

**Can Spirituality “Save” Social Work?**  
**A Critical Examination of Spirituality and Social Work**

by

Maxine Jessie Gibson  
B.S.W., University of Victoria, 2001

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

In the School of Social Work

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**Outside Member****ABSTRACT**

Drawing from principles of discourse analysis, this study provides a critical exploration of the contemporary debate surrounding spirituality and social work through the analysis of nineteen journal articles written by contemporary social work scholars. Two common problems identified by the scholars include the neglect of spirituality within contemporary practice and a lack of education and guidelines to address spirituality. The solutions identified by the scholars include provision of guidelines and education, the utilization of spirituality as a technique and the creation of spiritually aware social workers. The exclusion of general discussions surrounding macro level issues leads the author of this thesis to suggest that more research is necessary in order to explore how the concept of spirituality might serve to upset current power relations on a collective and systemic level in order to create a more significant impact upon contemporary social work practice and education.

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**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my mother,  
Freda Charlotte Gibson  
Thank you for showing me spirituality  
As a most beautiful lived experience

And

To my grandson,  
Keegan Paul Depner Joseph

May your world be a better place

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Lend me your hope for a while,  
I seem to have mislaid mine.  
Lost and hopeless feelings accompany me daily,  
pain and confusion are my companions.  
I know not where to turn;  
Looking ahead to future times does not bring forth  
images of renewed hope.  
I see troubled times, pain-filled days, and more tragedy. . .  
- (author unknown, cited in Anderson, 1990)

This study arose as a result of my feelings of disillusionment and disappointment in a profession that I entered full of a spirit of caring and hope. When I initially entered the field of social work, I was excited to discover a profession that claimed to match my own personal ideology and promoted “humanistic and egalitarian ideals” (Canadian Social Work Code of Ethics, 1994, p. 1). I was drawn to the philosophy that “social workers believe in the intrinsic worth and dignity of every human being and are committed to the values of acceptance, self-determination and respect of individuality” (p. 7). I was also excited about having an “ethical responsibility” to advocate for change and to fight for social justice – not only for the individual, but “for the overall benefit of society, the environment and the whole global community” (p. 9).

However, my experiences with the challenges and complexities of front-line practice have made me seriously question the validity of these ideals. As a front-line child protection social worker, I became dismayed by the discrepancy between the punitive child protection system and the values espoused by the profession. The conflict between the “humanitarian and egalitarian ideals” and the actualities of practice became more and more apparent, as the *doing* of child

protection slowly began to erode my sense of personal and professional integrity. I found it hard to ignore the devastating effects that the constant inconsistencies, disciplinary tactics, and ever-shrinking resources had on me, my colleagues, and my clients. I became aware that I was colluding in a cycle of dominance and social control “with the state, its disciplinary functions, and the histories embedded in them” (Frankenberg, 1996, p. 13). I discovered, as Margolin (1997) so aptly states: “master magicians are aware of their own illusions” (p. 4) and once I fully acknowledged these illusions, it became impossible to maintain my professional integrity and to “appear empowering while practicing power” (p. 131).

My study involves deconstructing these oppressive relations of power and examining what some contemporary social work scholars are calling a *crisis* in social work. I explore how the concept of spirituality might serve to disrupt, resist or maintain current relations of power through a critical examination of contemporary journal articles relating to spirituality and social work. I question whether spirituality has the potential to *save*, not only the profession of social work, but also social workers and their clients from the unhealthy and hostile work environments that result from restrictive services and oppressive power structures.

There is little doubt that spirituality has become a popular topic in today's society. From the self-help sections of bookstores to television shows like *Oprah* and the onslaught of *spiritual* e-mail messages, spiritual enlightenment and guidance appear to be everywhere. Although there are many varied descriptions

of spirituality, I believe that spirituality involves a relationship with a higher power and taps into that part of me that longs for meaning and purpose in life and strives for connection and sharing with others. My spiritual beliefs are modeled after those of my parents, who embraced Christian values. Rather than being overly legalistic or adhering to strict religious doctrine, my parents taught me that true Christian values encompass kindness, honesty and compassion. Of utmost importance is the imperative to be non-judgmental, unselfish and to treat others as I would want to be treated. Rather than viewing spirituality as a distinct and individual entity, I view spirituality much like I do social work, as a daily action-oriented way of living and being.

Given the popularity that contemporary spirituality seems to be enjoying in mainstream society, it is not surprising that my interest in spirituality and social work also coincides with a recent “explosion” of interest in spirituality among other social work practitioners and scholars (Canda & Furman, cited in Hodge, 2003, p. 349). According to Zapf (2003) “there is strong evidence in the literature of a recent call for social work to incorporate spirituality as part of its knowledge base and practice foundation” (p. 2). This “explosion” of interest served to validate the timeliness of my research and informed my decision to critically examine what the contemporary scholars are researching and discussing. I was particularly interested in learning how spiritually informed social work practice might differ from traditional social work practice and how this difference might affect social workers, their clients and the agencies and institutions that oversee them.

In order to provide the context framing the current debates about spirituality and social work, I explore how other disciplines and popular culture in general are talking about spirituality. I then examine the key tensions inherent in what some contemporary social work scholars are calling a *crisis* in social work. The crisis is identified by contemporary social work scholars as resulting from the conflicting social work mandate to assist people while at the same time having to judge and discipline them. Changes in the current neo-liberal political environment contribute to this crisis by restricting the funding, services and resources available to social workers and clients. These restrictions create hostile work environments and often force social workers to compromise their own personal and professional values at the expense of their clients. This violation of values contributes to the subsequent despair and disillusionment felt by many contemporary social workers, further fueling the crisis. The contemporary social worker and client are examined within the context of this crisis in order to understand how their roles might be altered by spiritual concepts.

I trace the historical roots of contemporary social work by exploring the social gospel movement, along with the personal struggles of early social gospel reformers. My study reveals that early social reform workers raised similar concerns about the conflicting social work mandate and experienced comparable feelings of exhaustion and despair. It is within this historical context of social work practice that the contemporary debate surrounding spirituality and social work is examined.

## Chapter Overview

The following chapters facilitate a critical examination of the discourses surrounding the spirituality and social work debate in order to determine how the concept of spirituality might serve to impact contemporary social work practice.

In Chapter Two, I outline the conceptual framework informing the research and the methodological approach. Drawing from Michel Foucault, I explore the concepts of discourse, truth, knowledge, power and resistance.

In Chapter Three, the contemporary discourse around the social work mission and the social work crisis is examined along with the ways in which the contemporary social worker and client are portrayed as a result of this discourse.

In Chapter Four, I provide a historical overview of the role that spirituality and religion played in the mission of social work. Due to its historical significance in the inception of social work, the social gospel movement is explored, along with the personal accounts of three female social gospel reformers. Finally, the discourse surrounding Christianity and its connection to social work practice is examined, along with contemporary discourses relating to spirituality in popular culture.

In Chapter Five, the methodological approach and method are explained, as are analytical validity, the merits and limitations of the research and methodological precautions.

In Chapter Six, I provide the findings to the first research question by exploring how the contemporary scholars define and discuss spirituality and social work, followed by an analysis and discussion.

In Chapter Seven, the findings of the second research question pertaining to how the authors perceive the problems spirituality will address are presented. I then provide a discussion and analysis of those problems.

In Chapter Eight, I present the findings of the third research question by providing a review of the proposed solutions offered by the contemporary scholars. An analysis and discussion of these solutions is also provided.

In Chapter Nine, I provide an analysis and discussion of those issues excluded from the contemporary discussions surrounding the spirituality and social work debate.

In Chapter Ten, I share my personal learning and present the conclusion of the study.

## CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Postmodernism, and the inter-related principles of post structuralism, have greatly influenced the thinking of several social work scholars. My analysis is informed by postmodernism's critique of the human service professions as the "effects of power rather than bearers of innocent knowledge deployed to help" (Rossiter et al., 2000, p. 84). As Allan Irving notes, postmodernism is now widely accepted by scholars as the "best concept for understanding our present historical condition" (Irving, 1999, p. 29, citing Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991; Lyotard, 1991; & Chambon & Irving, 1994). This acceptance is attributed to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment's failure to create economic and social well-being through reason, science and technology within the context of modernity.

As I wish to critically examine how spirituality might serve to perpetuate or obstruct relations of power within contemporary social work practice, I find Michel Foucault's ideas useful in understanding how discourse, power and resistance operate. Foucault's work is most often associated with current poststructuralist perspectives, all of which are concerned with language and its epistemological, or knowing, subject. Foucault's articulations of discourse, power, and centrally, history were most useful to me in developing an analysis of the place and significance of spirituality to social work, both past and present.

Foucault questioned the very foundations of modernity and its claims about truth, knowledge and power that support professions such as social work (Irving, 1999). Many contemporary scholars consider Foucault's ideas relating to power and how professional practices come into being both useful and relevant in

reviewing contemporary social work's objectives, activities and mission (Chambon & Irving, 1999).

While my analysis does not presume to provide a comprehensive Foucauldian analysis, I draw from Foucault's notions of truth, knowledge, power and discourse. The term discourse is being used in a wide variety of disciplines in a number of differing ways (Mills, 1997). As Chambon, Irving and Epstein (1999) explain:

Discourses are structures of knowledge and systematic ways of carving out reality that characterize particular historical moments. The embodied acts of discourse, or discursive practices, provide parameters for what can be known, said, and thought (p. 272).

Foucault was interested in the production of knowledge through discourse. His concept of discourse involves both language and practice. As Hall (2001) indicates, discourse "influences how ideas are put into practice and [is] used to regulate the conduct of others" (p. 73). Michel Foucault believed that the knowledge we possess is discursively determined; that is, discourses serve to create our identities and to determine what is possible and not possible for us (Abercrombie et al., 1984, p. 99). Thus, discourses have profound effects on the ways people act and think (Mills, 1997). Foucault also historicized notions of discourse, knowledge and truth, arguing that something is "true only within a specific historical context" (p. 74).

As I am interested in analyzing how clients and social workers are portrayed as subjects, I find Foucault's ideas about the creation of the subject useful in examining how the concept of spirituality might serve to alter the way social workers and clients are currently depicted. Foucault offers two different meanings of the word subject, one as being "subject to someone else's control and

dependence”; the other explained as being tied to one’s identity by a “conscience and self-knowledge” (Foucault, 1982, quoted in Hall, 2001, p. 80). Both meanings suggest a form of power, which “subjugates and makes subject to” (p. 80). Because it is through discourse that the subject is created, the examination of how contemporary and historical discourses impact social workers and clients is an important aspect of my study. I further draw from Foucault’s (1980) notion that “the individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (p. 98) in order to analyze how power is transmitted through the construction of social workers and the techniques and tools they employ.

### **Truth, Knowledge & Power**

While the concept of power is central to this study, it is a difficult concept to define and talk about because it operates on many different levels. Throughout the study I discuss differing levels of power such as hierarchical power, relational power and notions of a “higher” power. The relationship and interplay amongst these uses of power is complex and not easy to reconcile.

Rather than adopting simplistic notions of top-down, hierarchical power, Foucault (1980) describes power as:

...never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power (p. 98).

Foucault suggests that we look at where power “invests itself in institutions, becomes embodied in techniques, and equips itself with instruments...”(Foucault,

1980, p. 96). Therefore, in order to determine how spirituality-informed practice might differ from traditional social work practice, I explore the mission and tensions involved in contemporary practice to serve as a context and baseline with which to measure how spirituality might serve to alter current education and practice. My analysis concerns itself with the actual practice techniques proposed by contemporary spirituality theorists in order to determine how power dynamics manifest or become embedded in those techniques. Foucault also advises us not to look at power as “conscious intention, but rather where it installs itself and produces its real effects” (p. 97). Thus, I consider how spiritually-informed social work practice affects the relations of power between the social worker and client.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary spirituality’s contribution to social work practice, I draw from Foucault’s concepts of tracing current ideas backwards to determine how discourses were created and shared by history (Epstein, 1999). I provide the historical context around contemporary social work practice by exploring how religion and spirituality contributed to the mission of social work. I believe this notion of developing a “history of the present” is very useful for the study of contemporary spirituality because social work was historically founded on spiritual (i.e., Christian) values and beliefs.

### **Spirituality as Resistance**

Foucault suggested: “where there is power, there is resistance”(1980, p. 90). Faith (1994) stresses Foucault’s emphasis on the importance of resistance as a “conjunct of power” and that power actually “needs resistance as one of its fundamental conditions of operation” (p. 13). Thus, rather than examining power

relations themselves, Foucault emphasized the importance of examining the multiple ways that individuals and groups attempt to resist power. These concepts of resistance provide me with a lens through which to view how spirituality might serve as a form of resistance to existing relations of power in social work practice.

Like power, resistance is complex and multi-faceted. Therefore, one begins to recognize that “the binary division between resistance and non-resistance is an unreal one” (Gordon, 1980, p. 25). Indeed, the belief in a binary opposition, which “necessitates a belief in a singular Enemy” doesn’t fit with Foucault’s conceptualization of the networks of power relations (Faith, 1994, p. 14). Foucault’s notions relating to resistance and the binary opposition model intrigued me as I sought to draw a parallel within social work practice. I have often wondered why more social workers do not resist oppressive administrative and political policies and structures and why they do not follow through with the philosophical imperative towards social justice and action. Gordon (1980, p. 257) suggests a re-examination of resistance “whose strategy is one of evasion or defense”. I explore spirituality through just such a lens.

Rather than providing a concrete formula or strategy for resistance, Gordon (1980, p. 258) suggests that what Foucault offers is a:

set of possible tools, tools for the identification of the conditions of possibility which operate through the obviousnesses and enigmas of our present, tools perhaps also for the eventual modification of those conditions.

Foucault’s concepts of power, knowledge, truth and resistance provide me with the opportunity to utilize these tools in order to identify possibilities within

current social work practice with the hope of contributing to a new and innovative practice in the future.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL WORK**

I begin my study by exploring the contemporary discourse relating to the philosophy and mission of the social work profession. The current roles, expectations and portrayal of the present-day social worker are then examined, followed by an exploration of the definitions and construction of the contemporary social work client. Lastly, I explore the ambiguities and tensions inherent in current social work practice and how these culminate into what some scholars term the *crisis* in social work.

#### **The Social Work Mission**

The imperative to encompass individual well-being within a social context and to address and advocate for social justice is demonstrated in a “new” definition of social work created at a general meeting of the International Federation of Social Workers in July, 2000:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (Hick, 2006, p. 19).

An essential component of a “legitimate profession” is the establishment of a code of ethics in order to define “expected responsibilities and behaviors as well as proscribed behaviors” of its members (Hepworth & Larsen, 1993, p. 11). A new Code of Ethics (2005) has been produced by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW). The CASW Code draws sections of their code from its American counterpart, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). The

CASW Code of Ethics (2005) outlines six core social work values and principles: respect for inherent dignity and worth of persons, pursuit of social justice, service to humanity, integrity of professional practice, confidentiality in professional practice and competence in professional practice.

However, perhaps as evidence of the turmoil currently being experienced within the social work profession, the new code contains “no philosophical statement or vision” (Mullaly, 2005, p. 1). Mullaly (2005) expresses dismay that the statement “the profession of social work is founded on humanitarian and egalitarian ideas” contained in the 1994 CASW Code has been removed. He laments: “Without such social ideas, what is it that inspires social work? What is its social ‘raison d’etre’?” (p. 1).

What indeed.

### **The Social Work Crisis**

In the fourth edition of his well-known book, *Case Critical*, Ben Carniol (2000) mirrors my concern that the profession of social work has failed to accomplish its mission and is indeed in a state of “crisis” (p. 5). Other social work theorists agree: “the crisis in social work is manifest at all levels and in all areas of social work activity” (Mullaly, 1997, p. 13). Ife (1997) indicates that the “construction of social work” is becoming “increasingly out of step with the reality of the contemporary practice context” which leads him to question “whether social work indeed has a future, and if so what that future might be” (p. 12). I believe, as Ife (1997) does, that because the existing system is in crisis, the “possibility of system collapse must be considered” (p.36).

The impetus behind this crisis is discussed in the following section and reveals several themes. One of these themes involves the tension between the social work mission to provide humanitarian care to clients versus the institutional requirement to investigate and exert control over the poor and oppressed in society. This tension is exacerbated by the current neo-liberal political climate, within which individuals are viewed as responsible to provide for their own needs and resources and services that social workers are able to provide are severely limited. These tensions and restraints impact managers, supervisors, social workers and clients and serve to create a hostile and unfriendly environment. They also serve to perpetuate the contemporary discourse relating to the profession of social work as a substandard and struggling profession. While some authors identify these discourses as a troublesome yet inevitable part of social work practice, others believe that these tensions appear to be gaining momentum and culminating into a crisis needing acknowledgement and immediate attention.

### ***Conflicting Roles: Caring Versus Social Control***

There is certainly little doubt that a major tension still exists between the values of caring for the needy versus the need for social control evident within the social work profession (Epstein, 1999). While the profession is generally acknowledged as a social science, the coercive power inherent in social work as a social institution is not always recognized. As Epstein (1999) states, "social work is a major social institution that legitimates the power contained in modern democratic capitalist states" (p. 8). Thus, in order to ensure that the population doesn't question societal inequality, and remains accepting of liberal democratic

ideals, social work must serve the dual role of maintaining the status quo, while at the same time attempting to challenge it in order to honor its commitment towards social justice. Thus, there is an intrinsic dissonance operating within the profession of social work whereby to accomplish its purposes it must dominate clients while at the same time putting forth a “democratic egalitarian manner” (p. 8).

The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Work Code of Ethics (1993) openly acknowledges this tension by stating: “Social Workers often work within the context of an apparent dilemma; that of client empowerment and social control” (p. 2). The function of social control is problematic for social work because it conflicts with the very definition and mission of the profession and thus is often hidden under the guise of providing assistance (Gambrill, 1997). As Margolin (1997) states, “the constant work required to balance an interest to do good with a controlling, coercive, investigatory function” (p. 4) evident in the social work profession helps to explain the discomfort many social workers feel. Thus, social workers are constantly trying to shield themselves from their awareness of the “impossible alliance between judging and doing good” (ibid, p. 4) and use strategies to balance this discrepancy. This leads social workers to constantly deny evidence that they are engaging in such power dynamics as deception or manipulation. Such recognition would represent what Margolin (1997) terms an “ontologically fatal insight” because social work survives “only in so far as it hides from itself any awareness of what it is actually doing” (p. 60).

As a result of the dissonance created by the imperative to help individuals adjust to the status quo, while at the same time trying to bring about social change, the social work profession has difficulty defining itself and providing a clear understanding of its own practice (Epstein, 1999). To compensate for this difficulty, the social work profession subscribes to a rational and scientific approach as a way to gain validity. However, Ife (1997) reasons that social work's "insistence on the importance of knowledge, skills *and* values make it more than a "technical activity" (p. 11, italics in original). It is this emphasis on values that makes social workers uncomfortable practicing in increasingly bureaucratic and hostile environments as discussed below.

### ***Bureaucratic, Restrictive and Hostile Environments***

One of the main goals of the social work profession is "to establish a societal environment that promotes and enhances the human potential of all members of that society, each in accordance with their own potential" (Delaney, 1995, p. 16). However, conflicting values exist between a "restrictive and supportive" approach toward the provision of services. Delaney (1995) explains these two competing perspectives as "the institutional perspective", which "views social welfare as a necessary social institution that essentially meets the needs of people" (p. 16). Adherents to this approach tend to favor values such as equality, altruism, and social justice. The second perspective is the "residual" approach which views services as a "limited and temporary societal response" necessary only when families are unable to cope (p. 16). Adherents of this approach favor notions such as individualism, existentialism, and mistrust (Delaney, 1995).

Mullaly (1997) believes that a crisis exists in the welfare state whereby the government has assumed a residual perspective, relinquishing their responsibility by reducing resources and placing “demands on social workers to provide more with less” (p. 13) perpetuating a crisis for the profession as a whole. He attributes this crisis to changes in the economic, political and social environment, which he believes are “fundamentally in opposition to the values of the profession” (p. 13).

Such changes contribute to budgetary restrictions and staff shortages, which equate to fewer resources and increased work demands being placed upon social workers. The effects to front-line practice are described in a study involving British Columbia workers:

Social workers and supervisors stated that too many demands and not enough time were two factors that interfered most significantly with good decision making. Workloads were frequently described as impossible, overwhelming and a major cause of increased stress and pressure, which in turn creates ‘assembly-line’ social work (Callahan, Field, Hubberstey & Wharf, 1998, p. vii).

Social workers are further demoralized by the flow of “top-down” power which channels “punitive actions” (Carniol, 2000, p. 71) and contributes to their feelings of alienation and powerlessness. As Carniol (2000) points out, this top-down flow of power is not just confined to government. Social workers in voluntary service agencies are also subjected to what at times amounts to an “appalling imbalance in power” because, as one worker put it, “*the person who supervises you clinically is the one who hires you, is the one who fires you, is the one who disciplines you and is the one who overrules you*” (quoted in Carniol, p. 71, italics in original).

As a result of this hierarchical structure, social workers often find themselves faced with discrepancies between the policies and regulations of the agency or the institutions where they work and the needs and best interests of the client. Thus, they are forced to decide which takes priority – their employer’s needs or the client’s needs. In addition, there are times when the procedures and practices of the institution or agency do not match with the ethics and standards of the social work mission. As Hick (2006) notes: “balancing one’s beliefs, professional standards and agency rules can be difficult. In this context, the social worker’s place of employment can be either a source of empowerment or a source of distress” (p. 71).

As supervisors and managers are responsible for enforcing policy and budgetary restrictions, they pass on these expectations to social workers. While some supervisors do their best to minimize the impact of these restraints, others use their power in a way that undermines the social worker’s effectiveness. For example, I witnessed one supervisor berate a social worker in front of the entire staff for failing to carry out an oppressive policy. The social worker broke down in tears and quit her job shortly thereafter. At times, supervisors don’t recognize the impact that budgetary cut-backs have on the social workers’ feelings of competency and levels of stress (Carniol, 2000). That is, if areas such as overtime are restricted, social workers are either forced to leave essential tasks not completed or work overtime without pay. Supervisors sometimes use intimidation tactics to discourage social workers from making requests or questioning oppressive practices. As one social worker explains:

*The thing is, the supervisor sometimes doesn't have the answer either. But instead of admitting it, the supervisor scares away the worker. After being treated that way, the worker learns not to ask again. Especially since it's the supervisor who evaluates the performance of the front-line worker* (quoted in Carniol, 2000, p. 68, italics in original).

As a front-line social worker, I experienced similar intimidation and fear tactics. For example, my attempts to challenge policy, to advocate on clients' behalf and to practice in a transparent manner, were sometimes met with accusations that I was "too creative, too honest, too nice" or even worse, that I was becoming "enmeshed" with my clients. Thus, at times I found myself hiding any signs of "excessive" caring in front of certain supervisors. The extensive training I had received relating to the importance of developing a trusting and caring relationship with clients was clearly not sufficient in teaching me how to cope with such situations. As Carniol (2000) points out, although the possibility exists for social services to be offered in a humanitarian way, "social workers find their competency undermined by the very contexts they work in" (p. 62).

It would appear that no matter how much social workers want to assist their clients, nor how "sensitive their communication skills" (Carniol, 2000, p. 63) the root of the problem is not addressed and remains beyond the reach of social workers. As a result, many social workers feel incompetent and powerless to act in the best interests of their clients. Such circumstances lead social workers to grieve, not only for the adults and children suffering from lack of services and resources, but also for the "illusions" (Moran, 1992, p. 52) they once held for the profession.

It is obvious that such an environment is not receptive to the “kind of dissent, creativity and seeking of alternatives that are a natural consequence of social work’s primary commitment to a value position” (Ife, 1997, p. 11). Thus, social workers are left in the difficult position of having to choose to remain silent and accepting of the environment or to attempt to challenge a system that is not open to change and which is “fundamentally hostile to social work values” (Ife, 1997, p. 24).

### ***Social Worker Stress and Burn-Out***

Social workers suffer profound effects resulting from the economic restraints, bureaucratic systems and hostile environments described above. One worker sums up these effects well:

*We’re talking basics here. It could be a family that’s being evicted with five or six children; there’s no groceries so they’re hostile. That’s why our caseload is critical to their well-being. Yet the demands go beyond our energy and time. Talk of pressure! I’m developing allergies and my doctor tells me its stress related. Other social workers have migraines. There’s been marriage breakdowns among my co-workers. I’ve seen social workers becoming hysterical, breaking down and crying at the office (quoted in Carniol, 2000, p. 67, italics in original).*

Unfortunately, I believe such effects are not uncommon among social workers. I, too, have witnessed social workers breaking down, taking stress leave and experiencing marital breakdown. Many workers fear admitting that they are feeling overwhelmed because they don’t want to be viewed as incompetent or unable to handle the demands of the job. By working in environments which violate both their professional and personal values, social workers are placed in impossible situations whereby they must either change their perception of what a

social worker is and does or leave the profession altogether. Carniol (2000)

describes this *crisis* through the words of a front-line social worker:

Many front-line social workers feel alienated from their work, with a sense of powerlessness and frustration. There is low morale, unsupportive management. As one worker said about her colleagues: *If you ask any of these workers about how they see the future, they'll all tell you the same thing – I want to get the hell out of here.* (p. 5, italics in original)

Thus, Butot (2004) contends that social workers suffer from burn-out<sup>1</sup>, not “*from compassion, but rather from being blocked from our compassion because of the structuring of social work practice*” (p. 13, italics in original). Margolin (1997) sums up the conflict this way:

the deceptions, the manipulations, the need to live by two contradictory imperatives simultaneously, torture at the same moment they seduce. How much burn-out results, how much pain, there is no guessing. Yet the message of burn-out is clear; we cannot deny past and present complicity by telling flattering stories; nor can we resign ourselves to paralysis. The denial is too massive, the pain too great. (p. 180)

Social workers who choose to stay are not only expected to be able to maneuver within these stressful environments, but they must also learn to live with themselves and attempt to be comfortable with the way their personal and professional values fit within such a contradictory climate. In a sense, they have to be able to construct themselves and their clients in a way that justifies their actions and ways of practicing. Such tensions in practice not only contribute to the crisis in social work, but also contribute to the feelings of alienation and

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<sup>1</sup> Described as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do “people work of some kind” (Maslach, quoted in Monk, 2004). In its latter stages, “burnout is a crisis situation” (Monk, 2004, citing Gilliland & James).

powerlessness social workers feel, thereby creating an identity crisis for social work professionals.

### **The Construction of the Contemporary Social Worker**

In contrast to the feelings of powerlessness and frustration with the realities of front-line social work practice examined above, contemporary social work texts portray a very different conceptualization of the modern day social worker. According to a social work text written by Steven Hick in 2006, a social worker is comfortable assuming numerous roles, and chooses the specific role that is “most effective with a particular client in the particular circumstances”(p. 68). Thus at any given time, the social worker is or could be: “an enabler, a broker, an advocate, an initiator, a mediator, a negotiator, an activist, an educator, a coordinator, a researcher, a group facilitator and a public speaker” (p. 68).

According to Hick (2006), no matter what context social workers find themselves:

...they must apply themselves at all times in a professional manner, using all the knowledge and skills they have at their disposal and taking into account the specific needs of the client and the range of remedies currently available (p. 68).

The social worker must choose from a wide variety of different theories and interventions. The Hick (2006) text, for example, lists 29 different theories and therapies from which a social worker might choose to draw. The social worker’s background and beliefs about social work theories and therapies will have an impact on how they choose to intervene. In addition, as each client is viewed as being unique, social work is seen as more than merely a “mechanical process” encompassing more than “technical knowledge and skills” necessitating the social worker’s ability to “think on [their] feet” (p. 86). Hick (2006) compares

this ability to that of a “dancer” who, while having knowledge of the technical steps, still needs to be able to integrate these “moves” into effective social work practice. Thus, in order to be “truly excellent”, a social worker needs to be an artful improviser because social work is “art as much as it is science” (p. 86). Such descriptions of social workers as improvisers and all-knowing subjects, not only contradict the realities of front-line practice, but also present a stark contrast to those depicted by the popular media as I examine in the following section.

### *Social Workers As Modern Day Versions of the Dodo Bird*

One does not have to go far to see evidence of the crisis of identity and bad press contemporary social workers face. For example, in a recent issue of the Canadian Union of Provincial Employees magazine (Winter 2005/06), it is stated that the Liberal government in British Columbia sees social service workers as a: “modern-day version of the Dodo bird: as a species that is headed for extinction” (p. 5). A local newspaper, *The Times Colonist*, recently printed a cartoon depicting a mother with children attempting to contact the Ministry of Children and Families. The mother states: “The “Ministry of Children and Families is in upheaval. The only person left in the Minister’s office is the cleaning lady” (“Ministry of Children & Families in upheaval”, 2006). Another woman advises her to “call the Premier and complain”, whereupon the mother states, “are you kidding? This is the best service I’ve ever had.” (p. A14). The apparent conclusion one is to draw from this depiction is that social workers are incompetent and that cleaning ladies can provide better service than social workers and the institutions that employ them.

The same newspaper, just days previously, printed front-page headlines depicting a composite drawing of an Aboriginal man who confessed to killing a 19 month old female child, Sherry Charlie, left in his care by social workers. The headline read: “No child should be in my care”...followed by the statement: “Sherry’s killer says he discussed his criminal record with social workers” (“No child should be in my care”, 2006). The article paints a horrible picture of negligence and incompetence, not only on the part of social workers, but also on the agency placing the child. Perhaps even more damning were the headlines relating to the same incident appearing on August 9, 2005, screaming: “More deaths waiting to happen” (“More deaths waiting to happen”, 2005).

Such depictions no doubt have a significant impact on both social workers and the people they serve. Needless to say, as a woman who values her role as a social worker, I feel uncomfortable with the portrayal of social workers as incompetent, irresponsible or knowingly contributing to the death of innocent children. Nor do I feel comfortable sitting by and waiting for “more deaths to happen”. I’m sure this negligent and passive approach does not elicit confidence in clients or children either.

Understandably, in order to preserve their personal and professional identities as helpers within a humanitarian profession, social workers often seek to transcend these painful discourses. One such technique suggested to social workers as a way to “enhance personal identity” and accomplish “professional transformation” is the use of “bio-spiritual music” (Gallant et al., 2005, p. 1). An example of bio-spiritual music is the song “I’m Happy, Yes, So Happy”, written

by Dr. Wilfred Gallant (2005), an associate professor of Social Work in order to “encourage helping professionals to accept their shortcomings and to take life in its stride with a cosmic sense of humor and a spirited sense of wittiness” (p. 1). Dr. Gallant’s song is an excellent example of an attempt to transcend current social work discourses and to construct happier, albeit rather passive and self-sacrificing, social workers.

### **The Construction of the Contemporary Client**

In order to understand how concepts of spirituality might serve to impact social work clients, I felt it important to explore how the client is defined and portrayed in traditional social work practice. Hick (2006) defines the client within the context of social work as “the person or persons with whom the social worker is working” (p. 88). While the term *client* has been debated as a derogatory term, given that it alludes to a person as being a “powerless object of practice”, Hick (2006) utilizes this term with the disclaimer that it is not intended to be used in a negative manner, but rather views the client as ... “being involved in a partnership with the social worker in a relation of empowerment” (p. 88).

Hepworth and Larsen (1993) believe that although the profession of social work has borrowed from other disciplines, it enjoys a “rich heritage and has achieved distinction as the profession that advocates for the poor, the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised and the oppressed and can take pride in being referred to as the profession that services the nation’s conscience” (p. 2). Although once primarily restricted to serving strictly the “poor and disadvantaged”, the profession has expanded to serve in a wide variety of settings

with people of all ages, races, socio-economic levels, and spiritual backgrounds (p. 2).

Mullaly (2005) expresses concern, however, that the new Canadian Social Work Code of Ethics (2005) no longer regards clients as their primary professional obligation as was the case in the 1994 Code. The new Code states that: "social workers maintain the best interests of clients as a priority with due regard to the respective interests of others" (CASW Code of Ethics, 2005, p. 3). Thus, the agency, or those more powerful will likely take precedence when conflicts occur (Mullaly, 2005).

Social workers are also required to work with client groups and communities as well as to consider the well-being of society as a whole. This range and diversity of who constitutes a "client" (individual, group, community, society) necessitates the social worker to have "multiple skills and a broad-based perspective" (Hick, 2006, p. 85) toward social work practice. Thus, although some social workers might specialize within a certain client population, they "require a range of basic skills" in order to generalize their knowledge among such diverse and inclusive client groups.

### *Clients As Docile, Tragic Experts*

While the song discussed above is meant to provide self worth and a sense of the "whimsical" to hurting social workers, it does so by constructing a docile and tragic client, who, on the one hand is trusting and open to telling their "fine" secrets to social workers, while on the other as "just a drunk", who is "damned" by the courts (Gallant, 2005, p. 1).

In the case of Sherry Charlie described earlier, three clients are named and described. Sherry herself is portrayed as a young and vulnerable child who was left at the mercy of incompetent social workers who are held responsible for her untimely and tragic death. Sherry's uncle, while acknowledged to be Sherry's "killer", is constructed as an expert in his own self-assessment and blames social workers for not having the basic assessment skills to determine that he was indeed a killer in disguise. The child's aunt, Claudette, is revealed to have been working at the Aboriginal agency that placed the child in their care and appears to be an innocent bystander to the whole scenario. Rather than examining how the community and government might be held accountable, the clients are pitted against the social workers, with social workers clearly portrayed as the enemy.

Such portrayals of clients and social workers are a stark contrast to the construction of clients and social workers in the mission and philosophy of social work and contribute to the discourses of social work as a dying and inefficient profession. It is within the context of these discourses that the social work crisis becomes manifest resulting in cries for a "reformation of social work theory" and "transformational knowledge" (Mullaly, 1997, p. 13) of how practice can become more consistent with the profession's basic egalitarian and humanitarian values. In the following Chapter, I explore the roots of contemporary social work values through an examination of the role that religion and spirituality played in the creation of the social work mission.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROLE OF RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY IN THE MISSION OF SOCIAL WORK

The social worker is a missionary, whose mission is to teach not how to  
die but how to live...

(Margolin, 1997)

In order to fully understand the contemporary discussions surrounding spirituality and social work, it is necessary to examine the role that religion and spirituality have played in the creation and mission of the social work profession. Therefore, my analysis of the contemporary mix of spirituality and social work necessitates an examination of social work practice within the context of its religious and spiritual roots. Contemporary social work is profoundly impacted by religious and spiritual philosophies and values, particularly those relating to the Christian faith. The historical relationship between contemporary social work and the Christian church began with the growth of the social gospel movement (Moffat, 2001). As this movement is considered to be the precursor to present day social work practice, this chapter begins with an exploration of the philosophies and values behind the social gospel mission.

Even though social work values were originally based on Christian beliefs and values via the social gospel movement, the problems surrounding the discourses and definitions of Christianity have seldom been examined within the social work literature (Rojek, Peacock & Collins, 1998). Rather than either defending or demonizing historical social reform actions undertaken in the name of Christianity, I explore the fundamental philosophies of the Christian faith in order to gain a deeper understanding of the historical social gospel movement, as well as the controversies and discourses surrounding Christianity and how they

contribute to contemporary social work practice. I seek to gain an understanding of the complexities of early social work practice by examining the personal accounts of three Canadian social gospel reformers. I chose women because there is substantial evidence in the literature that women's voices have typically been excluded from the contemporary literature relating to the social gospel movement (Moffat, 2001).

### **The Social Gospel Movement**

Many historians consider "social work as the secular replacement of the social gospel movement" (Hick, 2006, p. 55). The social gospel movement is defined by Allen (1975) in a broad sense as referring to "any and all efforts of Christians to express their faith in a social context" and was based on the premise that Christianity was a "social religion...concerned with the quality of human relations here on earth" (Allen, quoted in Warne, 1993, p. 3). Allen (1975) indicates that the word "social" in social gospel was used to differentiate this movement from that of preceding generations who held "intensely individualistic" means of conceptualizing and solving problems (p. 2).

The social gospel movement grew out of the desire of "theologically liberal progressive minded Christians" (Allen, 1975, p. 4) to respond to the challenges and resulting social problems of industrial urban society. Given the grave social difficulties of the early 1900's such as the economic depression, the unprecedented growth of cities and the massive marketing problems for farmers, "if there had been no social gospel [movement] it would be necessary to invent

one” (p. 10). That is, the social gospel movement that developed would be “what one would expect in Christians, if they were true to their calling...” (p. 10).

Social gospel reformers were interested in creating a more prosperous and equal society and believed that the social structure itself required “salvation and redemption” (Moffat, 2001, p. 20). The capitalist system “which by nature was exploitive, competitive and greed-driven” was thought to be one of the primary obstacles to a reformed society (Allen & Warne cited in Moffat, p. 21). Thus, “social gospel advocates combined an emphasis on individual responsibility with a commitment to social reform” (Agnew, 2003, p. 117).

Allen (1975) highlights the religious and intellectual background of the social gospel movement in Canada and credits the series of awakenings and revivals occurring in North America, Britain and parts of Europe during the 1880’s and 1890’s as contributing significantly to the Canadian movement. These revivals perpetuated the idea that “radical change” was possible, with God viewed as an “immanent” and “crucial mediator” (p. 12) intervening towards the transformation of society. As Hick (2006) notes, the social gospel movement in Canada arose within the major Protestant churches as part of a movement within these churches for a “more socially oriented message or social gospel, concerning justice and social action” (p. 55).

Although some individual members of the social gospel movement expressed resistance to oppressive practices, the practice and mission of social work has been and is “profoundly shaped by both its imperial past and its liberal base” (Jeffery, 2002, p. 29). Social gospel reformers consisting largely of middle

and upper class women motivated by their Christian ethic of service “were the precursors to paid, professional social workers” (p. 56).

Organizations arising from the social gospel movement, such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the YMCA were initially criticized by some religious institutions for “improperly taking on the religious functions of the churches” (Allen, 1975, p. 14). Others criticized social gospel reformers for having a tendency to “lose touch with reality and to interpret the world too much in terms of religious wish fulfillment” (p. 6). In spite of this criticism, many of these organizations (such as the Woman’s Missionary Society and Young Women’s Christian Association) began to set the stage for modern social services.

By the mid 1900’s, the emphasis in social work shifted away from its religious roots towards a more scientific imperative, leading to a perceived necessity for professional training. As a result, the first Canadian social work education program was established at the University of Toronto in 1914 (Jeffery, 2002). Tensions arose around the emerging philosophy and mission of social work and the subsequent development of the profession’s knowledge base. A basic conflict occurred between the need for an empirical, scientific base versus the desire for a knowledge base steeped in ideals based on social justice (Moffat, 2001). Thus, during the 1920’s and 1930’s as social work was rising as a profession, the competing paradigms of scientific knowledge and humanistic values were “hotly debated” (p. 4) and resulted in numerous public debates around the formation of public and secular social work interventions.

Even though the majority of those involved in early social work practice were women, a “gender bias” is evident in historical documentation, with the presence of women notably absent (Moffat, 2001, p. 10). However, two female practitioners (Dorothy Livesay and Charlotte Whitton) left “exceptional archival records” (p. 10) documenting their struggles because they were likely aware of the historical significance of leaving such a legacy. It is interesting to note that three of the four social workers studied “experienced emotional exhaustion due to the demands of a shifting epistemological context” (p. 10) and although the women had diligently worked towards the creation of social work as a profession both were removed involuntarily from their paid social work positions.

The formation of the Canadian Association of Social Workers in the mid-1920’s led to the development of social work as a “technical occupation entrusted to expert professionals rather than to private, voluntary, religious-based philanthropy” (Moffat quoted in Jeffery, 2002, p. 67). Moffat (2001) notes that many male leaders were active in promoting a technical and bureaucratic approach to social work, confident that value neutral, scientific knowledge would be beneficial to society. An example of such scientific technology was the emergence of individual casework with clients, which was touted as objective and factual and discouraged the subjective involvement of social workers. It was argued that professional objectivity was the most effective approach when dealing with issues as complex as poverty (Moffat, 2001).

Thus, the Social Gospel movement declined during the 1920’s, with secular organizations and social welfare institutions, who were sometimes critical

of church institutions, gaining influence within the field of social work (Allen cited in Moffat, 2001). While some historians argue that the advancement of scientific knowledge created “a crisis of faith”, others suggest that a “subtle and intricate relationship” (p. 21) developed between the religious and scientific paradigms. Thus, rather than science replacing the religious paradigm altogether, there was an attempt to “integrate confidence in science and technology with a spiritual sense of mission” (p. 22).

On the other hand, it was the striving for scientific and professional status that contributed to the subsequent neglect of the “sacred and the spiritual” (Ife, 1997, p. 10) by the social work profession. Thus, although religion-based agencies occupy a significant place in the history of social work, Ife (1997) argues that they continue to occupy a “deviant or marginal position” (p. 11) throughout all aspects of the social work profession.

### *Excluded Voices of Women*

The Social Gospel movement was based on the practical work or praxis of  
women....  
- Moffat (2001, p. 21)

Consistent with feminist theory, research relating to the social gospel movement has recently attempted to uncover the lost voices of women (Edwards & Gilford, 2003). Reviewing narrative accounts of the social gospel movement through the eyes of women provides an excellent opportunity to examine the subjective, lived experience with all its complexities and incongruencies. As Moffat (2001) suggests, previous social work history has relied primarily on

events and facts, at times neglecting embedded assumptions as well as the values underlying those assumptions.

By exploring personal accounts, I gain an understanding not only of the values assumed to have been synonymous with Christianity and the social gospel movement, but also those beliefs and practices which were resisted by these women. An analysis of these themes offers a baseline with which to compare how their means of resistance and emphasis on structural issues and social justice continues to resonate within the contemporary spirituality and social work debate. It speaks to the similarities experienced by contemporary social workers continuing to struggle with the restrictions placed upon them by institutional restraints and exposes how the effects of such struggles become manifest in the disillusionment and despair felt by both social workers and their clients.

I chose to examine the experiences of Beatrice Brigden, Ethel Dodds Parker and Nellie McClung, three Canadian social gospel reformers, in order to seek from first hand accounts, the themes and tensions surrounding early social work practice. According to Stebner (2003), Beatrice Brigden is one of many women previously neglected in historical accounts of the social gospel movement. Ethel Dodds Parker writes from the perspective of a student with the first class at the University of Toronto School of Social Work in 1914 and as a resident staff member of St. Christopher Settlement House (Parker, 1975). Although she was primarily a writer, Nellie McClung is said to have been an important contributor to the social gospel reform movement (Warne, 1993).

### *Importance of Structural Issues*

A central element of McClung's philosophy was her emphasis on social responsibility – “not just of the individual to society, but of the society to the individual” (Warne, 1993, p. 18). This form of modern day structural social work is summed up eloquently by McClung:

If women would only be content to snip away at the symptoms of poverty and distress, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, all would be well and they would be much commended for their kindness of heart; but when they begin to inquire into causes, they find themselves in the sacred realm of politics where prejudice says no women must enter (p. 161).

Similarly, Ethel Dodds Parker (1975) critiques the methods utilized in “philanthropy, and in reform and rescue work” as “seriously lacking in wisdom” as they were “dealing with the produce of anti-social influences without endeavoring to get at the economic and other causes of the evils recognized by all” (p. 94). Thus, consistent with many adherents of the social gospel movement, Parker believed that structural problems were at the root of individual dysfunction.

### *Emphasis on Social Action*

Never retract, never explain, just get the thing done and let them howl!  
(McClung, quoted in Warne, 1993, p. 6)

In addition to the attention they paid to the root causes of individual dysfunction, which they believed could be traced to structural issues such as poverty and unemployment, all three of the women emphasized the need to combine social work with social action. For example, Beatrice Brigden (1975) stated, “I have never been able or concerned to restrain myself from social action” (p. 60). Brigden's mother was affiliated with the Quaker faith and as a young girl,

Brigden witnessed the Women's Christian Temperance Union taking up many causes involving "women's liberation in everything from dress reform to white slave traffic" (p. 40). Brigden (1975) herself was involved in such varied initiatives as studying social and economic issues, teaching public speaking to unemployed men and organizing women in Winnipeg neighborhoods. In the 1930's, she gathered responses to social problems to present to the Premier of Saskatchewan. To gain an understanding of the suffering and humiliation involved in being "on relief" (quotation marks in original), she cut off her own income for a period of 3 months and subjected herself to the "relief regime" (p. 60).

In the midst of these tensions, Brigden (1975) indicates that along with many members of the social gospel movement, she began to "give a more explicit political expression to [her] social and religious beliefs" (p. 56). While acknowledging that many oppose the combination of the political with the religious, Brigden's definition of politics became: "working together to fulfill the needs of others as you would have them fulfill yours" (p. 56). Thus, as Stebner (2003) explains, Brigden came to understand politics and religion as "working together to address the needs of all people" (p. 63).

### ***Institutional Restraints***

From her father, a minister on Moose Mountain Indian Reserve in Manitoba, Ethel Dodds Parker (1975) learned of the tensions inherent within the differing philosophies and approaches in the Christian community, which she describes as the "tug between evangelical and social Christianity" (p. 89). Parker

(1975) describes this “general tension between traditional evangelicals and the social gospel” as an ongoing debate (p. 89). That is, while social gospel adherents believed in serving the whole community regardless of nationality or religion, “there was always a strong and vocal number of church members, mostly ministers, who protested its lack of religious teaching” (p. 110). For example, settlement staff were often questioned why they were not “conducting Sunday services, opening every meeting with prayer, and bringing members into the church” (p. 110).

All three women also speak about the difficulty of maneuvering within hierarchical structures, which place individuals in positions of power and influence and often have a negative impact upon social work practice and methods. For example, Parker (1975) describes Rev. E.B. Horne’s “rigid conventionalism and absolute faith in evangelistic methods” and R. M. Inkster as a man who “swung it so far into rabid evangelism as to be quite out of line with Presbyterian church methods” (p. 94). McClung also experienced difficulties with opposing individuals in power. For example, her contemporary, Stephen Leacock “establish[ed] himself as an ardent spokesman for British Imperialism and “stood diametrically opposed to [McClung] on almost every issue” (Warne, 1993, p. 105). Leacock’s vision of imperialism was one that “affirmed the superiority of the white male and reflected profound mistrust of the ‘lower’ races” (p. 105). He believed that “at least part of women’s moral inferiority is due to their inability to follow rules and cooperate” and that unlike their superior male counterparts, “women could never be a team of anything” (p. 109).

*Resistance to Convention*

I prefer to work with and for people rather than to preach at them.  
(Parker, 1975, p. 9)

Through the writing of their own personal stories, all three women demonstrated resistance to conventional norms of silence and compliance with the status quo. All were willing to risk personal discomfort and professional ostracism through the naming of oppressive practices. For example, Ethel Dodds Parker (1975) indicates that staff members at the Settlement Houses (including herself) recognized that they were involved in “an implicitly religious activity” and admits that it was “often quite explicit” (p. 113) especially on such occasions as Christmas and Easter. She resisted these oppressive practices and expresses her discomfort with this form of practice, asking: “was it the Settlement’s job to teach only a single religious belief? We were continuously disturbed by that question” (p. 113).

Similarly, it was through McClung’s writing that she fulfilled what she believed to be her moral obligation to enact social change and, I would suggest, her own personal form of *resistance*. This is evidenced by McClung’s “writer’s creed”:

Writers are properly prophets, whose true purpose is to write words that will strengthen the weak, convict the stubborn, and shed light where darkness reigns...we believe in human beings, ever looking for the image of God in every human face (Warne, 1993, p. 14).

Although not widely acknowledged as a social gospel reformer, Warne (1993) makes the case that Nellie McClung’s many writings and narratives “became a potent weapon” toward women’s work being recognized and

rewarded in an attempt to create a “feminist and religious vision” (p. 4) which would empower women to work for social change.

### ***Disillusionment and Exhaustion***

Beatrice Brigden (1975) speaks to the challenges and realities surrounding her involvement in social action activities and indicates that many of these causes were being “denounced from some pulpits” with many husbands and fathers forbidding their wives and daughters to attend meetings (p. 40). To put it into context, Brigden explains: “if the struggle for women’s liberation today seems Herculean, in those days of hypocritical sexuality and legitimized exploitation, it was positively everlasting labour” (p. 40).

Brigden (1975) also discusses her shock and disappointment at the division caused within the church community involving labor movements and social justice issues. For example, she states:

three ministers whom we knew well...were now out of the church entirely due to their social protest on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, their cry for justice and humanity for all, which I had myself been advocating in my work with the Social Service Department. I felt compelled to take a long look at the situation (p. 55).

Unfortunately, and, perhaps not surprisingly, Brigden resigned in 1920, “exhausted” and needing to care for her aging mother and “disillusioned with the Methodist church” (Stebner, 2003, p. 63).

Similarly, although Nellie McClung was viewed as religious and retained her affiliation with the church, she was also very disillusioned and “actively critical of many of its actions” (Warne, 1993, p. 166). For example, McClung quite bluntly states:

The church, as an institution, has become the unwitting perpetrator of abuse, and its unwillingness to challenge convention and follow Christ's plain teaching will have a serious price...many women will remember with bitterness that in the day of our struggle, the church stood off, aloof and dignified, and let us fight alone" (McClung quoted in Warne, 1993, p. 166).

The personal accounts of Beatrice Brigden, Ethel Dodds Parker and Nellie McClung provide a backdrop to the contemporary discourse around spirituality and social work in several important ways. They expose the assumption that social reformers had uniform religious agendas as false. Each of these women resisted the priorities impressed upon them by religious institutions to impose their Christian beliefs upon the oppressed. Instead, Brigden, Parker and McClung each expressed insight into the structural causes of inequity and focused on the need for social justice and reform in spite of the considerable pressure they received from these religious institutions. In addition to religious institutions, the women resisted those individuals in power positions whose philosophies and practices were inconsistent with social gospel aims and to the women's own personal value systems. Evidence of the effects that these conflicts had on Brigden, Parker and McClung is manifested in their emotional turmoil, expressions of anger and disenchantment with the church and those individuals who ignored Christian ideals. Such conflicts and misuses of power had an impact on the effectiveness of the women's actions and how the discourses around Christianity and the intent of the social gospel movement were recorded and taken up historically. Ultimately, they also impacted the subsequent construction of social work as a profession, which I explore in the following chapter. Further analysis of the general notion of spirituality as resistance as well

as how these accounts serve to impact contemporary spirituality and social work practice will be expanded upon in Chapter Nine.

### **The Discourse Surrounding Christianity**

He has shown you, O man, what is good  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
And to walk humbly with your God  
(Micah 6:8, Holy Bible)

The above quote suggests that the requirements of the divine from a biblical perspective are surprisingly simple, yet it is widely recognized that the combination of church and state has created historical tension, with examples of imposed religiosity and proselytizing prevalent. In a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural country such as Canada, there are certainly other spiritual perspectives with which to view social work practice and education. However, as the Christian faith informs the philosophy of the historical social gospel movement and ultimately the contemporary social work mission, I feel it necessary to focus on the values and beliefs underpinning basic Christian beliefs and how these might serve to impact current discourse relating to the combination of spirituality and social work.

Kruger (1999) believes the social gospel message is “clear and uncompromising” and developed as a direct result of Christ’s words:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matthew 25:35, quoted in Kruger, 1999, p.25).

Kruger (1999) argues that the above Christian philosophy is compatible with contemporary social work's ethic to "advocate for the equal distribution of resources to all persons" (p. 26). However, a tension exists in social work practice between the ability to provide and advocate for such resources and the restrictive and unsupportive state institutions where the social worker is often employed.

Another crucial tension pervading Christian philosophy involves the issue of religious pluralism or the acceptance of other religions and forms of spiritual diversity within its domains. Frankiel (1985) notes that historically while Christians fought to prove that their faith was "the one true way" (p. 124), contemporary Christianity appears to be more accepting and willing to work with others to share ideas and work cooperatively. This is partly due to the contemporary attitude of tolerance, which, according to Frankiel (1985), makes it "rather impolite to claim such specialness" (p. 124). In addition, pluralism on a global scale has led Christians to learn more about other religions and spiritual forms throughout the world, leading to a greater acceptance of a spirituality based on individual preferences.

Nonetheless the issue of truth and whether there is more than one way to God continues to be an important contemporary debate. For example, contemporary social workers may be hesitant to broach the topic of spirituality or religion for fear of imposing their own version of spiritual truth onto clients. Such fear of imposing one's spiritual beliefs is warranted given the problems that imposed religiosity and inappropriate proselytizing have wreaked historically.

For example, Stebner (2003) acknowledges that religious reform often attempted to “assimilate new immigrant people” and to “convert and civilize Aboriginal peoples” (Warne, quoted in Stebner, 2003, p. 13). This imperative was evident in Canada through the “mission” (p. 57) to integrate Aboriginal people via residential schools. Rather than being viewed as cultural genocide, many social reformers viewed residential schools as meeting the “practical and physical needs of Aboriginal peoples” (p. 57).

Although some Christians feel justified to force their rules and cultures upon others, coercion is incompatible with basic Christian beliefs and values as modeled and advocated by Christ himself. For example, while popular Christian scholar, Philip Yancey (1995) admits to learning manipulative techniques for “soul winning” and at times “misrepresenting” himself, his research uncovered that Jesus “would not force himself on those who were not willing” (p. 77), refused to use coercive power” (p. 246) and “showed an incredible respect for human freedom” (p. 80). Yancey (1995) dispels notions of Christianity’s intent to be an imposed or restrictive religion by pointing out the fact that Jesus did not wish to “convert the entire world in his lifetime”, nor to “cure people who weren’t ready to be cured” (p. 246). Surprisingly, Jesus himself did not possess what is commonly referred to in popular discourse as a “savior complex” (p. 80). Such respect for personal choice and freedom serves to change and broaden contemporary discourse around Christianity and how it tends to be viewed.

In contrast to these ideals of personal choice and freedom, notions of the self-sacrificing subject continue to influence the professional identity of social

workers. The concept of self-sacrifice prominent in many Christian traditions was derived in part by the practice of sacrifice in Judaism (Frankiel, 1985). As Frankiel (1985) indicates, the image of personal sacrifice has dominated Christianity more than it has other religions. However, rather than relying on the power of God or Christ to intervene, contemporary social workers within secular practice are expected to have faith in themselves to heal societal ills and take on many roles in the servitude of both their individual clients and the public in general. These roles contribute to the sense of omnipotence and subsequent fear of disaster that shadows the contemporary social worker. As Bridget Moran, a generalist social worker in the 1960's states: "we always had a sense that we were too dependent on luck, a feeling that catastrophe was waiting for us just around the corner" (p. 50).

Obviously, such forms of self-reliance and self-sacrifice are not without consequence for those wanting to help others and to be of service to others. Jesus himself was no stranger to suffering and "experienced sorrow, fear, abandonment and something approaching even desperation" (Yancey, 1995, p. 161). As Yancey (1995) notes, "it staggers me to realize that the son of God himself emitted a cry of helplessness in the face of human freedom. Not even God, with all his power, can force a human being to love" (p. 160).

That being the case, how likely is it that contemporary social workers might hope to initiate successful societal or individual change through their own efforts and self-sacrifice? Given the emotional turmoil, worry and fear invoked by such impossible expectations, many social workers simply quit in silent

resignation. In the next section, I explore the contemporary discourse around spirituality as it relates to other professional disciplines and to popular culture in general.

## Contemporary Discourses Surrounding Spirituality

### *Spirituality as an Alternative to Scientific Knowledge, Power and Truth*

Increasing interest in contemporary spirituality as an alternate form of knowledge and power appears to cut across all disciplines, from the traditional helping professions to the business community as well as popular culture in general. In the nursing profession for example, Sandblom et al. (cited in Tanyi, 2002) indicate that although spiritual care has been a part of nursing “since ancient times” there has been “a resurgence of spiritual discourse, as scientific-based approaches are not fully able to address many fundamental human problems such as persistent pain” (p. 500). Within the health care system in the United States, Tanyi (2002) believes that people are upset by the “impersonal managed health care system” and are searching for alternative forms of healing (p. 500).

The business community has also “discovered spirituality” (Coates, J, personal e-mail received May 8, 2005). A recent article published in the *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, indicates that business schools are now offering courses relating to “spirituality and personal fulfillment in the workplace” (Alsop, 2005). The headline reads: MBA programs cross taboo line to teach spirituality in class. The aim isn’t to proselytize but to teach students to remain true to their convictions” (ibid, 2005). Although historically viewed as “taboo”, such courses are viewed as a timely and important means for workers to address “that part of themselves” and as an alternative to unhealthy ways of coping such as the use of antidepressants. Students are encouraged to choose work that expresses their own

values, is of benefit to society and to “look beyond prestige and salary and ask whether a potential employer is a good fit morally and spiritually” (Holt, cited in Alsop, 2005). Ironically, I (and I suspect many others) initially chose social work as a profession precisely because of its emphasis on values and supposed benefit to society, only to find that some employers do not share those values.

Notions of spirituality as elements of personal truth, knowledge and power are also echoed in popular self-help books, along with promises to “lead us to become more refined and transcendent in our personal power” (Myss, 1996, p. xiii). In her popular book, *The Anatomy of the Spirit*, Caroline Myss (1996) combines the Judaic, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist “concepts of power into seven universal spiritual truths” (p. xiii). She believes that “knowledge is power, and the knowledge presented in this book is the key to personal power” (p. xiii).

Similarly, in his book, *The Power of Now, A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, Eckhart Tolle (1999) draws from the words of Jesus, Buddha and others in order to emphasize that there “is and always has been only one spiritual teaching, although it comes in many forms” (p. 9). His purpose appears to involve uncovering the *spiritual essence* of these ancient religions because their “deeper meaning is no longer recognized and their transformative power lost” (p. 9). Tolle tells the followers of these teachings and religions: “there is no need to go elsewhere for the truth...let me show you how to go more deeply into what you already have” (p. 10).

Acceptance of spirituality within higher education is increasing partly because many scholars have “worldviews embedded in the spiritual” and partly

because of the “inclusion at the discourse table of those historically excluded – African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, Latino-Americans and other marginalized groups” (Dillard et al., 2000, p. 447). In challenging current mainstream Eurocentric educational paradigms, these groups are offering alternative “truth[s] of the very conceptualizations of what it means to be human, attempting at multiple levels to demystify the value-free claims of social science” (ibid, p. 447). Such notions of truth serve to disrupt the postmodern view that there is no one underlying truth underpinning contemporary society. As Asante and Richards (quoted in Dillard et al, 2000) emphatically proclaim:

...the heretofore silencing of the spiritual voice through privileging the academic voice is increasingly being drowned out by the emphatic chorus of those underlying versions of truth [which] cry out “We are a spiritual people!” (p. 448).

### *Spirituality Versus Religion*

Many contemporary authors feel the need to differentiate between the concepts of spirituality and religion. Some believe that the concept of spirituality is preferable to that of religion. For example, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) contend that traditional forms of religion, especially Christianity, are commonly being replaced by “holistic spirituality” (p. 1) and that research studies indicate that many people now prefer to call themselves spiritual as opposed to religious. Their thesis tests the “spiritual revolution claim” that religion will be overtaken by spirituality and that a “tectonic shift in the sacred landscape” will occur and will be “even more significant than the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century” (p. 2). Drawing from the Charles Taylor concept of “the massive

subjective turn of modern culture”, they indicate that a major cultural shift is occurring in today’s society whereby people are no longer adhering to “objective roles” (such as those of devoted worker). Instead people are moving into a “subjective life” which they describe as “life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of myself in relation” (p. 5). They conclude that those institutions that cater to this subjective turn are on the increase, while those that operate in “life-as mode” will find themselves “out of step with the times” (p. 5). This shift has implications for the profession of social work if social workers become less interested in the objective role of “social worker” and more interested in creating meaningful subjective experiences and relationships.

In her book *Living Spirit, Living Practice*, Ruth Frankenberg (2004) differentiates between the terms spirituality and religion. She views religion as signifying “specific form, history and institution” as well as encompassing a sense of belonging to a particular group. While the terms spirit and spirituality sometimes encompass religion, spirituality for her respondents tends to be “...processes that might equally well take place with or without relationship to specific religious institutions” (p. 3). I agree that the practice of spirituality does not necessarily involve an affiliation with a religious institution and that the terms spirituality and religion encompass different meanings. This differentiation is further discussed in Chapter Six.

### ***Spirituality As A Marketing Tool***

Ruth Frankenberg (2004) notes that she became troubled by the “seemingly endless flow of new books, lead articles in mainstream magazines,

even new lines in clothing and advertising” utilizing the concept of spirituality. Indeed, in response to Frankenberg’s question, “what does the term *spirituality* mean to you?” one of her respondents answered, “It’s marketing” (p. 3).

Similarly, Patricia Aburdene, author of *Megatrends 2010, The Rise of Conscious Capitalism* describes spirituality as “surprisingly practical in business” because the “game in business is to influence” (Spiritual leaders, April 19, 2006, p. 2). Not only does Aburdene view spirituality as the “greatest megatrend of our era” (p. 2), but she believes that one’s spiritual orientation can open more career opportunities because recruiters are likely to be impressed by “genuine motivation, passion for work and an absence of personal ambition” (p.2). Those in management and supervisory positions “who wear their soul, albeit not obviously” (p. 2) are also viewed as having more job opportunities because they will be less likely to succumb to the temptations of power.

The discourses surrounding spirituality as a marketing tool and as an advantage in the “game” of business conflict with the more benevolent notions of spirituality as a legitimate form of truth, knowledge and power being taken up by other disciplines. Such conflicting notions around the trendy topic of spirituality speak to the timeliness of my research and confirm the need to consider how spirituality is being defined and discussed by social work scholars and how they envision its impact upon contemporary social work practice and education.

## CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

My feelings of disillusionment with the oppressive circumstances and power structures I found myself in as a social worker propelled me to explore how the concept of spirituality might serve to disrupt these oppressive structures. I wanted to understand how these forms of power came to be, how they worked and how I, and others, might resist. I was interested not only in exploring how spirituality might serve to alter social work practice, but also in discovering how clients and social workers might be changed through such spiritually-influenced practice. Thus, my exploration of spirituality's contribution to the practice of social work necessitates a critical analysis of how spirituality is informing these debates about power. I use the term *critical* as a "method of inquiry, investigation, turning over, probing or delving into, so as to find something new or to see what is already known in a different light" (Ruggiero, 1998, p. 11).

As spirituality is not a concept easily understood and studied cognitively (Ouellette, 2000), I thought it important to be creative in my approach by combining various methodological perspectives as well as drawing from a number of different theories and ways of knowing. This utilization of multiple research techniques is consistent with the principles of both feminist social research (Neuman, 1997) and discourse analysis as both are often combined with other theoretical approaches (Fairclough, 2003).

By incorporating my own personal feelings, experiences and opinions throughout the study, I draw from both principles of feminist research (Neuman,

1997) and discourse analysis, which “does not deny, but explicitly defines and defends its own sociopolitical position” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96).

I chose to draw from the area of discourse analysis because it relates to the “study of the relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality and the position of the discursive analyst in such social relationships” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 300). Although there is no single “recipe” for employing discourse analysis methodology, I found the approaches of van Dijk (2001) and Wetherell, Taylor and Yates (2001), coupled with a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, knowledge, power and resistance helpful in assisting me to employ a critical examination of the contemporary literature surrounding spirituality and social work.

My analysis not only involves an examination of discourse, but also involves “modes of exclusion” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 303) within the discursive structures themselves. This “practice of exclusion” is common to all views of discourse and relies on the use of language that appears “natural” and “self-evident” (Mills, 1997, p. 59). It is this familiarity and acceptance of cultural norms that makes them so difficult to identify and question, as they appear so natural (p. 59). Thus, I pay particular attention to those voices excluded from the dominant discourses and explore how their issues and problems were historically discussed and how this compares to the contemporary discussions surrounding spirituality and social work. This examination not only serves to expose previously unquestioned discourse, but disrupts scientific tradition, which

assumes that society naturally and inevitably progresses based on new developments in scientific knowledge.

Discourses are not necessarily “all powerful” (Wetherell et al., p. 273) nor do people always passively accept them as truth. Discourse can interact and become mediated by other discourses “to produce new, different, and forceful ways of presenting the issue” (p. 271). Thus, I attempt to discover how the contemporary literature relating to spirituality and social work might serve to produce new forms of knowledge and power effects.

### **Overview of the Data**

As I was interested in critically examining the contemporary discourse around spirituality and social work, I chose a total of nineteen journal articles for analysis. These articles were written primarily by professors and scholars within schools of social work in various universities throughout Canada, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. References marked with an asterisk in the bibliography indicate studies selected for analysis. Although the authors are primarily considered scholars as opposed to front-line social workers, the majority of articles consist of research studies soliciting the opinions of frontline social work practitioners, students, educators and clients.

The articles I reviewed encompass a ten-year period, from 1994 to 2004, with every year represented with the exception of 1996. As the following table indicates, research studies and discussions surrounding spirituality and social work have appeared consistently in academic journals over the last ten years.

**Table 1: Number of Articles by Year and Author**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Articles</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>
1994	1	Sermabeikian, P.
1995	1	Derezotes, D.
1996	0	
1997	2	Carroll, M.; Jacobs, C.
1998	1	Cascio, T.
1999	2	Kaplan, A. & Dziegielewski, S.; Sheridan, M. & Amato- Von Hermert, K.
2000	1	Northcut, T.
2001	2	Damianakis, T.; Gotterer, R.
2002	3	Edwards, P; Griffith, M. & Griffith, J.; Rice, S.
2003	4	Coholic, D.; Epple, D.; Henery, N.; Hodge, D.
2004	2	Canda, E., Nakashima, M. & Furman, L.; Furman, L., Benson, P. & Grimwood, C.

### **Data Collection**

In order to gain a more complex understanding of how the concept of spirituality might alter social work practice, I chose all journal articles meeting the broad criteria of spirituality and social work in order to elicit diverse content and differing viewpoints. My selection of articles was obtained through database searches using the three Social Sciences Indexes available in the University of Victoria Libraries Gateway: 1) The Web of Science: the ISI Web of Knowledge; 2) The Social Sciences Index (1984-): The H.W. Wilson Company/Wilson Web; and, 3) Social Work Abstracts 1980-current: CSA Illumina, Advanced Search. A systematic search of these indexes was performed using the key words, *spirituality and social work*. The criteria for selection included peer reviewed journal articles relating to the incorporation of spirituality into the practice of social work with a generalized population. Those articles relating to specialized populations were excluded. As interest in spirituality and social work has increased significantly over the past ten years (Csiernik & Adams, 2002), journal articles written in the last ten year time period (1994 to 2004) were chosen for review. Excluded from the same search were non-research-based reports or discussions, unpublished manuscripts, books, tapes or electronic media and articles published outside the designated time. A total of nineteen articles were found matching the above criteria.

### **Research Process & Analytical Procedures**

My analysis began by numbering each of the journal articles according to the last name of the author. I read and summarized each of the journal articles to

obtain an understanding of what the authors were attempting to portray. I reviewed each of the articles with the following questions in mind:

- 1) How do the contemporary scholars define/discuss spirituality?
- 2) What are the problem(s) that spirituality is seen to address?
- 3) What are the solution(s) to these identified problem(s) as perceived by the scholars?

Referring to the above questions, I drew from general concepts relating to discourse analysis recommended by Wetherell et al. (2001). I began by exploring the way the authors conceptualize, define and discuss spirituality. I summarized each of the author's definition(s) of spirituality as well as their definition(s) of religion where applicable. I looked at the similarities and differences among the definitions and looked for themes in each of the categories. I colour-coded those phrases and concepts in each of the emerging themes.

I then created a matrix chart from these themes and noted where each of the authors discussed this topic. For example, I noted that many of the authors discussed spirituality as a resource. Thus, I chose this as a theme and utilized actual quotes from the individual articles to substantiate that this author had discussed spirituality as a potential resource. For example, Damianakis (2001) discussed spirituality as an "expanded opportunity for self-discovery" (p. 12). I interpreted this comment as encompassing spirituality as a resource, so placed this quote in the matrix chart under that heading.

The second question I examined was how the authors articulated the problem that spirituality was attempting to address. As Wetherell et al. (2001)

indicate, beginning with a definition of the problem, rather than a traditional research question, speaks to the “critical intent of this approach” (p. 236). Thus, I reviewed each of the articles and recorded how each of the authors spoke of the problems that the concept of spirituality was attempting to address. I noted these problems on individual cards according to the number of the article and the author’s name. I then looked for themes among the problems identified by the nineteen authors and colour-coded those concepts that were consistent with each of the themes.

I then reviewed each of the articles once again in order to identify possible ways past the obstacles or problems identified by the authors by analyzing how each of the authors conceptualized solutions to the problem(s) that spirituality is attempting to address. Thus, once again, I reviewed the articles and noted on individual cards the solutions that the authors offered to the problems that they had identified. I looked for themes among the author’s responses and then colour-coded the themes according to similarities in the way they were conceptualized.

The final stage of analysis often involves a “dynamic process of interpretation and reinterpretation” (Wetherell et al., 2001, p. 307) making it difficult to conduct an analysis in a step-by-step, linear manner. My final stage of analysis involved just such a dynamic process of critically reflecting on the data and identified themes, interpreting and reinterpreting, then formulating the analysis. I began by critically examining the discourse surrounding contemporary spirituality and social work practice through an exploration of the responses to the three questions posed to the articles. I explored contemporary theorists’

definitions of spirituality, along with the embedded assumptions accompanying them. I also looked at the contemporary discourse surrounding spirituality and religion along with the controversies both invoke for the profession of social work. I examined the problems identified by the authors and through an examination of the scholars' solutions to these problems, anticipated how spiritually-influenced practice might serve to change the relationship between social workers and clients. I next explored those issues and historical debates excluded from the contemporary discourse.

### **Analytical Rigor**

Throughout the research process, I have maintained rigor by carefully documenting my data collection and analytical procedures. In the data collection stage, I retained copies of the results of all of the searches, and kept a record of why each article was either chosen or eliminated from the research based on the chosen criteria. In order to ensure rigor, the process of choosing articles for selection was completed in consultation with committee members and in conjunction with my thesis supervisor. She provided feedback and assisted in the data selection process to ensure that all selected documents met the chosen criteria and those excluded did not meet the chosen criteria.

The analysis of the journal articles involved a very thorough process of reading and re-reading the articles and of marking the sections where the definitions, problems and solutions occurred, in addition to writing the definitions, problems and solutions on separate cards. This process allows for verification of my findings and can easily be checked for accuracy. I also created matrix charts

in order to determine those areas that represented themes and to provide a count of how many of the authors discussed the particular area. These charts not only provided me with a means to count and document the authors' statements, they also allow for the analysis to be easily verified. In addition, the themes emerging from the data were made easily identifiable by colour-coding and maintaining a master list of the themes corresponding to the colours on the cards.

Once my analysis was complete, I re-read the articles and cards once again to ensure accuracy. I also consulted with my thesis supervisor on a regular basis and received feedback from other members of my committee. In consultation with my thesis supervisor, it was determined that because my study does not involve human participants, approval from the Ethics Committee was not required.

#### **Merits & Limitations of the Research**

There are merits to conducting discourse analysis with contemporary literature because current issues are usually easier to understand than historical concerns (Wetherell et al., 2001). In addition, data are usually easier to obtain and the context of the debate easier to grasp. By examining data arising from nineteen contemporary social work journal articles, my research covers a broad range of opinions from a number of different countries. In addition, by reviewing journal articles written over the past ten years, I was able to benefit from each author's literature review, to ensure that I wasn't "losing" any important contributions to the spirituality and social work debate.

On the other hand, the use of journal articles as data made it important to separate the data from the body of the thesis. Therefore, I was careful to contain

the data to the Data Collection, Findings and Analysis sections of the document. I chose to utilize the literature review as a means to provide historical context to aid in the understanding of the current spirituality and social work literature and discourse.

My data were limited to peer reviewed journal articles relating to the incorporation of spirituality and social work with a general population and excluded those articles and books discussing specialized populations. My data were also restricted to the discourses and debates surrounding spirituality and the social work profession from the years 1994 to 2004.

A limitation of conducting discourse analysis with contemporary literature involves the “difficulty of stepping outside the data” (Wetherell et al., 2001, p. 307). As Wetherell et al. (2001) explain, it is often “difficult to identify discourses within which we ourselves are immersed, or that we agree with, or which we accept as taken for granted or common sense” (p. 307). I attempted to overcome this limitation by being critically self-reflective and transparent throughout the research process and by obtaining feedback and comments from my supervisor and colleagues.

### **Methodological Precautions**

Throughout this research project, I have been challenged to define a concrete methodological approach, which adheres to the requirements necessary for a valid study. Part of this challenge involved my struggle to define my research within a critical, postmodern framework. While I agree with Fardella (2005) that “postmodern theory, particularly that of Michael Foucault” contributes

significantly to critical analysis, I also share his concern that postmodern theory risks weakening our collective struggle for social justice and “possible reconciliation of difference” (p. 11). That is, Fardella (2005) argues: “in order to maximize the possibilities for social justice and social solidarity, all practitioners, religious and non-religious, modernist and postmodernist, need to risk promoting universal concepts of the common good” (p. 11). He envisions a “self-reflective form of spirituality” which includes a concern to maintain the cooperation necessary to “achieve rational understanding and consensus” (p. 11).

I deal with my concerns about postmodern theory by firstly acknowledging that theory itself cannot lay claims to represent *truth*. Thus, I open myself up to the possibility that universal values and notions of the common good are possible to attain, while still embracing difference. I share Mullaly’s (2005) concern that without some kind of common vision, we have no direction and no idea of the kind of society we are striving for, which ultimately negates the necessity to fight for social justice and change.

## **CHAPTER SIX: DEFINING SPIRITUALITY IN A SOCIAL WORK CONTEXT**

In this chapter I examine the first question I explored within the nineteen journal articles: how do the contemporary scholars define/discuss spirituality? I firstly present the themes arising from the definitions provided by the scholars, followed by an examination of the author's tendency to differentiate spirituality from religion. I then explore the themes relating to the authors' definitions of religion and provide an examination of the contemporary discourses surrounding spirituality and religion. The chapter concludes with a discussion and analysis of these findings.

### **Definition of Spirituality**

I discovered that most contemporary scholars agree that spirituality is a "nebulous" (Gotterer, 2001, p. 191) concept, which does not easily lend itself to constricting definitions or practices. Others describe the inherent difficulty of defining "a thing called spirituality which can be probed and categorized" (Edwards, 2002, p. 81). However, in spite of these concerns, most of the authors (15 out of 19) provided a formal definition for spirituality.

My analysis and comparisons of the contemporary scholars definitions of spirituality revealed several common themes, with many of the authors including some or all of these themes within their definition. One of the most common themes encompasses spirituality as an individual or "internal phenomenon"(Cascio, 1998, p. 524). For example, Diana Coholic (2003) states that spirituality can be "deeply personal" and "is necessarily self defined" (p. 49). Rebecca Gotterer (2001) believes that spirituality "differs from person to person

across ethnicity, gender, class and cultural lines” (p. 187) and Siporin states: “the spiritual element of the person is the aspect of an individual’s psyche, consciousness and unconsciousness, that is also called the human soul” (as cited in Sermabeikian, 1994, p. 180). Similarly, Maria Carroll (1997) defines spirituality as “the divine essence of the individual” (p. 29) and Coholic (2003) believes that spirituality encompasses the “essence ...of human existence” (p. 56).

This notion of spirituality as the universal essence of each individual was the second theme identified among the definitions of spirituality provided by the scholars. The concept of the common universal essence present in all people is used as rationale by the scholars to emphasize the importance of social workers demonstrating respect for each “person’s desire or lack thereof to recognize this spiritual essence” (Coholic, 2003, p. 56). This leads Toni Cascio (1998) to conclude: “accepting that the need for spiritual fulfillment is a universal experience, is therefore, one reason for social workers to acknowledge these matters in practice” (p. 524).

The acceptance of spirituality as an essential human need leads contemporary authors to conclude that “social work practice is not whole without considering the spiritual dimension”(Gotterer, 2001, p. 192) and to reason that: “...a commitment to the whole person necessitates a commitment to the person’s spirituality” (Carroll, 1997, p. 31). Thus, the neglect of the spiritual realm by social work negates its claim to embrace holistic practice, which encompasses “meaningful helping approaches that attend to body, mind, emotions *and* spirit” (Coholic, 2003, p. 58). So, while the profession claims to provide holistic

practice, in reality, social work has restricted itself to “material and intra-social domains” (Cox cited in Edwards, 2002, p. 79).

As spirituality is defined by the authors as a basic human need, Alicia Kaplan and Sophia Dziegielewski (1999) believe it to be “too important to be misunderstood, avoided, or viewed as neurotic or pathological in nature” (p. 37). They further emphasize that social workers should recognize spirituality as “connected to religious, cultural, ethnic and life experiences and that spirituality in a person’s life can be a constructive way of facing life difficulties” (p. 39). Similarly, Coholic (2003) believes that the “cautious” tension caused by a secular approach can be alleviated and calls for “a greater awareness of spirituality” (p. 56) within the social work profession.

In addition to the perceived universal need for spiritual fulfillment, virtually every definition of spirituality involved some aspect of an individual “search” for something. Thus, spirituality as a personal search was identified as the third theme among contemporary scholars. For example, Canda and Furman define spirituality as the “search for meaning and purpose and morally fulfilling relations with self, other people, the encompassing universe and ultimate reality, however a person understands it” (as cited in Canda et al., 2004, p. 28). Siporin describes “a person striv[ing] for transcendental values, meaning, experience and development” (as cited in Sermabeikian, 1994, p. 180) and Damianakis (2001) believes “spirituality can be operationalized as the search for purpose or meaning in one’s life” (p. 23).

While the spiritual search for meaning is most often described as an individual one, it also appears to involve a “transcendent dimension” and encompasses a desire to be connected to “something greater than oneself” (Derezotes, 1995; Morrell, 1996; and Netting et al., 1990, cited in Cascio, 1998).

For example, Coholic (2003, p. 49) explains that spirituality:

...is eclectic and transcends ideologies and institutions”...it is a complex construct that can be deeply personal and communal and that can encompass a sense of connection with something bigger that transcends ordinary life experience (something bigger is necessarily self defined).

Similarly, Gotterer (2001) believes that although spirituality “differs from person to person across ethnicity, gender and cultural lines” the “common thread is the notion that there is a connection with a power greater than oneself which transcends temporality and the five senses” (p. 187). Kaplan and Dziegielewski (1999) believe that spirituality encompasses “the human experience of discovering meaning, purpose and values which involve some kind of relationship with a higher force, being, power or God” (p. 29).

### **Spirituality Versus Religion**

Most of the authors felt it necessary to compare, contrast and differentiate spirituality from religion. For example, in 1995, David Derezotes provides evidence that the concepts of religiosity and spirituality were often defined poorly and used as if they were synonymous (Derezotes, 1995). Similarly, Maria Carroll (1997) agrees that the two terms have “frequently been used interchangeably, although they have different meanings” (p. 27). However, later writers appeared to have rectified this issue. I found only two authors who used the terms

spirituality and religion interchangeably and four authors who failed to formally differentiate between the two terms. Most authors (16) claimed that while the concepts of spirituality and religion may “overlap”, they encompass “distinct concepts” (Gotterer, 2001, p.188). In addition, spirituality tends to be more broadly defined than religion (Sheridan & Amato-Von Hemert, 1999). As Canda et al. (2004) indicate, “...the term spirituality encompasses religion but is not limited to it” (p. 28).

### **Definition of Religion**

Fourteen of the nineteen authors provided a definition of religion. An examination of the authors’ definitions of religion revealed two common themes. One of the themes identified was the view of religion as an “organized, structured set of beliefs and practices” (Canda et al., 2004, p. 28). For example, Carroll (1997) sees religion as “typically institutionalized” (p. 27), Coholic (2003) views religion as “...a construction of institutionalized worship...based on doctrine or a system of organized beliefs...” (p. 49) and Derezotes (1995) defines religion as “a system of beliefs, rituals and behaviors usually shared by individuals within an institutionalized structure” (p. 1). Thus, unlike spirituality which “transcends ideologies and institutions” (Coholic, 2003, p. 49), “religion usually has an institutional structure...in which people become members and take on religious roles, identities and relationships with others” (Siporin cited in Derezotes, 1995, p. 2).

This concept of “relationships with others” is another common theme relating to the definitions of religion. I discovered that while spirituality is often

described as a personal search for meaning, religion tends to include “beliefs and practices shared by a community” (Canda et al., 2004, p. 28). That is, while spirituality is presented as individualistic, religion is presented as “a communal phenomenon composed of specific beliefs, customs and practices” (Henery, 2003, p. 1112).

Toni Cascio (1998) expands this concept of community to encompass “worship practices, denominational affiliation and overt participation in a faith organization” (p. 524). Thus, religion “encompasses beliefs, ethical codes and worship practices that unite one with a moral community” (Joseph, cited in Gotterer, 2001, p. 188). Coholic (2003) further adds that religion is dependent upon “a notion of God or godheads and is based on doctrine or a system of organized beliefs and behaviors, usually shared by people” (p. 49). Therefore via such concepts as sharing, community, worship and denominational affiliation, religion tends to be defined in terms of an “external expression of faith” (Joseph cited in Derezotes, 1995; Gotterer, 2001; Northcut, 1999) as opposed to spirituality being an “internal phenomenon” (Cascio, 1998, p. 524).

Sue Rice (2002) comments that contemporary scholars’ notions of spirituality as “something more than, albeit inclusive of religion” serves to change the current discourse away from historical notions of imposed religiosity and imposed external doctrines. She sees this as a positive move, which has the “potential to increase the relevancy and applicability of spirituality to social work practice” (p. 310).

### **Contemporary Discourses Surrounding Spirituality & Religion**

Many of the scholars referred to the historical tension that exists between religion and social work in spite of the role that religion played in the history of social work practice (Damianakis, 2001). This tension continues to be present in contemporary practice and contributes to religion holding “negative connotations” (Cascio, 1998, p. 524) for some social work practitioners. The discourses surrounding religion occur due to notions that religion is “frequently equated with rigidity and dogmatism” (Kilpatrick & Holland, Loewenberg, Sermabeikian, & Siporin, cited in Cascio, 1998) with some social workers fearing the “pathological consequences that religion can foster” (p. 524). Examples of these consequences include “excessive guilt, a view of God as punitive rather than healing, and reinforcement of passivity by waiting for God to intervene” (Joseph cited in Cascio, 1998, p. 524). Furthermore, Gotterer (2001) indicates, “religion can rigidly inhibit change, stunt intellectual exploration, cause unnecessary guilt and shame, turn cult-like, and enforce mechanical rituals” (p. 182).

In addition, although religion has made great contributions to humanity, it also holds a “...stigma for many people [because] throughout history, its misuse has resulted in oppression, exploitation, hypocrisy, and war” (Gotterer, 2001, p. 191). Thus, Loewenberg believes that social work has made an effort to distance itself from its religious roots that “historically offered assistance based on moral judgments and charitable discourses of deserving and undeserving” (as cited in Rice, 2002, p. 305). This leads the profession to strive for a more objective stance and to base its practice on scientific methods rather than to be associated

with “seemingly oppressive religious moral doctrines [which] are regarded as a return to the dark ages, where status-quo maintenance and proselytisation are popular and legitimate concerns” (Miller, cited in Rice, 2003, p. 305).

Furthermore, religion is often spurned by practitioners because of perceived difficulties relating to “unequal treatment of women and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in some churches” (Loewenberg cited in Cascio, 1998, p. 524). These discourses often serve to create animosity towards the church and religion within the feminist community. At the same time, discourses relating to such feminist “resistance” at times perpetuate a negative view of feminism within the church. So while, feminism itself contains “...both links and antipathies to spiritual understandings...”, Edwards (2002) expresses the fear that “feminist aversion to a spiritual perspective may have been taken so far as to throw the baby out with the bathwater” (p. 83).

Such discourses contribute to the tendency of social work theorists to be “exceedingly careful to distance” the concepts of spirituality from religion, contributing to a “spirituality-religion binary” (Henery, 2003, p. 1112). Thus, although religion may provide viable alternatives to existential anxiety, it sometimes tends to be viewed as less favorable than spirituality. In addition, this spirituality-religion binary may provide a new expression of Western racism, by presenting ethnic minorities as “first religious and only then spiritual”. This serves to place minorities in the “disfavored half” (Henery, 2003, p. 1111) of the spirituality-religion binary and contributes to negative stereotyping of religious people. However, Jacobs (1997) argues that the inclusion of religious or spiritual

problems in the DSM-IV serves not only to raise practitioners' awareness about the importance of considering these dimensions, but also "attempts to redress the cultural insensitivity or indifference surrounding the treatment of religious and spiritual issues" (p. 171).

Henery (2003) argues that the contemporary discourses of individuality and personal exploration surrounding spirituality place it at odds with religion. With its rules and practices, religion not only places limits on personal exploration, but also threatens to limit participation in today's consumer society. This contributes to religion becoming suspect and presented as a form of social control. In addition, the concept of spirituality tends to "transcend ideologies and institutions" (Coholic, 2003, p. 49) and creates the perceptions of creativity and flexibility necessary to place it on the positive side of the religion-spirituality binary.

However, even though spirituality is considered the favored half of the spirituality-religion binary, most of the authors made some comment surrounding the controversies evoked by **both** religion and spirituality among social workers. These "controversies" included such concerns as "inappropriate proselytization, imposition of religious beliefs or activities (such as prayer) on clients, and bias against various spiritual perspectives" (Canda et al., 2004, p. 27). As Gotterer (2001) notes: "...spiritual and religious issues can be a source of confusion, passivity, pain and conflict..." (p. 192). Similarly, Griffith and Griffith (2002) discuss how spirituality "can be expressed destructively..." and acknowledge both its' "...potential for healing and potential for harm" (p. 167). Similarly, Rice

(2002) drawing from Cornett, relates that the “place of spirituality in social work practice is a contested issue, which freely attracts critical comment and emotive debate” (p. 305).

Part of the reason that spirituality is a contested issue within social work practice has to do with the perception that it is “irrational, unscientific, and therefore unsound” (Edwards, 2002, p. 83). This results in “little validation within agency or peer related forums” (p. 83). In addition, by embracing spirituality in social work practice, social workers fear “personal turmoil as one grapples with profound questions which do not necessarily have an answer” (p. 83).

### **The Marriage of Spirituality and Social Work**

In spite of their acknowledgement of the controversies surrounding the combination of spirituality and social work, most of the authors in my study believe that the profession of social work and the concept of spirituality share similar values and are “consistent with professional ethics” (Cascio, 1998, p. 525; Canda, 2004, p. 28; Edwards, 2002). For example, a common theme arising in Edward’s (2002) research was the “relatively close match between the formalized Social Work Code of Ethics and the universal humanist tone of spiritual values” (p. 83). Canda et al. (2004) draws from various sources to conclude that: “textbooks on spirituality and religion in social work share broad professional ethical principles for addressing spirituality in social work” (p. 28). According to Canda et al. (2004) specific principles inherent in both the social work profession and the contemporary notions of spirituality include “being non-judgmental, client

self-determination, unconditional positive regard, informed consent, worker competency, promotion of justice, and countering discrimination and oppression” (p. 28).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

While most of the scholars agree that spirituality is a difficult concept to define and categorize, all but two provided a formal definition. In exploring these definitions, I learned that the community of scholars studying spirituality and social work is relatively small, with many authors drawing from each other and offering similar definitions. As I searched for embedded assumptions within the data, I discovered that the authors used their assumptions around spirituality as justification for including it in social work practice. For example, many of the definitions surrounding spirituality contain the hidden assumption that all people have a spiritual essence. This universalization is viewed as a truth and is used as rationale for the inclusion of spirituality into holistic practice. By negating this truth, social work is viewed as guilty of not fulfilling its commitment to holistic practice.

Similarly, the universal search for individual meaning and purpose is embedded as a truth by making the assumption that all people have a need to find purpose and meaning in their lives. This discourse surrounding the individualization of spirituality raises questions around collective responsibility, inclusiveness and embracing of difference. That is, if people are only concerned with their own personal search, are they going to be motivated to collectively fight for social change? Similarly, if people are only concerned about their own

spiritual perceptions and growth, will they want to accept or embrace those whose spiritual beliefs differ from their own?

The individualization of spirituality also raises questions as to how the employer, agency or institution fits into this individual search for meaning and purpose. As I noted in the introduction, I believe that part of social work's current crisis can be attributed to the discrepancies between the values and goals of the employer and those of the social worker and the client. Without similar meaning and purpose, social workers will likely continue to struggle in hostile and uncaring work environments, which are not conducive to enhancing either their own, nor their clients' search for meaning.

In addition, although some authors acknowledged that spirituality should not be viewed as a "thing" to be "probed and categorized" (Edwards, 2002, p. 81), it (spirituality) was not only probed and categorized, it was also integrated into contemporary social work via existing theories (such as Feminist theory), therapies (such as Gestalt) and techniques (such as prayer and meditation). Many authors in my sample view spirituality as a method that can be taught, learned and practiced and which fits nicely into the current social work paradigm. Such use of spirituality as a technique or tool conflicts with my perception of spirituality as a way of being or a way of life.

As indicated in my findings, most of the authors felt the need to differentiate spirituality from religion. This tendency is no doubt related to the historical tensions surrounding Christianity, religion, imperialism and colonialism. As spirituality is viewed as a more inclusive (and by implication more valuable)

concept by the authors, an assumption is made that spirituality is preferable to religion.

Prior to conducting this research, I believed that the term spirituality was preferable over that of religion, because it is a much more inclusive and less restrictive concept. I tended to equate religion with strict adherence to religious dogma and to a false sense of “righteousness” that I observed in some so called “Christian” behaviors. Thus, the term “religion” and the discourses surrounding it held negative connotations for me and I shied away from using that term. For example, I made a conscious decision not to entitle my thesis “Can Religion Save Social Work?” partially because of my personal aversion to the term, partially because of the controversies and stereotypes that the word religion would likely invoke, and partially because the social work literature commonly utilizes the term spirituality. Through my review of the literature relating to other disciplines and popular culture, I confirmed that the term spirituality is commonly accepted as a more inclusive term, with the exception of Frankenberg (1996), who raised the possibility of the term being utilized as a “marketing” ploy. As noted in Chapter Four, there is also a common tendency among authors from other disciplines and in popular culture to differentiate the concepts of spirituality and religion.

However, there is a danger in creating a dichotomy with religion being all bad and spirituality being all good. For example, Edwards (2002) makes the point that this dichotomy may contribute to ostracism and stereotyping of religious people (particularly ethnic minorities) because of their beliefs.

In contrast, Edwards (2002) makes the point that negative discourses surrounding religion can spill over and contaminate discourses relating to spirituality, causing both to be avoided by the profession. Thus, with their negative connotations, complexities and political controversies, many educators and practitioners would prefer not to address either religion or spirituality. Many of the authors commented on these “controversies” and acknowledged the fact that their inclusion within social work practice and education is a “contested issue” (Rice, 2002, p. 305). Such discourses and controversy in turn contribute to the view that spirituality and religion are unscientific and thus not justifiable in social work practice. Perhaps this provides the impetus for scholars to attempt to *insert* spirituality into scientific theories and assessments in order to justify its inclusion as a “legitimate” element of social work practice. Ironically, the reverse was true historically. That is, social work justified a move *away* from the spiritual realm historically so that it would be viewed as a legitimate profession utilizing legitimate scientific knowledge and tools.

While many of the authors provide evidence of the similar values and attributes shared by spirituality and social work, I believe that such tendencies to universalize common humanistic values must not risk the minimizing of difference and the watering down of religious convictions. Issues of power and difference will be explored further in Chapter Nine of this study.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS

As I am approaching the data from a critical perspective, I chose to frame my questions around a definition of the “problem” rather than posing a traditional research question (Wetherall et al., 2001). In this chapter, I present the themes arising from the question: “what are the problem(s) that spirituality is seen to address?” I then provide an analysis and discussion of these themes.

### **Marginalization and Neglect**

The distancing by contemporary social work away from spiritual knowledge, experience and insight is identified by many of the authors as an important concern, especially given evidence of the need to incorporate this dimension by social workers and clients, along with a clear indication of a growing interest and need by the general public (Edwards, 2002, p. 78). As Edwards (2002) notes, many humanist philosophers agree that:

Spiritual deficit is endemic to current Western society. They describe the personal and social consequences in terms of a ‘malaise of the soul’, or a ‘postmodern anomie’ of moral apathy, community disintegration and ego-driven pathologies of narcissistic consumption, addictive preoccupation and existential despair (p. 79).

Despite this need, Coholic (2003) believes spiritual knowledge is “marginalized” (p. 50) within the social work profession. Sheridan et al. (1999) note: “despite [the] growing recognition of the need to examine the place of religion and spirituality in social work, the empirical literature produced by social work on the topic is still in its infancy” (p. 2). This problem leads Derezotes (1995) to conclude: “spirituality is one of the most neglected dimensions in social work practice” (p. 2). Similarly, Hunter acknowledges social work’s “religious

foundation” and expresses concern about “its decline in modern practice” (as cited in Canda et al., 2004, p. 769).

This decline is no doubt connected to the historical tensions between religion and social work and subsequent discourses equating religion to “rigidity and dogmatism” (Kilpatrick & Holland; Loewenberg; Sermabeikian; and Siporin cited in Cascio, 1998, p. 524). Other contributing factors include the increased role assumed by government, the specialization of clergy, and social work’s “search to become a legitimate profession” (Carroll, 1997, p. 26).

Thus, the profession of social work continues to be ambivalent about spirituality and where it belongs in practice, partially because of “historical oscillation” and partially due to the problems in integrating a concept that may be viewed as beyond scientific explanation (Carroll, 1997, p. 27). That is, because spirituality does not encompass “rational, linear, reductionist” (Cornett cited in Daminaiskis, 2001, p. 23) views, it tends to be marginalized and neglected within social work practice. As Edwards (2002) indicates, “any desire to reconnect clients with the fully subjective knowledge of spirit and soul may conflict with the profession’s hard-won self-image as an objective, scientifically credible service” (p. 74).

Because social work is viewed as objective and professional, scientific explanations for human behavior are favored (Carroll, 1997). Therefore treatment models such as psychoanalysis, the Western medical model and behaviorism with their emphasis on biological, psychological and social issues are popular (Weick cited in Carroll, 1997, p. 26). Northcut (2000) indicates that while

psychodynamic theories are useful, their use creates a tendency for social workers to be “ambivalent” at best about addressing spirituality or religious issues in treatment (p. 155). Rothenberg indicates that this hesitancy may have been influenced by Freud’s “dismissiveness of religion as an illusion” (as cited in Northcut, 2000, p. 155) or because psychodynamic practitioners have not constructed guidelines as to how to include spiritual dimensions in their work. Northcut (2002) acknowledges that along with this lack of guidelines, there is “an estrangement” (p. 156) of psychoanalysis and spirituality, because it is difficult to reconcile “a deterministic philosophy with a spiritual arena that is dominated by vagueness, paradox, and biases” (p. 156).

Thus, the choice to employ a scientific secular approach contributes to the deficit evident in theoretical knowledge and practice development of the spiritual dimension creating further tensions in practice (Coholic, 2003). Such tension leads social workers to be hesitant to explore spiritual issues with clients and to deal with this “often charged and controversial subject”. (Gotterer 2001, p. 187). Thus, Gotterer (2001) concludes that spirituality and religious issues may “trigger fear” in social workers who feel they are in “uncertain territory” and are afraid of “seeming to be ignorant” (p. 191).

This fear also contributes to social workers being unlikely to discuss spirituality and religion with clients and creates distance between clients and social workers. This distance creates the additional problem of the social worker not openly accounting for their own value system, which leaves the client “vulnerable” (Gotterer, 2001, p. 190). That is, without knowledge of the worker’s

spiritual values, a client seeking help is “automatically subjected to secular values that may conflict with his or her own religious beliefs” (p. 190). This leads authors such as Jacobs (1997) to point out the necessity for social workers to “acknowledge publicly if spirituality is a central dimension” (p. 172).

Whether or not social workers believe that there is a spiritual dimension is deemed important in accepting client’s spiritual beliefs (Gotterer, 2001). Gotterer (2001) believes that differences in the cultural backgrounds of the client and therapist may present “a gap that leads to misunderstanding” (p. 190). Such gaps in understanding can contribute to a “spiritual bias” [which] can be just as harmful as racism or sexism” (Sermabeikian, 1994, p. 179).

Thus, Gotterer (2001) points out that “the influence of religion can be complicated” (p. 190) with respect not only to the client’s value base, but also to the extent that it affects the client and social worker’s relationship. For example, cultural and spiritual beliefs are sometimes misinterpreted by therapists and require a “culturally attuned intervention” (p. 190). Such interventions are less likely to occur in a secular profession where spirituality is considered non-objective and where social workers have no specific guidelines, nor education to guide them.

### **Lack of Ethical Guidelines & Education**

As indicated in the above discussion, most of the authors indicated that there has been considerable interest expressed by social work students and practitioners in the inclusion of guidelines and education addressing the concepts of spirituality into social work practice. For example, Canda et al.’s (2004) study

of the “largest national pool of social work practitioners ever to discuss spirituality<sup>2</sup>” found that an “overwhelming majority” of social workers “supported the inclusion of religious and spiritual content in social work education” (p. 29). Despite this support, previous studies have demonstrated that most social workers have not received formal education around spirituality or ethical decision-making relating to the integration of spirituality and social work. This leads Canda et al. (2004) to conclude:

There is urgency for wide dissemination of education on spirituality via academic degree programs (coursework and practica), continuing education courses, agency in-service training, and practice supervision (p. 33)

Such lack of education creates problems from an ethical standpoint because many social workers are already integrating spiritually oriented activities into their practice, many without the benefit of having received education and/or ethical guidelines around this integration. Thus, there is a danger of such controversial behaviors as “inappropriate proselytization, imposition of religious beliefs or activities (such as prayer) on clients, and bias against various spiritual perspectives” (Canda & Furman cited in Canda et al., 2000, p. 27). In addition this lack of education and guidelines is viewed as “alarming”, because it causes concern around social workers’ competency “regarding relevant knowledge, skills and preparation”, as well as their ability to “make practice decisions that conform to professional ethics” (Canda, et al., 2000, p. 28).

Sermabeikian (1994) agrees that: “spirituality is an important feature of social work practice and ethics and should be considered an area for educational

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<sup>2</sup> The quantitative portion of the survey was presented in Canda & Furman’s 1999 study

and clinical training” (p. 178). While the majority of social work participants in Furman et al.’s 2004 study believed “spirituality was a fundamental aspect of being human” and “strongly approved of raising the topic of religion and spirituality with clients”, most of the respondents reported “little or no content on religion and spirituality” in their educational programs (p. 767). Not surprisingly, their findings raised concerns surrounding the lack of availability of practice models and training curricula for social workers (Furman et al., 2004).

Similarly, Sheridan et al.’s (1999) research revealed that social work students had favorable attitudes towards the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work practice with “relatively high endorsement and utilization of spiritually oriented interventions with clients” (p. 1). These results were striking because most of the respondents in their study reported that they had received little training relating to religious and spiritual issues in their educational programs, thus raising concerns about “potential harm to clients” resulting from the social worker’s lack of training (p. 2).

Derezotes (1995) provides evidence of the growing multi-disciplinary interest in spirituality and religion, citing authors from 1965 to 1990. His review of the literature points to the importance of incorporating spirituality and religion in the treatment of psychosocial problems facing individuals, families, groups and communities. Most of the social workers in his study were already considering spiritual and religious issues in their assessments and interventions, and most believed these issues were “associated with most if not all, psychosocial

problems” (p. 9). This leads Derezotes (1995) to conclude that: “spiritual and religious content needs to be incorporated in social work curricula” (p. 9).

Similarly, Edwards (2002) points out that social workers “face practice dilemmas when they are openly presented with spiritual issues, or when they choose to frame their clients’ needs in spiritual terms” (p. 78) because they are offered little in the way of guidance or accountability. Jacobs (1997) agrees that clinical social workers struggle with incorporating spirituality into their practice because neither their training, nor traditional clinical theories fully attend to this dimension and Kaplan and Dziegielewski (1999) note that the profession has paid “little attention to formalizing spiritual issues and training in spirituality” (p. 26).

This lack of training not only affects those social workers currently implementing spiritual practices, but also contributes to the hesitancy some social workers feel about addressing spiritual or religious issues with their clients. For example, Cascio (1998) indicates that despite the fact that spirituality has been given “legitimacy” through recognition of its importance in the American Psychiatric Association and the DSM IV, social workers are “often reluctant to address this issue” because of the “lack of knowledge on this subject and its application to practice” (p. 523).

Kaplan and Dziegielewski (1999) also indicate that more importance should be given to the relationship between spirituality and psychotherapeutic intervention in the formal education training process, because “to date, very little attention has been given to formalizing issues and providing specific training in this area” (p. 26). Thus “social workers are often unsure how best to handle

spiritual needs” (p. 26). Their study supported “the similar findings of previous research which show a strong recognition of the importance of including spiritual and religious concepts into social work practice and education” (p. 37). They believe that once more education and clearer guidelines are provided, “some of the professional resistance or avoidance may be stopped” (p. 37).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Looking at spirituality through the lens of problems needing to be solved in social work practice gave me the opportunity to examine the findings in a different way. I initially had difficulty identifying the problems that the authors sought to solve with the inclusion of spirituality. Interestingly, most of the authors spoke about the marginalization and neglect of the spiritual realm as a significant “problem” for social work, which needs to be addressed on a number of levels. Firstly, they saw this neglect as a concern because of the popularity that spirituality is currently enjoying in mainstream society. Therefore, social work is viewed as ignoring public need. Some scholars, such as Edwards (2002) attribute this public need to the apathy caused by postmodern thought leading to “postmodern anomie” and general “malaise of the soul” (p. 79) within contemporary culture.

Many authors, such as Coholic (2003), Sheridan and Amato-Von Hermert (1999) and Derezotes (1995) noted that extensive research proves that there is a growing need for spirituality to be addressed in social work practice and education. Despite evidence of this need, spirituality continues to be marginalized and neglected within social work. As indicated above, the primary reason given

for social work's ambivalence around considering spirituality in practice and education stems from problems in integrating a concept that is beyond scientific explanation (Carroll, 1997). The need to be viewed as scientific, objective and professional has resulted in a lack of knowledge around spirituality and thus social workers are hesitant to discuss spirituality and religious issues because they are treading on unknown territory and don't want to be viewed as "seeming to be ignorant" (Gotterer, 2001, p. 191).

Thus, an obvious problem identified by the contemporary scholars is the lack of guidelines and education necessary to alleviate such ignorance and absence of knowledge. There is a sense of urgency around this problem because the authors indicate that social workers are already integrating spirituality into practice without receiving the appropriate education and guidelines for practice. While this urgency is perhaps understandable, it is somewhat confusing, as the scholars on one hand talk about spirituality as being beyond scientific explanation (Carroll, 1997) and as not encompassing "rational, linear, reductionist" views, yet they tend to want to quantify, reduce, and educate social workers on how to employ spiritual practice.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: THE PROPOSED SOLUTIONS**

By looking at the solutions posed by contemporary experts in the field of social work, I sought to explore how these scholars envisioned spiritually inspired practice as opposed to traditional practice. I also sought to discover the type of social worker and client that these solutions were intending to create. In this chapter, I present the themes arising from the solutions posed by the contemporary scholars, followed by an analysis and discussion of those themes. My analysis revealed three common themes among the solutions posed by the authors.

### **Educational Preparation and Guidelines to Address Spirituality**

Given that one of the most common problems identified by contemporary scholars was the lack of ethical guidelines and training relating to the spiritual realm within social work, it is not surprising that the most common solution offered was that of providing spiritual practice guidelines and education in order to create informed social workers who are competent with respect to spiritual practice.

As far back as 1997, Carolyn Jacobs talks about the importance of “bringing spirituality out of the closet and into both social and academic discourse and clinical practice settings” (p. 172). She indicates that the Smith College for Social Work demonstrates the importance of spirituality by offering practice-focused courses on religion and spirituality, where the students use “psychodynamic and transpersonal theories to examine critically spiritual and religious content in clinical practice” (p. 172).

Carroll (1997) gives specific suggestions for social work practice courses involving such “treatment modalities” as meditation and imagery, and allowing students “structured opportunities to experience them” (p. 31). She suggests several theoretical models including: Jung, Aden, Fowler, Wilber, Washburn and Vaughan. She also emphasizes the importance of attending to multicultural diversity and believes that the “transpersonal dimension and spirituality need to be included as part of a thorough grounding in normal, healthy human development” (p. 31).

Kaplan and Dziegielewski (1999) believe that social workers are responsible to address their clients’ “spiritual and religious beliefs, practices and problems with the same degree of professional knowledge and skill as are used in other areas of professional practice” (p. 37). They believe that education is required to prepare students to deal with these issues in their client’s lives because without “specific education and preparation in this area, social workers would be as ill-equipped to practice as they would be if they did not learn to deal with policy issues or psychological problems” (p. 37). They believe that once further research is conducted and educational content and curricula becomes clearly determined, “some of the professional resistance or avoidance may be stopped” (p. 38).

In her review of the current “spirituality and social work debate”, Sue Rice (2002) indicates that most of the contemporary research pertains to education and training issues, with some academics uncertain of the “appropriateness” (p. 307) of including spirituality as part of social work education and training. Other

concerns around education involve, “clashes with social work’s analysis of social justice and structural change, curricula space, inclusivity, lack of academic support and interest, and fears of incompatibility with social work’s scientific professional base for practice” (p. 307). However, in spite of these concerns, Rice (2002) suggests that the inclusion of some aspects of the spiritual dimension could be included in current social work curricula without a significant educational redesign.

The social workers in Derezotes (1995) study indicated that although they were already considering spiritual and religious issues in their assessments and interventions, they believed that they had received inadequate training in this area. Thus, Derezotes (1995) recommended the integration of three components into social work curricula in order to create more spiritually aware practice: 1) knowledge of models of spiritual development and religious traditions; 2) understanding and acceptance of the diversity of personal spiritual and religious values; and 3) spiritually and religiously sensitive assessment and intervention skills. Similarly, suggestions for the inclusion of spirituality within social work curricula were outlined in detail in Furman et al.’s (2004) article, as well as recommendations for individual courses, social welfare, psychology and sociology courses and social work practice and practicum courses.

Cascio (1998) expresses dismay that despite the fact that some schools of social work are exploring elective courses in spirituality and social workers are adapting traditional methods and techniques to explore spirituality in practice, “...negative connotations and misunderstandings” surrounding spirituality

remain” (p. 530). From his perspective, the solution is: “the same as with any other stereotype that social workers strive to dispel – education” (p. 530). Cascio (1998) not only believes that workshops, in-service programs and continuing education for practicing social workers are very necessary, but that the same education should be provided to professors and scholars in the schools of social work. He makes the point that professors are likely hesitant to teach a subject that they are “neither knowledgeable nor comfortable with” (p. 530).

Other authors, such as Coholic (2003) developed a set of practice principles relating to spirituality and social work in order to address the “lack of empirically based frameworks and knowledge development, the marginalization of spiritual knowledge and the need for language and models” (p. 55). Griffith and Griffith (2002) provide guiding principles and methods both to “open therapy to spirituality and religion” as well as to counter those spiritual and religious elements that “do harm” (p. 168). Although Rebecca Gotterer (2001) believes spirituality to be a “complicated topic that eludes clear-cut guidelines” (p. 192), she offers some basic principles, including the necessity of supporting spirituality and religion as a strength, while also examining religious and spiritual struggles as possible sources of conflict in order to determine what is helpful and what is harmful. She cautions that the therapist’s “seemingly neutral values” (p. 192) may be incongruent with the client’s religious beliefs and emphasizes the need to be culturally sensitive about mental health problems and assessment as well as the need to consider the client’s personal viewpoint.

### **Spirituality as a Resource and Technique**

A solution posed by the authors to the problem of spirituality being marginalized and neglected in social work practice is the utilization of spirituality as an “untapped strength” and resource that the profession can draw on to improve practice (Cascio, 1998, p. 525). For example, Derezotes (1995) believes the incorporation of spirituality into social work is a way for social workers to “help clients identify and build on spiritual strength” (p. 12). Northcut (1999) believes that the social workers can tap into client’s use of spirituality as a “potential coping source” (p. 161) and Kaplan and Dziegielewski (1999) view spirituality as a “constructive way of facing life’s difficulties” (p. 37).

In addition, spirituality is viewed to be “beneficial in that clients may use it as a resource for problem solving, coping or healing” (Kilpatrick & Holland; Sermabeikian & Siporin as cited in Carroll, 1997, p. 30). Similarly, Gotterer (2001) believes that social work practice “ideally focuses on client strength” and for some “...religion fosters a spirituality that serves as a bastion of strength” (p. 188). Hodge (2003) believes there is a need to “focus on the strengths of various theistic populations” (p. 355) and Damianakis (2001) sees spirituality as an “expanded opportunity for self discovery” (p. 31). Sermabeikian (1994) emphatically claims that “clients’ use of spirituality as a weapon in their coping arsenal is precisely why spirituality must be considered” (p. 178).

This view of spirituality as a potential resource prompts many of the contemporary scholars to suggest the use of specific techniques or “tools that incorporate a spiritual perspective” which include “...prayer, meditation,

contemplation, ritual, scripture study, and work with broader range of consciousness states” (Canda, Cowley, Keefe, Sheridan et al., cited in Carroll, 1997, p. 31). Carroll (1997) also suggests that the location of therapeutic encounter can “provide a healing context” (p. 31). For example, she draws from the “concept of the interdependence of all relationships including nature” and Canda’s suggestion to tap into “the natural wilderness as well as the inner wilderness (unconscious) and thereby reconnecting the two” (as cited in Carroll, 1997, p. 31).

Toni Cascio (1998) introduces general guidelines for employing a “variety of assessment and intervention techniques” (p. 525). For example, Satir’s mandala is viewed as a “vehicle for directly gathering a wealth of information about the individual, including that of a spiritual nature” (p. 525). The mandala carries the added benefit of making the client aware that the “practitioner views spiritual issues as an integral part of the client’s functioning” (p. 526). Bullis’ genogram is also utilized and is “devoted entirely to spiritual issues” (p. 527) and as assessment gives way to intervention, Cascio (1998) explains a “variety of viable methods, including Gestalt techniques, journaling, bibliotherapy, metaphor, and various forms of prayer, such as meditation and ritual” (p. 527).

Lazarus believes that social workers “can be encouraged to become technically eclectic” (as cited in Derezotes, 1995, p. 12) when integrating spiritual and religious techniques and can creatively adopt techniques that they are already using within the traditional approach. These techniques are drawn from Maslow’s forces of psychology and include:

- **“Psychodynamic techniques”** which involve helping the client to work through past issues around spiritual and religious experiences and to gain insight as to how those experiences may contribute to their current conflicts.
- **“Cognitive/behavioral techniques”** which assist clients to replace “thinking errors and unhelpful behaviors” with different ways of thinking and acting that perpetuate spiritual development.
- **“Experiential/humanistic techniques”** to make clients more aware, accepting and responsible for their emotional experiences. Derezotes (1995) uses the example of the Gestalt technique where a client is asked to speak to an empty chair in which “God or the goddess” (p. 13) is sitting. The client later takes on the role of God or goddess and responds to their own personal questions.
- **“Transpersonalist intervention”** involves the “further spiritual self-development of the social worker”. This technique involves the social worker modeling their own spiritual development for the client and displaying behaviors “that are consistent with various models of spiritual development that may or may not be personally owned” (Derezotes, 1995, p. 13).

Epple (2003) integrates her social work training and her spiritual orientation using “theoretical constructs” from spirituality and psychology believing that although there is no direct correlation between spirituality and psychology, “there is the possibility of enrichment if both areas of discourse are

considered” (p. 174). She reasons that because scientific knowledge and spiritual experience “operate on different levels of discourse”, (p. 174) a dichotomy is created. However, she feels that the therapist “may go beyond science to be present to a client’s experience through images, illusions and metaphors”...“that speak to a deep inner spirit that defies logic” (p. 178). Similarly, Damianakis (2001) advocates for the use of Watson’s model of human care, which involves the creation of a “transpersonal caring relationship” which allows for a “spirit-to-spirit” union between the social worker and the client (p. 32).

Similarly, through the illustration of a specific case, Griffith and Griffith (2002) highlight the tension between two competing paradigms: “a scientific view of illness” versus the need for a “therapeutic alliance” between therapist and client (p. 173). They believe that optimal clinical treatment draws from both discourse-based and physiology-based therapies. Discourse based therapy involves changes occurring through such expressions as metaphors, stories, beliefs, customs and traditions. Physiology-based therapies on the other hand are expressed through “states of neurotransmitter systems or neural networks” (p. 173). Griffith and Griffith believe that changes in either discourse or physiology are able to “open or close different possibilities for lived experiences” (p. 174).

However, Sue Rice (2002) makes the point that while spiritually-influenced interventions are being discussed in the contemporary literature, there have been few questions asked about the effectiveness of these interventions, nor about the “rationale of inclusion, and the theoretical and ethical basis which underpin their usage” (p. 310). Canda et al. (2004) also raise concerns that while

the NASW Code of Ethics provides general guidance in the area of spirituality, it does not provide specific standards as to which spiritually oriented activities may be appropriate or inappropriate. For example, the majority of respondents in the quantitative portion of Canda, et. al's (2004) study did not believe it was appropriate to touch clients for the purposes of providing healing in a social work setting. However, the respondents in the qualitative portion of the study believed that such qualities as caring and respect can be demonstrated via touching through such spiritually-based practices as reiki. While the NASW Code does indicate that there are instances where the touching of clients is acceptable, it does not specify how or when such touching is deemed appropriate. Moreover, another concern lies in the NASW Code's implication that "touching is done at risk of psychological harm or cultural inappropriateness to the client" (Canda et al., 2004, p. 33).

### **Spirituality Self Aware Social Workers**

Another of the solutions offered by the scholars involves the creation of spiritually self-aware social workers. For example, Carroll (1997) believes that in order to fill the "current gap" in social work education, students need to be provided with opportunities "*to examine and become clear about their own spirituality and spiritual beliefs*" (p. 32, italics in original). She believes this solution will help social workers to "become more secure about their own points of view, more able to separate themselves from their clients, and thus better equipped to accept the client as she or he is even when the client's beliefs may be very different" (p. 32). By not developing this self-understanding, Carroll

believes that social workers would be more likely to avoid the “client’s spiritual issues or the spiritual aspects of the client’s attempts to cope, and thereby avoiding the whole person” (p. 32).

Griffith and Griffith (2002) illustrate the importance of self-understanding through their description of a specific therapeutic encounter:

Too automatically, I associated Lutchi’s beliefs, tone and words with religious rigidity and sexism. Stereotyping was closing my mind and my heart, pulling me in an either/or position. It had to be countered. Stereotypes do not just dissolve, or, I at least am unable to dissolve them by force of will. For me, these stereotypes must be actively melted in a kiln of intellectual, emotional and spiritual engagement (p. 175).

This engagement is facilitated by a narrative approach, which is not necessarily specific to spirituality, but rather is about “maintaining dialogue, collaborating, and respecting local knowledge and cultural wisdom” (p. 191). Consistent with a narrative approach, Griffith and Griffith (2002) further suggest we “attend to the power distribution in our culture and in our therapy”; as well as listening attentively while maintaining an attitude of “not-knowing” and focusing on the “language, meanings, and values of the other” (p. 191).

Damianakis (2001) argues that “with respect to spirituality and identity, transpersonal theory provides the capacity to explore the view that both a core self and multiple selves can coexist, a view that is characteristic both of modernity and post-modernity” (p. 31). It is therefore possible for social workers to assist their clients in deconstructing their present identities, through reconstructing their life stories and transcending their multiple identities. Northcut (2000) draws from the postmodern perspective that “language shapes meaning and reflects personal

and cultural values” (p. 162) to demonstrate the importance of helping clients to examine how their personal stories have been constructed through the narratives surrounding their religious and spiritual experiences. He reasons that by discussing both religion and spirituality in initial discussions with clients, these narratives are deconstructed, allowing room not only for “those clients who oppose organized religion yet embrace spirituality” (p. 162) but also serves to separate the two concepts. Northcut (2000) thus concludes that the “therapeutic relationship is essential to facilitate the unfolding and reshaping” (p. 162) of the client’s personal stories.

In addition to the importance of the self-reflective social worker, the therapeutic relationship between the social worker and the client is suggested by many of the scholars as an important way to form a spiritual connection as well as to assist the client to discover their own spiritual potential. For example, Epple (2003) defines a “spiritual therapeutic attitude” (p. 172) via a reflection of her own subjectivity in her work as a therapist. She believes that the therapeutic encounter aims to tap the spirit within through an emotional connection between the client and the therapist, which allows the client to connect to their own (previously undiscovered) inner essence, potential or spirit. According to Epple (2003), therapists not only deal with their own spiritual attitudes but are also “confronted daily with the manifestations of the spiritual yearning of their clients” (p. 172). Therefore, the spiritual aspects of both the client and the therapist must be considered. Within a therapeutic spiritual encounter, “the client must face the problem within him/herself, own the problem, believe something can change, and

make a decision to participate in whatever needs to occur to make the change” (p. 175). The social worker and the client “need humility, surrender, hope and belief in transcendence, openness, willingness and courage to face pain” (p.175). Epple (2003) believes that it is important to connect with the spirit within and that the ability to say yes or no from this spiritual center regardless of what others think, brings with it the final goal of true freedom. Successful treatment for Epple (2003) within a spiritual context involves the client’s “ability to transcend or go beyond [their] ordinary limits” (p. 175).

Edwards’ (2002) research provides pointers as to how social workers might provide spiritually aware approaches versus those traditionally applied through secular social work practice. For example, he believes that spiritually aware practice is reflected in the creation of a supportive environment, which can be enhanced within the physical setting or revealed in the worker’s actions and words. Such words might involve acknowledgement of common spiritual experiences, familiarity with resources in the community, or the expression of spiritual or religious knowledge. Edwards (2002) also believes that the spiritually aware social worker is sensitive to the possible spiritual contributors to client strengths and deficits, and is willing to help frame issues and strategies in spiritual terms. The spiritually aware worker is also willing to “sometimes place themselves at emotional risk when grappling with problems for which there may be no ultimate answer, no way to measure achievement, and which may trigger uncertainty and existential anxiety” (Edwards, 2002, p. 84).

Under the heading, *Techniques*, Epple (2003) speaks to the importance of an “initial therapeutic alliance” (p. 176) between the therapist and the client. In order to reach the “sanctuary” of the client (or the self in psychological terms), the therapist must develop a trusting relationship by “listening, curiosity, empathy, validation, and presence” (p. 176). Through “imagery, imagination, and reverie”, the therapist and client share the experience of “soul touching soul” and “being touched by the Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup> [which] changes both the client and therapist” (p. 176). In order for the client to be willing to share their “sanctuary”, the therapist needs to be able to convey to the client a belief in transcendence. Thus, it is necessary for the therapist to have experienced this transcendence (or ability to move beyond their own limitedness) in order to convey to the client that they believe in such an experience (Epple, 2003).

Sue Rice (2002) indicates that very little documentation has occurred relating to the kinds of spiritual issues clients are raising with their social workers, nor how the social workers are responding to these issues<sup>4</sup>. She feels more research is needed regarding client’s spiritual world-views and their expectations and experiences around accessing spiritually based social work services.

Carolyn Jacobs (1997) advocates for social workers to consider using practice-based research in order to construct “more sophisticated ways” (p. 172) of utilizing spiritual and religious interventions in clinical work. She indicates that in order to gain such understanding, social workers must pay attention to the relationship with the client and to recognize that the “power to interpret resides

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<sup>3</sup> Epple acknowledges the “Holy Spirit” as a Christian term.

<sup>4</sup> Her study was set in Australia.

with the client” (p. 172). Jacobs (1997) also emphasizes that the social worker’s engagement in “continuous active spiritual work on [their own] journey towards wholeness is essential” (p. 172).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

By stressing the provision of education and guidelines as a solution to the problem of the neglected spiritual realm in social work practice, the authors create a new element of practice for social workers to master. Rather than focus on the need for an overhaul in social work structures and current practice, the contemporary spirituality discourse portrays social workers as currently incompetent, ignorant and at times even unethical because they are already practicing a concept that they know nothing about and have not been educated about. Some authors such as Cascio (1998) include professors and scholars as being “neither knowledgeable nor comfortable with” (p. 530) the concept spirituality.

Although several authors believe that the problem may be alleviated by adding spiritual courses to the current curriculum, others provide guidelines and suggestions for spiritually inspired practice. However, this leaves the social worker with one more role to fill, one more area to master, and one more skill to in which to demonstrate their competency, rather than being viewed as a way of being. Thus, the goal appears to be to construct a social worker who will be a spiritually knowledgeable enabler, broker, advocate, initiator, mediator, negotiator, activist, educator, coordinator, researcher, group facilitator and public speaker.

The assumption is that by providing the appropriate guidelines and education social workers will be able to master spiritually competent practice.

While some of the authors claim that spirituality is marginalized by social work because of its unscientific approach, many attempt to insert spirituality into scientific theories via such methods and techniques as spiritual assessments and genograms. As outlined in Chapter Four, social work history tells us that the competing paradigms of scientific knowledge versus value based (or spiritual) knowledge has been an ongoing debate since the inception of the social work profession. As Moffat (1999) indicates, the clash of knowledge versus “ideals steeped in social justice and humanitarian values” (p. 4) was hotly debated as social work was arising as a profession. Flax indicates that postmodernism’s valuable, yet “deeply problematic contribution” (p. 82) to human services marks an end of innocence for professions such as social work (as cited in Rossiter et al., 2000). That is, we are no longer able to rely on scientific knowledge and objectivity as our claim to the supposedly superior knowledge that we hold over our clients. However, the assumption made by much of the contemporary spirituality research is that by soliciting as much information as possible about a client’s spirituality, the social worker will be able to assist and/or enforce the client’s spiritual growth.

Most of the scholars emphatically view spirituality as a “resource for problem solving, coping or healing” (Carroll, 1997, p. 30) with some calling it a “bastion of strength” (Gottterer, 2001, p. 188) and others a “weapon in [the client’s] coping arsenal” (Sermabeikian, 1994, p. 178). Thus, while the client is viewed as

the expert in their own life on one hand, on the other they are constructed as spiritually deficit, with the social worker being responsible for enlightening them.

Not only is the spiritually competent social worker responsible to facilitate the client's spiritual growth via numerous methods and techniques, but is also expected to point out to the client those spiritual strengths of which they were previously unaware. The social worker constructs spiritually aware clients through such techniques and tools as "prayer, meditation, contemplation, ritual, and scripture study" (Carroll, 1997, p. 31) and the provision of a location that is conducive to spiritual healing. However, given the hostile and unsupportive environments within which many social workers work, the provision of an environment conducive to either their clients' or their own spiritual healing likely presents a challenge.

Closely related to the provision of a spiritually conducive location in the creation of the spiritually receptive client is to ensure that the "atmosphere [is] conducive to the discussion of spirituality" (Cascio, 1998, p. 525). The inclusion of a spiritual dimension via spiritual models and techniques, is one way to achieve this goal and is used to assist in convincing the client that the topic of spirituality is legitimate and that "discussions of a spiritual nature are acceptable" (Bullis, cited in Cascio, 1998, p. 525). This advice carries with it the assumption that the client wants to be convinced that the topic of spirituality is legitimate and assumes the client's acceptance and collusion in matters relating to the spiritual realm. In addition, as discussed in the findings, some scholars have expressed concern

about the use of spiritually influenced techniques, tools and interventions, as their effectiveness has not been thoroughly researched.

The use of such tools as Satir's mandala are recommended by the contemporary scholars as carrying the additional bonus of making the client aware that the social worker sees spirituality as an "integral part of the client's functioning" (Cascio, 1998, p. 526). Once the social worker has gleaned "a wealth of information about the individual, including that of a spiritual nature", the assessment moves to the intervention stage, which includes a multitude of "viable methods", techniques and tools (Cascio, 1997, p. 527). Derezotes (1995) encourages social workers to become "technically eclectic" and to creatively interject spiritual and religious techniques into those already being incorporated within traditional social work practice. Thus, rather than addressing structural issues or attempting to impact the profession as a whole, the authors recommend that spiritual concepts and techniques be utilized to maximize the individual client's existing coping mechanisms.

In addition to the use of techniques, models and theories, social workers are also expected to use themselves as a means of intervention. For example, Derezotes (1995) suggests the use of the "transpersonalist intervention" (p. 13), which involves the further spiritual development of the social worker and the modeling of this development for the client. This means that social workers will need to look at their own spiritual beliefs and "become clear" about them (Carroll, 1997, p. 32) and will use their own growth to facilitate growth in their clients.

Several different approaches are suggested to social workers as effective in using themselves to elicit such spiritual development in their clients. For example, the use of narrative (or story telling) is suggested by Griffith and Griffith (2002), Damianakis (2001) suggests transpersonal theory, and Northcut (2000) draws from the post-modern perspective of language shaping meaning in order to demonstrate the importance of the therapeutic relationship between social worker and client.

Edwards (2002) provides insight into how both the spiritually aware social worker and spiritually receptive client differ from the traditional social worker and client. For example, he constructs both the social worker and client in the spiritual encounter as humble, surrendering, hopeful and believing in “transcendence, openness, willingness and courage to face pain” (p. 175). The client is further constructed as a person willing to “face the problem... “own the problem, believe something can change and make a decision to participate in whatever needs to occur to make the change” (p. 175). The social worker is expected to be willing to “place themselves at emotional risk when grappling with problems for which there may be no ultimate answer...” (Edwards, 2002, p. 84).

Such an expectation of emotional risk is reminiscent of the discussion earlier in this thesis relating to the discourses surrounding contemporary social work. That is, cartoons depicting substandard service and newspaper headlines constructing social workers as incompetent, uncaring and passively standing by waiting for children to die not only generate emotional reactions, but serve to humiliate social workers as well. I question how this kind of humiliation impacts

the soul and spiritual development of social workers. If spirituality aims to change the individual social worker through more guidelines and education, how will this type of humiliation be prevented, especially if the agency or institution doesn't change or "get educated" as well?

Thecia Damianakis (2001) acknowledges this question when addressing the importance of the "spirit to spirit connection with clients" (p. 27). She believes that missing from the postmodern analysis is the question of how oppressive experiences in practice serve to break our own and our clients' spirits. As Deegan states: "this cumulative experience of spirit breaking, further indicative of an expression of misused power, shatters hope, and instills indifference, humiliation, and a deep numbness, in its violation of one's basic human dignity" (as cited in Damianakis, 2001, p. 28). Without a sense of hope, "there is only burnout and despair" (Adams et al., 2002, p. 310). Thus, while the social worker must be willing to place themselves at emotional risk, there is no such reciprocal expectation placed upon the employer or the community to provide support to the vulnerable social worker.

Other contemporary social work practitioners share the concern that the social worker's use of self can be destructive and debilitating without the support of the institutions that employ them. For example, Michelle Reid (2005) conducted a study relating to the experiences of First Nations Child and Family Services social workers working within reserve-based First Nations agencies delegated by the provincial government. The women in this study overall believed that: "it is a myth that colonization is over, that they continue to remain

in a colonial, racist and paternalistic relationship with the Canadian government and the child and family service laws, policies and practices and systems that impact their holistic health” (p. 4).

The participants in Reid’s (2005) study discussed their struggles to survive the stress of unrealistic expectations and multiple roles embedded in their social work positions in addition to “always dealing with the extremities of emotions and the pain of the people they work with” (p. 5). They discuss the chronic health issues produced by such unrealistic demands, stress and pressure. The participants believed that social work not only needs to be redefined to fit with First Nations ways of working, but that the holistic health of the social worker (mental, emotional, physical and spiritual) needs to be considered.

In addition to suggesting individual strategies for holistic health, Reid (2005) suggests “collective and systemic strategies for restoring holistic health and balance” (p. 5). Such strategies include speaking with other social work colleagues about the challenges of self-care for social workers, ensuring that mentoring occurs within agencies and that “dialogue on all levels” (p. 5) occurs to support them and the important work that they are doing.

## CHAPTER NINE: . . .AND WHAT CAN'T THOU SAY?

In addition to listening to what is actually being said, there is a tradition within the Quaker faith to ask – “...and what can't thou say?” (Nine Friends Press, 1995, p. 15). Discourse analysis also involves not only exploring what is included in the commentary, but also what is excluded from it (van Dijk, 2001). Thus, as I read through the articles, I not only looked at what the authors were saying, but also at what they were *not* saying or perhaps felt they *could not* say. Thus, this section of my analysis explores those issues and tensions I felt were missing from the scholar's discussions.

### The Crisis in Social Work

As I made evident in Chapter Three of this study, contemporary social work discourses and tensions create a crisis for social workers as well as the profession as a whole. Feeling powerless to change their circumstances, social workers must either alter their professional and personal values or modify their image of themselves, their clients and the social work profession in general.

Even though I used the search criteria of “social work” in general, I was surprised to discover that the scholars provided very little commentary relating to the profession of social work as a whole, nor to the current *crisis* in social work. That is, there were no obvious outcries for more resources, less oppressive systems, not to mention the need to fight for social justice. Thus, the focus remained on how social workers need to be respectful of each person's individual spiritual values (even and perhaps especially if they have no spiritual focus) and to employ techniques and tools to enhance those personal values. Unfortunately,

by maintaining a focus on the individual, the status quo continues to be maintained, leaving little chance for structural changes within the profession of social work to occur.

One of the few authors to acknowledge the exclusion of macro and structural issues is Edwards (2002) who indicates that a limitation of his research was that his respondents focused mainly on their experiences as “one-on-one counselors, generally steering clear of any implications to the wider social or professional sphere” (p.85). I believe that this omission contributes to Henery’s (2003) criticism of the contemporary spirituality and social work literature as complementing rather than counteracting dominant societal arrangements, which he believes “prevents recognition of some important social and political issues” (p. 1112). That is, while consideration of individual spiritual growth is not without merit, the societal structures and root causes of individual dysfunction and despair continue to be unexamined and hence unchanged.

In addition, while often discussing the tensions between a scientific and objective approach versus subjective and unscientific knowledge, the scholars did not discuss the tension between social work’s mission to assist the needy in society while also attempting to maintain a disciplinary and social control function which assists in maintaining society’s status quo. As this thesis demonstrates, the philosophies around the root causes of individual dysfunction and subsequent imperative for the profession to fight for social justice has been an ongoing debate historically.

Although not acknowledging these historical debates and structural issues, some scholars do indicate that spiritual and religious issues are “relevant in a macro level practice” (Marty, Loewenberg, Netting, Thibault & Ellor, cited in Derezotes, 1995, p. 2) and speak to the need for spiritual and religious issues to be considered with respect to “communities, institutions and social policies” (Russel cited in Derezotes, 1995). Carroll (1997) credits Canda with expanding the “person-in-environment concept to include relationships among client, social environment, nonhuman world and ultimate reality” (Canda cited in Carroll, 1997, p.30). Although not providing details, Carroll (1997) further explores this macro view by discussing the views of “interconnectedness of the individual, family, society and global community... and the “ultimate goal of societal transformation” (p. 30) evident in the spiritual approach. Furman et al. (2004) suggest such “macro practice strategies” as liberation theology and “non-violent spiritual approaches” such as those of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. (p. 789).

### **Issues of Power and Difference**

Ironically, given contemporary discourses around Christianity, one of the few authors to address issues of power and difference in the spirituality debate believes that evangelical Christians have been unfairly stereotyped within the social work profession (Hodge, 2003). Gouldner makes the point that professionals have been “endowed with a significant amount of power” (as cited in Hodge, 2003, p. 349) because of their capacity to construct discourse through research, publication and teaching. Thus, the voices of those whose worldview differs from those discourses are “subject to oppression” and “highly influential

professional narratives” (Kuh cited in Hodge, p. 349) and are excluded because they view life differently. His solution also lies in education and presenting all sides of the issue in order to prevent the tendency to simplify “complex, multi-faceted issues” (Hodge, 2003, p. 349).

While I did not discover any unfair stereotyping of evangelical Christians in the contemporary literature, I believe that Hodge does raise an important point surrounding the importance of providing all sides of the issue, versus the creation of dichotomies and the need for a common enemy. Historical discourses surrounding the combination of Christianity (and by association religion and spirituality) and social work cause them to be viewed as an enemy to be avoided and contribute to their marginalization within contemporary social work practice and education. As most of the authors argue, rather than acknowledging and embracing social work’s spiritual roots, there is a tendency to simply ignore that aspect of practice altogether. For example, I experienced a shying away from any and all things spiritual in my Master’s course work with no course offerings relating to spirituality and religion within contemporary social work practice. I did experience very negative discourse around Christianity and its history, leading me to be aware of little else than feelings of shame around my imperialistic ancestry.

Thus, Hodge (2003) raises a good point that scholars and professors have a great deal of power when it comes, not only to shaping theory, but to the way issues like spirituality get taken up and either marginalized and/or embraced within the social work realm. Ironically, although front-line social workers

assume responsibility to facilitate clients' healing, they are often excluded from theorizing and compiling their own practice models involving spiritual and religious interventions. Sheridan and Amato-Von Hemert (1999) make the point that social work students and front-line social workers are not often included in formulating theory and constructing new knowledge. They conclude that social work practitioner's practice knowledge and experience should be a valued and important contribution to contemporary theorizing around spirituality.

Canda et al. (2004) believe the solution lies in social workers and educators attempting to "change the current social work paradigm" (p. 788) in order for social workers to feel free to discuss the use of spiritual and religious techniques which are consistent with professional social work ethics. They suggest that such practice models could benefit the social work profession as a whole and could be utilized in culturally diverse settings on micro, macro and personal levels.

As previously noted in this study, the issue of difference and acceptance of spiritual diversity was a crucial tension pervading Christian philosophy historically. The contemporary scholars acknowledge this tension by emphasizing the inappropriateness of religious proselytizing and imposing one's beliefs onto others and argue that respect for individual preferences and differences in cultural and spiritual views must be paramount within contemporary social work practice. The scholars' insistence on differentiating religion and spirituality may be an attempt to ensure that such coercion and imposition does not occur in contemporary social work practice.

Many of the scholars in the study make the valid point that providing education around different religious and spiritual practices will serve to enlighten students to more diverse forms of spiritual expression. However, as Brown (2005) a social work professor at the University of Victoria suggests, “diversity is a commitment to inclusion and struggle, and is not about just being equitable and nice” (p. 10). Thus, a strategy for Brown’s (2005) concept of diversity is to “center difference in our work”. Rather than focusing on “the other”, whiteness and other dominant cultures are interrogated in an attempt to work collaboratively – “the result of hard work through confrontation about difference” (p. 2). Another social work professor, Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha (2005) adds: “to be difference-centered is a matter of what I teach as well as how I teach it. When developing course curriculum – the what – I ensure that multiple voices are present in the course content” (p. 2). I believe such an action-oriented approach of inclusion and embracing of difference is essential, not only for the incorporation of spirituality into social work curriculum and education, but for social work practice as a whole.

### **Spirituality As Resistance**

As I read and explored the lives of the women involved in historical Social Gospel Movement, I was surprised at the similarities of their experiences to those of contemporary social workers. I was also surprised at their candor and identification of specific individuals and problems. While the social gospel movement consisted of individual members fed by their individual values and beliefs, through the examination of the personal accounts of three female

members of this movement, I was able to recognize not only the commonalities of their struggles, but also how their struggles are connected to those experienced within today's social work environment. For example, each of these three women resisted the oppressive and restrictive environments within which both they and their clients found themselves in. Thus, although they were socially constructed to be subservient and accepting of the status quo, they refused to comply with the existing rules of convention. They also refused to adhere to those philosophies that they believed to be inconsistent with their personal values and beliefs.

However, such acts of non-compliance and resistance can have devastating consequences. Such consequences were not only felt among those women that I researched within the social gospel movement, but were also uncovered in Moffat's (2001) research involving Canada's first social workers in the 1920's. For example, he describes Charlotte Whitton's difficulty in accepting the "technocratic professionalism in the social work field" (p. 99) and the subsequent alienation she received from her colleagues as likely contributing to her "near nervous breakdown" (p. 99). Both women studied by Moffat, (Charlotte Whitton and Dorothy Livesay) were forced out of the social work profession and "suffered emotional turmoil after being separated from their life's work" (Moffat, 2001, p. 99). Such emotional turmoil and disillusionment is comparable to that experienced by many contemporary social workers (including me) and contributes to the crisis Carniol (2000) describes, resulting in social workers becoming paralyzed and just wanting to "get the hell out" (p. 5).

The contemporary scholars in my study provided little discussion surrounding spirituality as a form of resistance to dominant paradigms, nor how it might be conceptualized in order to minimize social workers feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment. However, the scholars did employ forms of resistance to current social work practice via their research relating to the neglected and controversial subject of spirituality and social work. Some of the authors contributed innovative and creative ways to enhance the social worker/client relationship and, while not generally acknowledging the needs of the social work profession as a whole, did make important contributions to improve the quality of existing social work education and practice.

I believe that such contributions, coupled with an examination of historical forms of resistance to oppressive institutions and individuals can provide us with opportunities to explore how spirituality as a form of resistance might be undertaken in contemporary social work practice and education. Whether resistance occurs on individual or collective levels, I believe it need not be evasive nor defensive, but instead used to create alternatives to current forms of practice (Adams, 2002).

## CHAPTER TEN: EPILOGUE

### Personal Learning

*Lend me your hope for a while;  
A time will come when I will heal,  
And I will share my renewal,  
Hope and love with others.*

*- author unknown, cited in Anderson, 1990*

Through the process of writing this thesis, I have discovered that without a personal sense of hope, I am unable to share hope and encouragement with others. I also discovered that I am not alone in my feelings of despair and hopelessness about the future of the social work profession and myself as a social worker. To my surprise, human service workers have been struggling with many of the same feelings since before the inception of social work as a profession! I now have such great respect for those who are willing to share their experiences and feelings in order that those that follow might be encouraged to seek better ways of knowing and being.

I have learned that resistance to oppressive structures and practices can take many forms. Early social gospel reformers preformed acts of resistance through their commitment to their spiritual values and the recording of their lived experiences and by utilizing their anger as a driving force. I believe that I utilized my feelings of disillusionment and despair as a form of resistance through the writing of this thesis. As Mullaly (2002) indicates, “anger is a gift” (p. 211) that can be mobilized from these internalized feelings and externalized to serve as a form of power. Anger is also an effective method of resistance on a collective level, “if it is used as an expression of our will directed against injustice” (Bishop,

as cited in Mullaly, 2002, p. 211). My hope is that collectively, social workers will be mobilized by the acknowledgement of our original mission to nurture and advocate for the oppressed, even if those oppressed are the social workers themselves.

My current social work position involves working with social work students in practicum placements. I feel their eagerness and need to take pride in the social work profession and in their personal identities as social workers. My fear is that they are currently being set up with impossible expectations and that through the portrayal of social workers being on one hand, omnipotent and all-knowing, while on the other as incompetent and subservient, they will inevitably suffer the same effects of emotional trauma and despair as their predecessors.

I believe that the current political and economic climate does little to change the negative discourses surrounding social work, nor does it nourish and support management, supervisors, social workers or their clients. As a result of bureaucratic and hierarchical power structures, management and supervisors are required to enforce budgetary restraints and to impose oppressive policies creating hostile working environments. Such environments place great stress on front-line social workers, forcing many experienced and valuable social workers to leave the profession altogether. Those social workers choosing to stay are forced to turn clients away, even though the social work mission contains the promise to protect the needs of the vulnerable and oppressed. As one young worker put it, "I feel like I'm leaving my brother out there to die" (personal communication, March 27, 2006). Indeed, while social workers are expected to develop a therapeutic

relationship with their clients, there is also an expectation that they may have to abandon them when resources are not available.

This study helped me recognize the potential of spirituality to nurture the relationship between client and social worker as well as the necessity of social workers, institutions and perhaps society as a whole to acknowledge the complexities and difficulties inherent in such a difficult mission.

### **Can Spirituality “Save” Social Work?**

The question guiding this study is intentionally rhetorical. I chose it because I wanted you, the reader, to contemplate why the profession of social work needs to be “saved”. I wanted to expose the crisis that many social work scholars and front-line practitioners know exists. I was also interested in “saving” social workers from going the way of the dodo bird and wanted to emphasize the necessity to search for alternative forms of knowledge and power in order to provide a more nurturing and supportive environment for both social workers and clients.

By analyzing nineteen journal articles written over the last ten years, I learned that spirituality is a timely and important topic with much to offer the profession of social work. By posing three questions, I gained an understanding of how spirituality is defined and discussed by the social work scholars in the study, as well as what they viewed as the problems spirituality is attempting to address and the solutions they posited to alleviate those problems. My research also uncovers how historical tensions and discourses surrounding spirituality and

religion impact these contemporary discussions and ultimately social work practice as well.

Consistent with the principles of discourse analysis, issues and tensions not discussed by the authors were also uncovered. Very few of the authors discussed spirituality and social work on a macro level, nor did they speak about the current hostile economic and political environment surrounding social work practice. Issues around the current crisis in social work, such as lack of resources, oppressive systems and social worker burn-out were largely ignored. Thus, while contemporary scholars addressed oppressive practices on a micro level with clients, their resistance to structural and systemic issues can be viewed as one of “evasion” as they tended to ignore any tensions currently existing on the macro level.

I believe that burn-out itself can be utilized as a form of resistance to these oppressive systems. As Margolin (1997) states: “burnout – social worker’s inability to successfully and permanently repress the contradictions they live by - creates the need to deal with questions that cannot, or will not be asked” (p. 180). My study is just such an attempt to bring these questions into the open and to seek “new and radically different understandings” (Margolin, 1997, p. 180)

The authors in my study suggest such different understandings through an improved and more spiritually aware relationship between client and social worker. Perhaps these same principles are the key to changing the practice of social work on a macro level. That is, through the acknowledgement of the realities of practice and by collectively working

together to educate the public, social workers and clients will not be held solely accountable for societal ills and contemporary discourse will be altered. By exposing the realities of practice and the crisis in social work, the contradictions that social workers and clients live by will no longer be repressed and the despair and disillusionment they experience will be lessened.

Thus, my findings suggest that more research is needed to explore how the concept of spirituality might serve to upset current power relations on a collective and systemic level in order to create a more significant impact upon existing social work practice and education. I believe that agencies, institutions and communities should become more involved and aware of the crisis in social work and should be held accountable to assist in facilitating a more humane and supportive environment for social workers and clients alike.

Without such collective initiatives, it is difficult for social workers to remain optimistic about the future of our profession. One of the few scholars to define spirituality on a collective or macro level encompassing social change is Patricia Sermabeikian (1994) who defines "our professional spirituality" as:

The collective inspiration derived from the ideal of human compassion or well-being that drives us to advance our cause. Social workers may have individual aspirations and interests, but there is a sense of unity in working toward an ultimate goal, which includes some transformation of society (p. 182).

Can spirituality save social work? Perhaps it can.

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