

## **THE INTEGRATION OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY INTO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: AN EMERGING TREND FOR THE NEW CENTURY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A resurgence of interest in the interface of spirituality/religion and social work has occurred in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The social work profession has been engaging in open debate and experimentation in the field (Canda, 1988). The centrality of spirituality and religion in clients' lives has been witnessed by their inclusion in the Council on Social Work Education's curriculum guidelines (1995) Handbook of Accreditation Standards and Procedures 4th Edition.

A number of recent studies have examined the attitudes of social work practitioners, educators and students toward spirituality and religion: Dudley and Helfgott (1990) in two Eastern states; Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, (1992) in Virginia; Furman and Chandy (1994) in North Dakota; and Derezotes (1995) in Utah and Idaho. The Generalist Social Work Practice Model is also beginning to include issues of spirituality and religion (Deboise & Miley, 1996; Locke, Garrison, & Winship, 1998). To date, there are few, if any, curriculum guidelines regarding inclusion of religion and spiritual material into micro and macro generalist practice course content. Nor has there been a national survey of social workers who are in direct practice.

Consequently, during the summer of 1997, a national study was conducted to explore the views of National Social Work (NASW) members in direct practice regarding religion and spirituality. Its purpose was to better understand the extent to which practicing social workers on a national level incorporate religion and spirituality in their practice and to explore their views of the appropriateness of religion and spirituality in social work practice.

The findings were significant and were included in the new textbook, *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping*, by Dr. Edward Canda and Dr. Leola Dyrud Furman.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

To clarify definitional issues for respondents, the questionnaire began with operational definitions of what was meant by spirituality and religion. Specifically, *Religion* was defined as “an organized structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community related to spirituality,” whereas *Spirituality* was defined as “involving the search for meaning, purpose, and morally fulfilling relation with self, other people, the encompassing universe, and ultimate reality, however a person understands it.” It was explained that spirituality can be “expressed through religious forms, but is not limited to them.” Furthermore, the respondents were informed that some questions addressed spirituality in both religious and non-religious forms. When all forms of spirituality were intended, both spirituality and religion were used in the question.

## SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire consisted of 105 items that included demographic, education, and practice information. Items concerning past and current religious or spiritual affiliation and/or involvement were used. A newly developed scale separating religion from spirituality was also employed to assess practicing social workers’ agreement with raising the topic of religion and spirituality for differing client needs. In addition, there were items exploring conflicts between religion and spirituality with the social work mission, code of ethics, and separation of church and state.

Some items were drawn from Dudley and Helfgott’s (1990) study, and Sheridan et al’s (1992 & 1994) scales. Also, modified items were used from Bullis’ Doctoral dissertation. Finally, items regarding forgiveness, the DSM-IV, referral to clergy, and attitudes about so-called cults were included.

## METHODOLOGY

A stratified-random sample of 8,000 practicing social workers was selected from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) membership lists. This survey population was limited to social workers in the following professional practice areas: Child/Family Welfare, Criminal Justice, Medical/Health Care, Mental Health, Occupational SWK-EAP, School Social Work and Other. These practice areas identified the professional orientation of the service which the NASW member was providing, regardless of place of employment or role in that service.

**Table 1. Regional Survey Response Rates**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Returned</b>	<b>Total Mailed</b>	<b>Regional Response Rate (%)</b>	<b>Margin of Sampling Error (+/-)</b>	<b>Total Returned (%)</b>
North	456	2000	23	4.6	22.0
South	537	2000	27	4.2	26.0
Midwest	513	2000	26	4.3	24.8
West	559	2000	28	4.2	27.0
Region Unidentified	4	---	---		0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>2069</b>	<b>8000</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Based upon the U.S. Census Bureau Regional Divisions, the population was stratified by state into four regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. Two thousand questionnaires were mailed to each area in June 1997. Six weeks later a replacement survey was sent to those who had not returned the survey. Of the 8,000 questionnaires mailed, 2,069 were returned, representing a 26% overall response rate (+/- 2.2% at the 95% confidence interval). (See Table 1).

## FINDINGS

### Sample Characteristics

The demographic findings of this survey closely reflect the NASW demographic surveys of their employed members, as indicated in *Who We are: A Second Look* (1997) by Margaret Gibelman and Philip Schervish. (See Table 2 below)

It is important to note that the NASW does not request statistical data regarding religious or spiritual affiliation of its members. Therefore, this survey does not have national data with which to compare its findings regarding current religious or spiritual orientation. One of the noteworthy features of this survey was that respondents were allowed to select more than one response for religious or spiritual orientations (19% of the respondents checked more than one religious or spiritual orientation.) However, this posed complications for coding and statistical tests. Tables 3 and 4 below report the religious and spiritual affiliations of the subjects in this survey.

**Table 2. US Sample Characteristics (Canda & Furman, 1999) Compared with NASW Demographics (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997)**

Demographic Indicator	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	NASW (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Female	1539	74.4	78.3
	Male	512	24.7	21.7
	Not Reported	18	0.9	-.-
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	African-American	73	3.5	5.3
	Latino/Hispanic American	34	1.6	2.8
	Asian Am/ Pacific Islander	23	1.1	1.7
	Native American/Alaskan	15	0.7	0.5
	Caucasian (EuroAmerican)	1847	89.3	88.5
	Multi-racial	24	1.2	1.2
	Other	34	1.6	0.1
	Not Reported	19	0.9	-.-
<b>Areas of Practice</b> (Respondents were asked to select as many practice areas as appropriate)	Child/Family Welfare	281	13.6	25.5
	Criminal Justice	66	3.2	1.3
	Medical Health Care	319	15.4	12.8
	Mental Health	1112	53.7	37.6
	Occupational SW-EAP	51	2.5	0.8
	School Social Work	138	6.7	5.1
	Other	364	17.6	12.0
	Not Reported	11	0.5	-.-
<b>Primary Work Setting</b>	Private	1083	52.3	66.3
	Public	908	43.9	33.7
	Not Reported	78	3.8	-.-
<b>Location of Practice</b>	Rural	357	17.3	-.-
	Suburban	740	35.8	-.-
	Urban	832	40.2	-.-
	Not Reported	140	6.8	-.-
<b>Employment Level</b>	Full Time	1541	74.5	77.8
	Part Time	440	21.3	22.2
	Not Reported	88	4.3	-.-
<b>Highest Level of Education Held by Respondent</b>	BSW/BA	48	2.3	5.8
	MS/MA/MSW	1876	90.6	90.1
	PhD/Post Doctorate	122	5.9	4.1
	Not Reported	23	1.1	-.-

(\*Gibelman & Schervish, 1997 p.44, 51-53, 58, 29-31, 43, 69, 27)

**Table 3 Spiritual Orientations of Social Workers (mutually exclusive categories)  
Singular Religious Orientation Affiliation**

	Affiliation/Orientation	Frequency (n=2069)	Percentage (%)
<b>Singular Religious Affiliations and Orientations</b>	Christian Catholic	386	18.7
	Christian Protestant	623	30.1
	Christian Non-denominational	75	3.6
	Christian Unspecified	65	3.1
	Latter Day Saints	22	1.1
	Eastern Orthodox	10	0.5
	Quaker	8	0.4
	<b>Subtotal (Christian)</b>	<b>1189</b>	<b>57.5</b>
	Jewish Reform	71	3.4
	Jewish Orthodox	2	0.1
	Jewish Conservative	36	1.7
	Jewish Unspecified	14	0.7
	Jewish – Other	5	0.2
	<b>Subtotal (Jewish)</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>6.2</b>
	Buddhism	24	1.2
	Hinduism	2	0.1
	Islam	1	< 0.1
Unitarian	33	1.6	
Traditional Native American	6	0.3	
Goddess Religion	6	0.3	
Spiritism/Shamanism	4	0.2	
Wicca	3	0.1	
Other Singular Religious *	54	2.6	
Other Unspecified Religious **	7	0.3	
<b>TOTAL RELIGIOUS</b>	<b>1457</b>	<b>70.4</b>	
<b>Singular Non-Religious Affiliations and Orientations</b>	Jewish Non-affiliated	42	2.0
	Agnosticism	70	3.4
	Atheism	32	1.5
	Existentialism	13	0.6
	<b>TOTAL NON-RELIGIOUS</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>7.6</b>
	<b>TOTAL RELIGIOUS AND NON-RELIGIOUS SINGULAR ORIENTATIONS</b>	<b>1614</b>	<b>78.0</b>
<b>No Affiliation / Orientation or Not Reported</b>	No Affiliation/Orientation	52	2.5
	Not reported	11	0.5

	<b>GRAND TOTAL SINGULAR ORIENTATIONS</b>	<b>1677</b>	<b>81.0</b>
<b>Multiple Religious Affiliation / Orientation</b>	Any religious orientation in combination with any other religious orientation (e.g. Christian and Buddhist)	204	9.9
<b>Multiple Non-Religious Affiliation / Orientation</b>	Any combination of atheist, agnostic, existentialist, and Non-affiliated Jewish)	188	9.1
	<b>GRAND TOTAL MULTIPLE ORIENTATIONS</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>19.0</b>
	<b>GRAND TOTAL SINGULAR AND MULTIPLE ORIENTATIONS</b>	<b>2069</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\* Marked other and wrote in religion

\*\* Marked other religion but did not specify a name

**Table 4 Religious or Spiritual Orientations of Social Workers (overlapping categories)**  
**Religious Orientations**

	Affiliation/Orientation	Frequency (n=2069)	Percentage (%)
<b>Religious Affiliations and Orientations</b>	Christian Catholic	471	22.8
	Christian Protestant	633	30.6
	Christian Non-denominational	118	5.7
	Christian Unspecified	95	4.8
	Latter Day Saints	22	1.1
	Eastern Orthodox	15	0.7
	Quaker	8	0.4
	Other	128	6.2
	<b>Subtotal (Christian)</b>	<b>1490</b>	<b>72.3</b>
	Jewish Reform	97	4.7
	Jewish Orthodox	5	0.2
	Jewish Conservative	45	2.2
	Jewish Unspecified	28	1.4
	Jewish – Other	5	0.2
	<b>Subtotal (Jewish)</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>8.7</b>
	Buddhism	152	7.3
	Confucianism	9	0.4
	Hinduism	30	1.4
	Islam	3	0.1
	Unitarian	33	1.6
	Traditional Native American	97	4.7
	Goddess Religion	55	2.6
	Spiritism/Shamanism	71	3.4
Wicca	23	1.1	
Other Religious	54	2.6	
<b>TOTAL RELIGIOUS</b>	<b>2197</b>		
<b>Non-Religious Affiliations and Orientations</b>	Jewish Non-affiliated	80	2.5
	Agnosticism	134	6.5
	Atheism	59	2.9
	Existentialism	111	5.4
	Other (Unspecified)	7	0.3
	No Affiliation/Orientation	52	2.5
	Not reported	11	0.5
<b>TOTAL NON-RELIGIOUS</b>	<b>454</b>		

\* Marked other and wrote in religion

\*\* Marked other religion but did not specify a name

## **Practice Issues**

It is no longer a matter of whether the social work profession should address the topic of religion and spirituality. It is already happening. The question now is how we can address religion and spirituality in a manner consistent with professional values and purposes. This dilemma was explored in depth in this national study. Twenty-two questions in the survey explored the appropriateness of social workers raising the topic of religion or spirituality with clients dealing with issues such as bereavement, substance abuse, sexual abuse, etc. Most social workers in our study believed that it is appropriate to raise the topic of spirituality in a nonsectarian manner with clients on every issue we explored, but especially regarding terminal illness, bereavement, substance abuse, and suffering effects of a natural disaster.

Most respondents also believed that it is appropriate to raise the topic of religion in cases of terminal illness, bereavement, partner violence, foster parenting, and suffering the effects of a natural disaster. But for every issue, fewer believed it was appropriate to raise the subject of religion rather than spirituality. These findings indicate that many social workers recognize the importance of spirituality and religion while also making a distinction in applying them to practice.

Unfortunately, as earlier studies also indicated, our national survey showed that about 73% did not receive content on spirituality or religion in their social work education. As students, they had rarely received relevant content in the curriculum areas of human behavior, research, and policy. Clinical practice and field practicum exposed somewhat more people to the subject, but still a small minority (less than 12%) of respondents. Even in courses dealing with human diversity, only about 13% had received knowledge to address religious or spiritual issues. Only about 17% agreed or strongly agreed that social workers in general possess the knowledge to address religious or spiritual issues and 39% agreed or strongly agreed that they not have the skill to do so. It appears from this that many social work practitioners do not feel adequately prepared to address religion or spirituality, even though they recognize its importance.

**Table 5 Appropriate to Raise Topic of Religion/Spirituality by Client Issue**

It is appropriate for a social worker to raise the topic of . . . when dealing with a client . . .	Religion			Spirituality		
	% Agree	Mean	SD	% Agree	Mean	SD
Who has a <i>terminal illness</i> .	73	3.90	1.11	90	4.30	0.87
Who has a <i>substance abuse disorder</i> .	43	3.19	1.20	74	3.90	1.03
Who is preparing to become a <i>foster parent</i> .	62	3.58	1.15	66	3.75	1.04
Who is recovering from <i>sexual abuse</i> .	46	3.23	1.20	69	3.79	1.04
Who is or has experienced <i>partner violence</i> .	44	3.20	1.17	64	3.69	1.05
Who is suffering the effects of a <i>natural disaster</i> (i.e. flood) or <i>catastrophe</i> (i.e. airline/train crash)	55	3.44	1.17	73	3.87	1.02
Who is bereaved.	75	3.89	1.08	87	4.22	0.89
Who is suffering from a chronic <i>mental disorder</i> .	36	3.05	1.17	52	3.47	1.10
Who is suffering from a <i>loss of job</i> .	36	3.08	1.15	57	3.55	1.08
Who is experiencing <i>difficulty in family relations</i> .	47	3.27	1.14	64	3.68	1.03
Who is involved in the <i>criminal justice system</i> .	40	3.14	1.14	59	3.59	1.05

**Note:** Percentages, means, and standard deviations are based on valid responses. Missing cases are excluded.

### **Ethical Guidelines for Using Spiritually Based Activities**

The survey identified a wide range of spiritually oriented helping practices employed by social workers. These interventions are listed in order of decreasing probability of use and are found in Table 6.

**Table 6 Spiritually-Oriented Helping Activities**

Helping Activity	Have Personally Done with Clients		Is an Appropriate Helping Activity (Intervention)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Help clients consider ways their religious/spiritual support systems are helpful.	1910	94.1	1941	97.4
Use non-sectarian spiritual language or concepts	1750	87.2	1817	92.6
Recommend participation in a religious or spiritual support system or activity.	1639	81.3	1728	87.5
Discuss the role of religious or spiritual beliefs in relation to significant other.	1637	80.7	1784	90.3
Help clients reflect on their belief about what happens after death.	1454	71.8	1728	87.3
Help clients consider the spiritual meaning and purpose of his or her current life situation.	1432	71.0	1635	83.2
Help clients consider ways their religious/spiritual support systems are harmful.	1427	70.9	1702	87.0
Use religious language or concepts.	1371	68.2	1482	75.8
Assist clients to reflect critically on religious or spiritual beliefs or practices.	1292	64.2	1508	77.1
Help clients develop religious/spiritual rituals as a clinical intervention (e.g. house blessings, visiting graves of relatives, celebrating life transitions).	1281	63.3	1591	81.3
Use or recommend religious or spiritual books or writings.	1197	59.0	1577	80.0
Pray privately for a client.	1167	57.9	1344	70.6
Encourage the client to do regular religious/spiritual self-reflective diary keeping or journal keeping.	1093	53.8	1610	81.9
Help clients assess the meaning of spiritual experiences that occur in dreams	751	37.2	1309	67.4
Pray with a client.	571	28.3	980	51.7
Participate in client's religious/spiritual rituals as a practice intervention.	369	18.2	720	37.6
Touch clients for "healing" purposes.	296	14.6	472	24.4

It is interesting to note that a higher percentage of respondents indicated it is appropriate to use a spiritually-oriented activity than those who actually did use it. For all but three activities (pray with a client, touch for healing purposes, and participate in the client's religious/spiritual rituals as a practice intervention), more than 2/3 of respondents believed it is appropriate to use them. Also, except for the three least-approved activities above and dream assessment, more than half of respondents have actually used these helping activities. These findings show that most social workers recognize the usefulness and ethical appropriateness of a wide range of spiritually-oriented practices. The three least approved practices are most directive and intimately involved with a client's personal life space and boundaries, so it is understandable that workers would be cautious about them. Our findings in the area of ethical guidelines reflect these concerns.

### **Religious and Spiritual Practices of Respondents**

The more a person participated in religious community services while in elementary school or adolescence, the more s/he will participate in organized religion or spiritual support groups as adults. The more positive a person feels about these religious experiences as a child the more they will participate in organized religion or spiritual support groups as adults (e.g. 66.3 % of the total sample reported positive experiences with religion and 91.1 percent with spirituality during childhood).

### **NASW Code of Ethics**

Overall, only 9% of the responders (N=189) agreed that "integrating religion and spirituality in social work practice conflicts with the NASW Code of Ethics or the social work's mission." Nearly 80% of respondents believe church/state separation does not prevent them from dealing with religion in practice. Nearly 91% believe it does not prevent them from dealing with non-sectarian spirituality in practice. These findings confirm that most social workers are already likely to feel that dealing with spirituality and religion in practice is consistent with professional values.

### **Referral of Client to Clergy or Spiritual Leader**

Surprisingly, 71% of responding social workers had referred a client to a clergy person or other religious spiritual leader. Of those, however, 43% felt that problems concerning differences of beliefs between social workers and religious/spiritual leaders would prevent referrals.

### **Forgiveness Issues**

Two questions were asked that dealt with forgiveness issues. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents indicated that it is important to help clients assess whether s/he wishes to work on forgiveness and 74% of the respondents use techniques in their practice that deal with forgiveness. This puzzling result calls for a reminder of the importance of assessment and matching a helping technique to the client's preference.

### **Informed Consent**

It was clear that the social workers in this survey did not feel that informing clients about their own belief systems when establishing the helping relationship was important; 69.1% (N=1,418 ) disagreed that it was important.

### **Religious History**

When asked whether taking a client's religious history or a spiritual history should be part of intake and assessment, 58.5% (N=1202) of the social workers in the study agreed that a religious history should be taken and 59.4% (N=1,220) believed that a spiritual history should be taken.

### **Use of DSM-IV in Practice**

Seventy-nine percent (N=1591) of the respondents reported using the DSM-IV in practice. Of those, 46.9% (n=729) consider religious/spiritual beliefs in determining a diagnoses. It is uncertain, however, what these diagnoses' might be.

### **Definition of Terms by Respondents**

This survey explored the ways that social workers understand the three common terms: *spirituality*, *religion*, and *faith*. We initially offered our own definitions of spirituality and religion so that respondents would have common meanings of the terms in mind when completing the survey. In addition, at the conclusion, we asked people to identify the descriptors (e.g. meaning, purpose, belief) that they relate to the terms *spirituality*, *religion*, and *faith*, aside from our definitions. Respondents clearly saw a close relationship between these terms, as nearly every descriptor had overlap for some people. However, a clear pattern of distinction between the terms emerged by comparing the top six descriptors for each. (See Table 7.)

**Table 7. Top Six Descriptors Selected by Respondents for Each Term**

<i>Religion</i>	%	<i>Spirituality</i>	%	<i>Faith</i>	%
Organization	78	Meaning	85	Belief	87
Ritual	77	Personal	82	Personal Relationship with Higher Power	61
Belief	74	Purpose	78	Personal	53
Scripture	73	Values	75	Meaning	44
Prayer	66	Belief	72	Purpose	39
Community	64	Personal Relationship with Higher Power	72	Prayer	33

**Note: The percentages represent those respondents who selected a descriptor associated with a given term.**

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### **Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping**

For a more detailed exploration of the issue of religion and spirituality in social work practice, please consult *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping* (1999) by Edward R. Canda and Leola Dyrud Furman, New York, Free Press.