

BELHAVEN UNIVERSITY

Integration of Christian Faith and Social
Work Practice

Belhaven University Tenure Paper

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Introduction

As I think about the academic topics to be addressed in this paper, I feel compelled to begin with my personal reflections of this journey of combining my calling to the social work profession with my Christian faith. As a Christian young adult I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to helping others, though not entirely sure through what means or what the notion of “helping” even looked like. Growing up in a Christian home and attending church on a regular basis, to help others was not only taught it was expected. It was defined many different ways—to *help* my grandmother with her yard work; to *help* the elderly neighbor next door; to *help* the stranger on the street by donating to the local shelter; to *help* missionaries by sending them money I saved throughout the year. Each of these and various other deeds were instilled in me at a young age on the philosophical basis of loving others as Christ loved and “but for the grace of God there go I.” How would I pursue developing this passion and desire of *helping* into a lifelong career? As a high school and college student, opportunities presented themselves academically and experientially which led me to choose social work as the avenue of fulfilling this calling. During the course of my studies and spiritual growth, I soon recognized there were many suppositions in social work which were congruent with my personal faith and Christian worldview; however, others existed which caused me to grapple with balancing my faith and my profession. I continued to be faced with challenges during my practice, but there were repeated

opportunities for learning and growth as not only a social worker but as a Christian who also happens to be a social worker.

As I now prepare students to enter into the social work profession, I feel convicted that it is my job to challenge them in a classroom, which is emotionally and spiritually safe. The goal is for them to struggle with their own worldviews and how to integrate them into a profession which has in recent years begun to pull away from its acknowledgement of the impact that the Christian faith has had on its development. This means that I must do more than simply insert scripture into a syllabus. I must attempt to make my students analyze and critically think about issues which are often controversial and help them to develop their stances through scripture by presenting them with both secular and biblical presuppositions. It is my responsibility to challenge them to explore how their worldviews, Christian or otherwise, are involved in the process of social work practice when they are in positions of deciding what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and why do it.

This paper will attempt to communicate what I have come to understand through my own journey as an integration of Christian faith and social work practice as well as the foundation on which I construct my classroom experience.

Philosophical Presuppositions of Current Scholarship in Social Work

The social work profession historically based much of its language and premises for practice on the foundations of the Christian church, one of the first originators of this notion of helping others. Additionally, Christian spirituality laid the foundation for the establishment of moral and social justice in both religious and secular institutions.

However, during the past 50 years, the social work profession diluted the influence of the church on the profession and has ventured toward the notion that neither institutional nor ideological religion has a place in informing social work practice (Hugen, 1998). It has been consumed with presenting itself as a scientific profession supported by quantitative empirical data, not only philosophical assumptions. Research has also shown a reluctance to incorporate spiritually related issues into social work education (Derezotes & Evans, 1995). This hesitancy, compounded by the profession's recent stance, has led to a dominant secular worldview in social work education and practice.

Though there is extensive agreement that social work has a religious foundation (Neibuhr, 1932; Marty, 1980; Keith-Lucas, 1989), it is obvious that social work also promotes a positivist worldview and devalues spirituality and religion. In the early twentieth century, logic and empirical evidence were embraced in the social sciences as superior influences to the profession. Secular theorists such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud greatly impacted the development of social work theory. Each of these social scientists viewed religion with hesitancy and doubt (Ressler, 1998). Marx viewed religion as oppressive, while Durkheim's opinion was that it was a segment of social construction functioning strictly as a societal institution. Freud's explanation was that it was a neurotic impulse. The influence of these theorists redirected the focus of social work from compassion and caring to social diagnosis.

This secularization of the profession, the idea that religion had no place informing the profession has been very extensive (Hugen, 1998). The profession has at

times been hostile toward persons and institutions that profess a Christian orientation to practice. According to Cnaan (1997), the topic of religion and spirituality has been largely ignored in social work circles over the past 50 years. Clark (1994), a social work researcher and educator, argued that if social workers wanted the profession to maintain its “political and technological gains” then social workers must not “move religion to a position of central importance.” An increased attention to the topic would place social workers on a “slippery slope.” This pervasive attitude has created a segment of social workers who advocate a form of professional tyranny with the notion that there is one correct social work worldview and one set of values in social work that all must agree with (Ressler, 1998). They believe that social workers who do not agree with this worldview should not be allowed to practice as professionals.

This secular approach has underpinnings of postmodern values emphasizing each person’s right to determine a belief and value system with no acknowledgement of a larger story which makes sense of a personal story (Sherwood, 1998). Social workers stress values such as the dignity and worth of each individual and the right to self determination; however, many deny the basis on which such a value ultimately stands. Elton Trueblood (1963) referred to this as a “cut-flower” approach. He explained that it is possible to cut a rose from the bush, put it in a vase, and admire its fresh beauty for a while. It is also possible to maintain the dignity and value of every human life while denying the existence or significance of God as the source of that value. But the cut rose is already dead, regardless of the beauty which lingers for awhile. Even uncut, “the

grass withers, and the flower fades, but the Word of God endures forever" (I Peter 1:24-25).

Social workers are taught to encourage individuals to value themselves and their capacities to become self-aware, anticipate, plan, choose and act as individuals. The notion that this right is a gift from God, the Creator, and has divine purpose is not incorporated into most social work programs nor acknowledged in the professional code of ethics. To abandon any idea of spiritual basis for these values can dangerously lead to empty motivation for moral obligations (Sherwood, 1998).

Relevant Biblical Presuppositions in Social Work

Does Christian belief have any place in the field of social work? Apart from the historical influence of the Christian faith on the development of social welfare, there are timeless presuppositions which guide Christian social workers in their professions, many of which parallel with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics.

The value of *service* is stated as, "social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems" (NASW, 1999). For Christians, this resonates of Jesus' teaching when he says, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28). Both social work and Christianity value service to others.

Social justice is the second social work value. The ethical principle is stated, "Social workers challenge social injustice" (NASW, 1999). Social justice is emphasized in

both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus broke social barriers and gender discrimination when he spoke freely with the woman of Samaria. The admonition of Micah 6:8 commanded, “and what does the Lord require of you but do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

The third and fourth social work values are *dignity and worth of the individual* and *the importance of human relationships*. The social work principles dictates that “social workers recognize the dignity and worth of the person” and the “central importance of human relationships” (NASW, 1999). Each of these principles parallels with Christ’s death as an act of unconditional love for others as well as Christians being called to love their enemies and their neighbors as themselves (Luke 6: 27; Luke 10: 27).

The fifth and sixth values are *integrity* and *competence*. The corresponding ethical principles state social workers are to “behave in a trustworthy manner” and “practice within their areas of competence and improve upon their professional expertise” (NASW, 1999). Christians are directed to act above reproach (I Timothy 5:4) and to do all things as if they are done for God (Colossians 3:17).

This “fit” of social work and Christianity appears to be an easy one. Neither to oversimplify the process of salvation nor to attempt to humanize the Triune God, Alan-Keith Lucas paralleled the practice of offering help by social workers with the help offered by the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The congruency begins with the reality that help is offered but is often resisted. Social workers often extend help to clients, but clients fear the changes that are expected of them or are so comfortable with their current situations that they refuse to accept the help offered. To accept help

requires the acknowledgement that there is a need for correction, the willingness for the helper to have some authority over one's life and the willingness to relinquish old patterns of behavior to be replaced by the unknown. This closely parallels with what the church refers to as repentance, confession, submission and faith. Even a resistance to help can also be paralleled. Clients achieve exactly what social workers ask them to do, such as keeping appointments, yet they do little to change internally. Individuals often follow all the "rules" of the church hoping that God will be satisfied and never truly seek neither internal nor eternal changes.

Methodological Contrasts and Similarities

Social work draws from an eclectic base of theories. In an effort to present itself as a profession and not only as a practice of charity, it claims a set of practice concepts based in theory which can be analyzed and tested. To achieve this, social work uses concepts related to general systems theory as a basis for its methods. General systems theory promotes the practice of working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and large social and governmental structures. It does not promote the practice of focusing on any one of these systems to analyze or correct. A *system* is defined as a "set of elements that are orderly and interrelated to make a functional whole" (Kirst-Ashman, 2011). The practitioner must evaluate problems from multiple perspectives and determine whether change is best pursued by the individual, the family, a group, an organization, or a community. The systems must have relationship to each other and are functional to the point of being able to perform some regular tasks or activities. This approach challenges workers to look beyond seemingly simplistic

presenting problems and view them as being interrelated with all other aspects of the system. Many aspects work together to affect the functioning of the whole person.

General systems theory provides the worker with a framework that extends beyond that of the individual as the sole target of intervention. The attention is diverted from the individual to the interaction between the individual and his or her environment. The target for change can be the individual, families, formal groups, agencies, policymakers, etc. The client's needs as he or she identifies them are first acknowledged. The worker is then committed to assess and help the client prioritize issues related to other systems in his or her environment. Change in the individual may also result in change in this system. In 1922, Mary Richmond, a social work pioneer, wrote, "The worker is no more occupied with abnormalities in the individual than in the environment, is no more able to neglect the one than the other" (Richmond, 1922).

General systems theory requires the social worker to assess the dynamics of the individuals as well as the dynamics of their environments. Secular social work practice does not take into consideration the spiritual or religious practices of the individuals. The Christian social worker should remember that all people have worldviews, belief systems, and value systems that determine their life decisions. Understanding the religious affiliation, the content of clients' spiritualities; the process whereby their spiritual identities were developed; and how that identity guides their principles for living gives the Christian social worker insight into their capacity for growth. Victor Frankl (1968) expounded on this principle by claiming "the proper diagnosis can be made only by someone who can see the spiritual side of man."

When working with individuals, the worker's initiative to explore spiritual issues may act as a catalyst for the clients to grapple with their own questions of meaning that underlie their life experiences. The Christian social worker sees this as an opportunity to be sensitive to the clients' situations, to help them enter a process of self-reflection, and to evaluate the principles and values they have used to give direction to their lives. The worker being willing to consider these issues may help to deepen clients' interests in their own spiritual journeys. This requires social workers to be self-aware of their own spiritualities and worldviews in order that they might be comfortable with allowing clients to struggle and seek answers.

This also requires the worker to view the individual not as an object to be repaired but as a human being in need of assistance. The helper is not the expert who diagnoses the client and prescribes treatment; nor is the helper in charge of the treatment; nor does the client need to be dependent on the expert for help. This approach emphasizes social work's attempt to address clients' needs with what Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian, refers to as an "I-Thou" relationship. This is a relationship which involves a person being valued as a human being and approached with genuine empathy and support. Secular social work does not always support this biblical approach to helping.

There are definite methodological assumptions in general systems theory which can be implemented with a Christian worldview approach; however, there are also areas of contradiction. General systems theory promotes the humanistic notion that individuals intrinsically possess strengths which enable them to help themselves given

adequate assistance. In 1952, Herbert Bisno attempted to draw from general systems theory the notion that social workers should approach human behavior as a result of a “deterministic interrelationship between the biological organism and its environment.” Aligned with this vein of thought is the idea that people are naturally good and that given opportunity they will demonstrate this. This notion is in direct conflict with Scripture which records incidences of humans as irrational creatures, most of the time, and not always choosing well. Humans are often self-consumed, short-sighted, and immature. In short, humans are fallible beings (Romans 3:23). For the worker to approach clients with any other idea is to place expectations on them which cannot be met and will ultimately lead to disappointment. However, this knowledge and insight does not give the helper/worker the right to act as judge.

Being nonjudgmental is an assumption claimed by social workers which is also emphasized in Scripture. Jesus told believers not to judge (Matthew 7). The parable of the speck and log is perhaps the clearest command. Paul also explains *why* people should not judge others. He writes, “All have fallen short of the glory of God and there is no distinction” (Romans 3:23). Social workers who are also Christians might find themselves struggling with this social work principle and biblical truth when they are asked to deal with issues that are seen by society as particularly heinous sins.

The Bible provides insights to Christian social workers to deepen their understanding of their practices and into the individuals being helped. To practice empathy from the viewpoint of the Incarnation, to support an individual through the lens of Jesus’ promise that he would never leave or forsake anyone, or to consider the

importance of individual choice in relationship to the Garden of Eden provides a deeper understanding of social work principles and presuppositions. Working with people, trying to help, can also deepen the Christian social worker's understanding of God. Finding the need for empathy with clients and seeing clients choosing to or not to respond to that empathy reminds the worker of what God did when he humbled himself and came down among his people and how great his love was for him to perform such a selfless act.

Projected Three Year Plan

I would be remiss if I did not state that the majority of my professional efforts over the next three years will be dedicated to fully developing the social work program from a biblical perspective and successfully accomplishing accreditation from the Council on Social Work Education. This is a minimal three-year process which will demand the majority of my energies and focus. The program will meet the need for students who wish to pursue practicing social work from a Christian perspective or students who never plan to professionally practice social work but wish to learn social work skills which can be used in a plethora of settings in order to further the Kingdom.

With that being said, writing this paper has rekindled my passion for the importance of the integration of faith and social work in practice and education. There is so much more to examine as the field of social work continues to address societal issues from a humanist, postmodern approach.

My future reading will lead to continued examination of this process and how Christian social work scholars are responding. I will also engage in more in-depth

studies of the influence of the Church on the development of social work by reviewing works such as *The Poor You Have with You Always: Concepts of Aid to the Poor in the Western World from Biblical Times to the Present* by Alan-Keith Lucas and *A Historical Look at Integration of Faith and Practice: A History of the North American Christian Social Workers* by Ed Kuhlmann.

I have been propelled to develop a more defined collection of works of Christian influence in the field of social work to present to students in their social work classes. To do so, examining more works written from a biblical perspective is essential. Such works might include *Charitable Choice: The Challenge and Opportunity for Faith Based Community Services* by David Sherwood which addresses how professional social workers are in unique positions to help bring people of faith and people in need together, especially if the social workers are persons of faith themselves. Another important book to give further examination is the most current edition (2008) of *Christianity and Social Work* by Beryl Huguen. This book will add to my insight into the contemporary debate regarding Christianity and social work. Also included in this text is an in-depth study of the historical religious roots of the development of social welfare.

After increasing my understanding of the historical influence and modern approaches of the Christian faith upon social work, I will be able to improve my integration into the classroom. Many students enter the field of social work because of their faith-based value systems but do not have the knowledge of how their chosen field has been influenced by Christianity. They also do not often realize that due to recent

secular influences in the field their ethics and value systems are going to be challenged. Furthering my studies will increase my abilities to equip students to gain insight into these issues. Students will be expected to be able to integrate their worldviews with their profession, both from philosophical and practical perspectives.

I will take this knowledge and continue to develop presentations to present at professional conferences, both secular and Christian based, addressing the integration of faith and Christian worldviews with social work. I will also continue to present at workshops and conferences on other areas of interest, such as counseling military families and issues related to child welfare. I also plan to complete a couple of articles for publication. Additional research based on my data gathered for my dissertation will also produce more results for future articles.

Finally, all of this is for naught if I do not continually seek to grow in my relationship with God. This brings me back to my opening remarks regarding gaining an understanding of the notion of *help*. I have come to understand that I have not only chosen social work as a profession but have a calling to help others, and social work equips me to do this in a way which I believe follows the example of the life of Christ. I have also come to understand that in order for me to follow his example I must stay centered in God, focused on him, and keep my motives pure. When I fail to remain entrenched in my relationship with him, then my *helping* becomes motivated by self-promoting motives. Even though the receivers may have their needs met, I miss the blessing and growth which comes from serving from a Christ-centered heart.

Possessing an attitude of Christ must be evident as I instruct and model for my students

lest they think they can fulfill their calling into social work through their own strengths and merits. The verse that keeps me grounded while I expend my physical, emotional and mental energies in helping those in need as well as teaching students to do the same is Isaiah 61:1. It spoke to me as a young student searching for God's will in my life. It continues to keep me focused on that calling today. "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed."

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