consider religion and spirituality as
relevant factors in people’s lives (Askeland and Døhlie 2015) or as potentially rich resources for
both individuals and communities (Furness and Gilligan 2010). Furthermore, it is not unheard
of for social workers who advocate anti-oppressive practice to have no hesitation in denigrating
persons of faith (Crisp 2011; Thyer and Myers 2009). Yet such a position is arguably at odds
with the definition of social work approved by the International Federation of Social Workers
(IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in July 2014:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social
change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people.
Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities
are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humani-
ties and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life
challenges and enhance wellbeing.

(IFSW and IASSW 2014)

Such theories and knowledge are key to the curriculum in social work education, but prac-
titioners often feel inadequately prepared to explore the significance of religion or spirituality
Developing the agenda (Horwath and Lees 2010). Nor does holding religious or spiritual beliefs and/or engaging in practices associated with a religion or spirituality necessarily result in social workers having relevant knowledge about religion and spirituality as might be required in their professional work with service users (Rizer and McColley 1996). Recognising this as an issue, the Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession have, for more than a decade, acknowledged the need for social work education to promote respect for different religions and for social workers to have some knowledge as to the roles that religion and spirituality play in the lives of the users of social work services (IASSW and IFSW 2004). Such guidance, however, may have little or no influence on regulations guiding social work education in different countries. For example, the recent Croisdale-Appleby (2014) report Re-visioning Social Work Education: An Independent Review (Croisdale-Appleby 2014), which made recommendations as to what is required in social work education in England, made no mention of religion or spirituality as areas of knowledge social workers should have. However, the lack of content about religion and spirituality is certainly not confined to England (Crisp 2011).

One suggestion that has been made is that specific teaching on religion and spirituality be taught as an elective to social work students (Sheridan et al. 1994). However, such offerings are most likely to attract students who are sympathetic to, or have an interest in, religion (Crisp 2011) and fail to tackle the broader issue of social workers needing to be able to recognise the complexities of religious beliefs, identities and practices (Anderson-Nathe et al. 2013). Another proposal is that teaching on religion and spirituality be included as part of cultural competence training (Crook-Lyon et al. 2012). While this may ensure that issues of religion and spirituality are recognised for minority groups or groups with special needs such as immigrants or refugees, religion and spirituality as a legitimate aspect in the lives of cultural majority service users may be overlooked. Arguably a more encompassing approach is that proposed by Fiona Gardner in her chapter in this volume, which recognises religion and spirituality as some of the many factors that warrant a social worker’s consideration. As Gardner demonstrates, generic skills such as the ability to engage in critical reflection, along with an openness to considering the impact of religion and spirituality, can enable social workers to work effectively with service users from diverse religious and spiritual viewpoints. Furthermore, as Fran Gale and Michael Dudley have pointed out, having one’s religion or spiritual viewpoint recognised is a human right but this is not necessarily straightforward and there may be many tensions to be negotiated:

Inevitably, there will always be inherent tensions in balancing human rights, religious beliefs and religious practice, such as the freedom of religion and belief versus freedom of expression … the conflicts between individual rights and community rights and conflicts between particular groups. These frictions can be deep.

(Bouma et al. 2011: 30)

However, silencing any discussion of religion may play a role in ‘creating and re-creating patterns of exclusion’ (Taket et al. 2009: 183). On the other hand, it is also important that social workers be able to distinguish between religion and other forms of oppression such as race, ethnicity and language, which are often conflated (Ashencaen Crabtree and Wong 2013).

Establishing the legitimacy of religion and spirituality in social work practice cannot be left solely to individual social workers. Organisations can legitimise the place of religion and spirituality for service users by recognising these factors in their policies and procedures. For example, including information about religion and spirituality on an assessment protocol indicates to staff that this is necessary for a holistic assessment (Furness and Gilligan 2010). There is also a growing recognition of the need for community leaders and organisations to have sufficient knowledge
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and skills to handle the complexities of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices (Dinham 2011). Consequently:

Within service providing organisations, a major challenge is that of designing and implementing policies, systems and practices that are inclusive, that respond to diversity rather than creating a limited understanding of majority or “normal” needs, against which other groups are constructed as deviant with “abnormal” needs, attracting shame or stigma. It is important to re-orient the mainstream towards inclusivity rather than creating a variety of special case responses that are highly limited in funding and scope.

(Taket et al. 2009: 183)

As to how this occurs in practice will undoubtedly reflect the different roles that religion and spirituality play in the civic life in countries as well as varying political contexts, cultural values and historical developments that have influenced the development of social work practice (Appleton 2005; McDonald et al. 2003). This might explain the rising popularity of mindfulness in Western social work settings, albeit typically presented in a form divorced from its Buddhist roots (e.g. Beckett and Dickens 2014; Foulk et al. 2014). Moreover, ‘social policy ambitions and social needs differ, and the economic conditions to address them also vary widely’ (Trygged and Eriksson 2012: 656). Hence, this volume has presented a range of ways in which religion and spirituality are recognised and/or incorporated into organisational practices, some of which will have more application for individual readers than others.

Developing social work scholarship in religion and spirituality

One of the strengths of this volume has been the inclusion of perspectives from a broad range of places. Consequently, it is perhaps unsurprising that this has revealed a wide range of theoretical and methodological paradigms being utilised by social work researchers concerned with religion and spirituality. There are nevertheless some paradigms that tend to have local associations, which impact on the development of research agendas. For example, when asked to compare research from the US and UK in the area of spirituality and mental health, John Swinton, whose professional backgrounds are nursing and theology, noted:

There is therefore an interesting difference in approach and style with UK-based studies tending to focus on research that is primarily aimed at practice which, at times reacts strongly against the methods and assumptions of science, and the US where the emphasis is on credibility and importance of science for helping us to understand the health benefits of religion.

(Swinton 2007: 302)

Such methodological differences are not only apparent in social work research and practice more generally but particularly in social work scholarship associated with religion and spirituality. For example, articles outlining the development of quantitative measures such as those produced by Chamiec-Case (2009), Hodge (2007b) and Oxhandler and Parrish (2016) not only hardly included any mention of literature originating from outside the United States, but are consistent with Swinton’s (2007) contention that much US research was concerned with measurement of religious participation or of the health benefits of religion and spirituality on individuals. Such research is not unproblematic. While the following statement was written in Australia, it well describes much of the US research:
In the past, religiosity has been measured by how often one attends church, or observes other aspects of a faith. Many measures that are currently used rest on Christian and Protestant assumptions about religion. However, … new measures are needed as many identify with a religion culturally, not necessarily practising that faith in its organised and official contexts.

(Bouma et al. 2011: 81)

By way of contrast, Swinton suggested that much of the UK research around religion and spirituality was concerned with concepts, the meaning of the care provided for service users and practice issues. While these questions are important, the use of other theoretical and methodological paradigms is broadening the scope of social work scholarship associated with religion and spirituality. Contributors to this volume have utilised approaches including adopting a critical theoretical paradigm (John Fox and Mark Henrickson), historical research (Mark Smith), narrative approaches (Laura Béres and Irene Renzenbrink), socio-legal research (Janet Melville-Wiseman) and organisational case studies (Eva Jeppsson Grassman).

Rather than arguing as to the relative merits of such approaches, the strengths of these and other approaches must be considered as social work scholarship in religion and spirituality continues to evolve. Extending the range of methodologies enables new questions to be asked, which is important if we are to keep developing the breadth of scholarly canon of social work research on religion and spirituality and not just the quantum of publications.

At the beginning of this project, I had somewhat naïvely hoped that one of the outcomes of this volume might be the development of an international research agenda concerning religion and spirituality in social work. However, differences in the way that welfare services are administered and provided, differential understandings of what social work is and the mandate of social workers, differences as to expectations about the place of religion and spirituality, and what are considered acceptable methodologies for researching religion and spirituality, all vary considerably between countries and make the development of a single research agenda almost impossible. Nevertheless, such differences should not be taken as a rationale for limiting ourselves to the research and practice questions and paradigms that have already found favour in our home contexts. Rather, being open to foreign ideas from our colleagues working in different countries or from different methodological paradigms is a scholarly necessity.

Some of the chapters are likely to expose readers to ideas and knowledge for which they have no apparent need. For example, Nehami Baum’s chapter, about the issues for a group of Haredi women in Israel studying social work, is at one level very specific. However, social work educators in many countries face questions about what adaptations are possible in order to meet the needs of students of particular religions and not compromise professional requirements. Employers and civic authorities also regularly face questions as to what allowances can be made to enable people to meet their religious beliefs or obligations (Maddox 2011). Furthermore, the Haredi are just one of many examples of religious groups whose members seek to limit their contact as far as is possible with those outside their religion (Doherty 2012).

Although each of the chapters in this volume raises its own questions, either explicitly or implicitly, reading across chapters can enable seemingly idiosyncratic events in individual countries to be theorised and contextualised. For example, Malta joining the European Union, and the Church of Sweden being disestablished and no longer being a state church, could readily be understood as unrelated events. However, both involve political decisions, which have led to the opening up of new conversations as to the potential contribution of religion and spirituality in social work practice. Undoubtedly there will be differences as to how these issues play out and are resolved in different countries, but a starting assumption of uniqueness breeds insularity
and limits the likelihood of engaging in potentially fruitful dialogue with colleagues elsewhere. Conversely, assumptions of homogeneity may also be scrutinised.

Utilising a comparative lens when reading apparently disparate contributions from different countries or different fields of practice can enable questions to emerge, which may not be so apparent from a single chapter. Some of the questions which emerged for me as editor were as follows:

- Does the local religious/spiritual culture have implications for social work practice, and if so, how?
- Has religion been associated with the establishment and maintenance of social and political elites, and if so, how?
- What role can religion and spirituality play in assisting individuals and communities that have been affected by war and civil unrest?
- Is there a role for religious and spiritual organisations in supporting the development of professional social work services in direct service provision and/or social work education and scholarship?
- Should the state or philanthropists pay for services provided by religious or spiritual organisations?
- How do we best equip social workers to provide religiously/spiritually sensitive practice?
- Is it appropriate to consider the tenets of a particular religion or spirituality, when establishing what is appropriate and ethical professional social work practice?
- Is religion and spirituality relevant throughout the lifetime or more particularly at certain points?
- What are the obligations of social welfare organisations in promoting and protecting the religious and spiritual beliefs of service users?
- How do social workers take seriously the religious and spiritual needs of those they work with, particularly when there is an apparent clash with other needs or values?
- How can arts-based or other non-traditional ways of working benefit service users?
- How can religious or spiritual beliefs/value systems inform macro practice, such as policy development?

This is far from an exhaustive list, and hopefully the contributions in this volume will stimulate readers to ask further questions, and even lead to scholarly research to answer these. However, consideration by readers as to why they consider particular questions to be those most salient and worthy of their attention, is also necessary given the limited resources available to most scholars to engage in their intellectual endeavours.

Conclusion

This volume provides glimpses into the overlapping domains of social work practice and scholarly research as they respond to very real issues and conundrums that emerge when religion and spirituality are taken seriously and regarded as integral to humanity. In grappling with these realities, there are often no easy answers and the ways forward suggested by some authors may even be distasteful to some readers. But rather than simply dismissing these authors and/or their solutions to the ‘problems’ associated with religion and spirituality, readers are invited to 1) consider the conditions that led to authors proposing what they have; 2) identify and explore other solutions that might be both more appropriate but also feasible; and 3) share these new ways of thinking with colleagues locally, nationally and internationally. It is only as we develop
new insights and share these within the social work profession that our practice and scholarship can continue to develop and evolve.

References


