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Introduction

This book tackles and explores one of the most significant, important and controversial themes to emerge in social work in recent years. Spirituality has ‘come of age’. Throughout this book we explore why and how it should be taken seriously by social work practitioners, students and academics, for the simple reason that this is a profession which seeks to make an important contribution to human well-being.

What does spirituality have to do with social work?

This question may well be on your lips as it has so often been the first reaction of students and colleagues when we have raised the subject of spirituality with them. We are two social work academics who have been teaching, writing, researching and discussing the relationship between social work and spirituality for over two decades, as well as thinking about what spirituality means in our society for much longer. We are very familiar therefore with this reaction. Social work is, after all, a secular profession which takes place to a very large extent in secular organisations, and we are proud to belong to it. It is, of course, firmly grounded in a psychosocial model of practice with theoretical underpinnings from the secular disciplines of sociology and psychology, though straying briefly into the realms of philosophy and ethics. But all the while our eyes are firmly fixed on the policy and legal frameworks within which we must work. Although it is true that we are very concerned with the uniqueness of each service user, we are much more concerned with her or his relationships with those individuals around them, whether that be their family, other service users or immediate community, than we are with questions about their relationship with ‘God’ or some ‘Higher Power’. As the authors of this book we both ‘sign up’ to all of this, except that we are going to suggest that this is not some either/or discussion. Far from it. We shall be arguing that
our exploration of spirituality will take us to the very heart and spirit of social work. Indeed we believe that this concept provides a powerful and insightful lens through which social work practice can be understood and critiqued.

We also want to suggest at the very outset that you as readers do already recognise something of this reality which we are calling ‘spirituality’, both for yourselves and in your practice. This is because spirituality (as its root suggests) takes us to the very heart and spirit of what it means to be human, to be in relationship with others, and to make connections with each other and between the various parts of our lives. Spirituality is saying something profound that affects each and every one of us, individually and collectively, privately and professionally. It invites us to explore and to articulate the meanings we find in, and give to, the world as we experience it. The cluster of values and world-views to which the concept of spirituality points us have been around far longer than social work, yet in very significant ways they have always belonged to the heart of social work. For this reason our discussion will be helping us to see with fresh eyes what we have known for a long time, as well as breaking new ground in our understanding and theorising.

So if it’s not religion, what is it?

This is usually the second question, and it is fair enough, particularly given the sensitivities which social workers often have towards religion. We are clear that our services should be given free from any religious or other bias. Yet social work is not a morally neutral activity and it purports to respect and nurture the service user’s own ‘take’ on life. That is, except when discriminatory and oppressive behaviours conflict with social work’s anti-oppressive value-base and must be challenged. Ironically, one of the earliest ‘wake-up’ calls to social work in its neglect of the spiritual dimension has come from service users from ethnic minority groups for whom a religious framework for their living is fundamental to their quality of life and approach to problems. For such people, and indeed any who identify religion as significant to both their identity and how they conduct their lives – who they are and how they behave, in other words – religion may well be the main vehicle through which they experience and express their spirituality. It may also be the source of some of their problems, as we shall explore later in this book. For others, however, there may be something which they call spirituality but which has little for them to do with ‘organised’ religion. As Peberdy remarked,


[2] Spirituality and social work
So before we go much further, let us introduce some definitions which have been suggested by social work writers (see Box 1.1 below).

**Defining spirituality**

...the human search for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships between people, between people and the natural environment and between religious people and God...Social work practice can be described as a spiritual voyage which involves promoting the growth and fulfilment of user, professional helper, and the wider community. (Patel et al., 1998, p. 11)

...a search for purpose and meaning, and having a moral dimension which reflects a concern with relationships to others, the universe, and to some transcendent being or force. (Lindsay, 2002, pp. 31–32)

...a dimension which brings together attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and practices reaching beyond the...material. (Lloyd, 1997)

The wholeness of what it is to be human...The spiritual relates to the person’s search for a sense of meaning and morally fulfilling relationships between oneself, other people, the encompassing universe, and the ontological ground of existence, whether a person understands this in terms which are theistic, atheistic, nontheistic, or any combination of these. (Canda and Furman, 1999, pp. 43–44)

The first of these, Patel et al. (1998), one of the early publications in the UK to tackle the subject published by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, describes social work practice as ‘a spiritual voyage’. Maybe you find yourself subscribing to those feel-good elements like ‘meaning’ and ‘fulfilling relationships’, but are not sure why this makes social work a spiritual voyage, since it could be seen to be simply describing good practice. Lindsay’s (2002) definition takes us a bit further by adding to some concepts which are familiar to social work – purpose, meaning and relationships – something called ‘transcendence’, which might seem a little strange to most social workers. In the next definition, developed by one of us to assist people in completing a research questionnaire, spirituality is firmly asserted to belong to a realm beyond the immediate tangible realities of the material world (Lloyd, 1997). So then surely we are talking about God, or some entity ‘out there’ and we are back to religion again? Not necessarily so, Canda and Furman (1999) assure us, suggesting that it could even be an ‘atheistic’ or ‘non-theistic’ concept.
So spirituality is a complex concept and it is still not obvious whether and how it is a necessary concept for social work, or whether we could get by without it! Social work has long recognised the importance of the ‘search for meaning’, particularly in fields like mental health and palliative care, but may have greater sympathy with the idea that this belongs to existential philosophy rather than being in any way ‘spiritual’ (King et al., 1994).

Perhaps religion is, after all, easier to grasp and to incorporate into our social work assessments, even if as social workers we feel that religious support and intervention should be left to the religious professional. Canda and Furman’s definition (Box 1.2) keeps it simple by focusing on what is sometimes described as ‘organised religion’. However, in contemporary society few people sign up to organised religion but quite a few more use concepts related to religion, either as metaphors or with a secular twist. For example, people talk about having ‘faith in life’, or perhaps more often, having lost faith in something, without that implying religious beliefs although it may imply a whole set of other ‘beliefs’ about life (see Lloyd’s definition below). Other writers (see Grainger, Box 1.2) have suggested that religion should be understood as a way of thinking and living, not simply adherence to a set of handed-down beliefs and traditions – in other words, the opposite to organised religion. Grainger goes on to say that we particularly employ this kind of thinking in situations of existential challenge. Dare we suggest that social work has not been very good at engaging with the existential challenges which service users face, much as it has shown itself to be well-equipped, particularly in certain specialisms, to work therapeutically with deep emotion?

**Defining religion**

An organised structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community related to spirituality. (Canda and Furman, p. 54)

(Faith) Humanistic or religious beliefs which guide the way an individual seeks to live. (Lloyd, 1997)

Religion answers a need for meaning, order, purpose; but it is not itself that need… it is one expression of a kind of thinking which is in fact characteristic of human mental processes, but which we become more than usually aware of in situations of existential challenge. (Grainger, 1998, p. 95)

Already we have opened up the complexity of this topic and identified some of the critical questions which we must explore in depth if we are to
achieve our objective of reaching a better understanding of a dimension of human existence which social work has for too long largely ignored. Throughout this book we explore the implications of understanding spirituality as stemming from the ‘world-view’ which we each choose or arrive at (Moss, 2005). Some people, of course, service users and social workers alike, insist that they do not believe in a spiritual dimension and we are concerned to respect that position. Most of all, however, this book aims to explore a social work approach which recognises the service user’s spirituality; understands the significance of spiritual issues and needs among the mass of problems with which they may be grappling; and enables the social worker to engage with this aspect at a level and in a manner and as far as sits comfortably with their personal belief system. This is not to say that this is comfortable work. Much of it may be distinctly uncomfortable and a strong theme in this book, contrary to the impression given in much of the contemporary literature, is that spirituality is ‘not all sweetness and light’ (Holloway, 2007b). So as we begin this exploration, think about the example below – a common scenario for health and social care professionals. How often would the deep spiritual crisis feature in our assessments? Yet whatever else we do to support Joan may have limited impact without some acknowledgement of her spiritual pain as well as her physical and emotional exhaustion.

Example
Joan, aged 83, has been caring for her husband, Jim, aged 87, since he had a stroke 6 years previously. The couple have been evangelical Christians all their lives and in the immediate aftermath of the stroke, Joan insisted that Jim would be healed. The doctors agreed that he had made a surprising recovery to the point where he was able to go home to Joan’s care, but despite her feisty spirit, Joan found herself progressively more exhausted and mentally and spiritually worn down. Then one day Jim, normally a very gentle man, had an aggressive outburst directed at Joan, followed by others in which he began to blaspheme. He seems increasingly confused about time and place and incontinence becomes a serious problem. The GP suggests to Joan that Jim probably has dementia. Faced with the disintegration of the person she had known and loved, Joan reflects on her life and the hard times she has survived, supported by her faith, and wonders why it should end like this? The district nurses are very kind and, sensing that Joan is neglecting herself and depressed, refer the couple to social services for home care.
for Jim. Joan cannot begin to explain to them that, although she might appreciate some help, this isn’t really the root of the problem.

The remainder of this chapter will explore some of these questions in greater depth, before placing these contemporary discussions into the broader context of the development of social work from its professional origins to its current international agenda.

**The human condition – a good place for social work to start?**

Social work, as traditionally understood, deals with all aspects of human life. From the cradle to the grave, social workers find themselves grappling with the complexities of human life. More often than not they also have to deal with the darker aspects of human existence. For every rewarding, life-enhancing moment – sharing the happiness of a successful adoption placement, for example, or of a young care-experienced person making a success of his or her life – there will be far more occasions when the social worker will be working with people destroying their own lives or the lives of others, or struggling with situations which seem to have no hope or possible positive outcome. Admittedly, for most of the time social workers, like others involved in the caring professions, simply get on with the job. They deal with the challenges and the crises that come to them in the people they seek to care for and work with; they use their knowledge, skills and values to achieve the best outcomes possible, which sometimes are woefully disappointing. But there are times when we wonder what it is all about, why do people behave in the ways they do and what is it that we are trying to do as social workers intervening in their lives? Underlying such questions are deeper questions about the human condition, even though for the most part we may not reflect on them. These include:

- What does it mean to be human?
- How can we understand our lives, individually and collectively?
- What sense or meaning can we find in, or bring to, the story of our humanity?

These questions are just as powerful at the other end of the spectrum of human behaviour, where we find, for example, foster parents who never stop taking damaged and disadvantaged young people into their homes and hearts, and succeed in helping them turn their lives around through sheer loving perseverance; people who selflessly love and care for family members; community and faith groups whose sole ‘raison d’etre’ is about caring and looking after people in need.

6 *Spirituality and social work*
Any responses we try to make, therefore, to the challenging questions of what it means to be human will need to acknowledge the extremes of human behaviour and the diversity of human responses in between. Moreover, uncomfortable though it may be for us to acknowledge, we need to recognise that in each and every one of us there is the potential for both. None of us is wholly good or wholly bad; and the factors that predispose or nudge us to move in one direction instead of another in our lifestyle choices, and how we treat other people, constitute an important area of study, not least for social work.

Our starting point for understanding the importance of spirituality for social work therefore is both within us and around us. At least by starting here, we know (or at least we think we know) where we are, who we are and what are the issues that need to be tackled in our lives and in the lives of those around us. This is why social work curricula include core themes such as life-span development, studies in identity development, social policy and the social and political context of social work. But the questions we have just posed take us to a level that social work curricula often do not tackle. Ultimately these questions are profoundly philosophical, and for many people also spiritual. They are questions that seek to tease out and unravel the sense of meaning and purpose we have in our lives, and the extent to which the world-view we each choose to live by and to interpret what goes on within and around us is intellectually, emotionally and spiritually fulfilling and satisfying.

The very fact that we can pose these questions to ourselves and our environment, of course, in itself suggests an important facet of what it means to be human. Emmons (2005) is not alone in suggesting that

> As far as we know humans are the only meaning-seeking species on the planet. Meaning-making is an activity that is distinctly human…. (p. 731)

Thompson (2010) takes this point further when he observes that ‘spirituality is fundamentally about meaning making’ and suggests that this has a strong link to social work because of the profession’s ‘strong element of helping people develop more empowering meanings, understandings, or “narratives” ’ (p. 142). Thus understood, spirituality can and, as we are arguing, should be located at the very heart of the social work enterprise.

**stop and think**

- What do you see as the ‘heart and spirit of social work’?
- How does this relate to spirituality?
Whatever other criticisms may be made of them, the pursuit of religion and spirituality both enshrine serious and often systematic attempts at meaning-making. However, it is important to emphasise at the outset that while religion is self-evidently raising the possibility of a divine being, however conceived or named, the same is not necessarily the case with spirituality. A secular spirituality would not wish to ‘buy into’ a theistic world-view, but would nevertheless argue strongly for a world-view that enables meaning and purpose, mystery and awe, to be valid and important concepts. These are issues to which we will return in greater depth in Chapter 2.

It is also important to recognise that the context in which contemporary social work is practised, both in the UK and indeed throughout the world, is both secular and religious. As Ford (2004) notes,

“It is, I think, a fairly obvious statement, yet nevertheless necessary to make and often denied in practice…[that] our world cannot truthfully be described simply as ‘religious’ or simply as ‘secular’; it is simultaneously and complexly both. (p. 24)

His comment that this ‘truth’ about the world is often denied hits home with social work education and practice, as we shall see later in this chapter. The challenges that social work has had to meet in becoming a ‘respectable’ academic discipline that is recognised and valued in both professional and academic circles have characterised the journey that it has made over the last century or so. One of the by-products of this journey has been the promulgation of a world-view for social work education and practice that is almost exclusively secular in colour and context. Anything that ‘smacked’ of religion was interpreted as being ‘part of the problem’ and has either been pathologised accordingly or been relegated to the territory of student-led ‘corridor discussions’, out of the hearing of sceptical, even hostile, academic staff (Channer, 1998).

This is particularly interesting when we note that in the 2001 Census in England and Wales, for example, only 15 per cent of people overall said that they have no religious affiliation, and in some sectors of the community, almost everyone identified with some kind of religion (www.nationalstatistics.gov.uk).

Ford is reflecting on the role of higher education and the responsibilities of universities to provide a safe but stimulating arena in which deep questions and issues can be creatively debated and discussed. His concern is not about social work but for higher education as a whole, where he argues that
Universities ought to be taking far more seriously than they do their responsibility to contribute to the coming century by engaging with the issues arising from the simultaneously religious and secular character of our world. (Ford, 2004, p. 25)

There are very few settings in our world where the huge range of issues arising out of these differences, relating to every sphere of life, can be thoughtfully and peacefully addressed in ways that allow for fruitful understanding, discussion and deliberation, leading to negotiation of the sorts of settlements that allow religious and secular civil societies to flourish. (Ibid., p. 24)

Social work education internationally is now firmly located within higher education, usually in close partnership with social work agencies and service user and carer groups. Although these professional training courses also bring their own requirements and the assessment of professional competence prescribed by professional bodies, the challenge laid down by Ford is as relevant for social work education as any other academic discipline. This challenge includes all the partners involved in the educational and training process – those practitioners, service users and carers whose active involvement is highly valued for ensuring that social work education stays in touch with ‘the real world’. What Ford is saying so compellingly, of course, is that it is the real world’s agenda that has to be taken seriously in our education and training, and that we should be challenging each other to take this complex religious and secular world seriously. To what extent are social workers and social work students who themselves belong to faith communities able to explore the implications of their faith and their personal, religiously orientated value-base to work within the secular dimensions of society? How well are social workers and social work students who cleave to a secular world-view equipped to work appropriately with people for whom faith and religious practice is the fundamental ‘bed-rock’ of their lives? And to what extent are social workers able to understand, as well as radically critique, those faith groups whose values are at odds with professional social work?

These are some of the key questions that can no longer be avoided if social work and social work education are to meet the challenges of our complex societies. Yet a brief overview of the historical origins of social work reminds us that social work’s relationship with religion is itself complex.

**Philosophical and religious roots**

It is easy to forget our roots, but social work in fact grew out of strong religious traditions and values, in a culture which was steeped in Christianity. However, the value-base of respect and caring for others which...
lies at the heart of social work is often traced back to the work of several key philosophers. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for example, proposed his now famous dictum,

“**So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, never solely as a means, but always also as an end.**

Kant was not alone in this thinking. The utilitarian approach espoused by David Hume (1711–76) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73) argued that the benchmark for the morality of any action is the extent to which it achieves more good than harm, and thereby benefits the majority (for a discussion of these themes see Beckett and Maynard, 2005, chapter 2). Such positions are reflected in contemporary professional codes of conduct for social workers and other professional bodies. We are required to treat other people with respect and dignity as befits another human being. Indeed, the whole thrust of anti-discriminatory practice derives its energy from this core value: if individuals, groups or societies act towards others disrespectfully or oppressively, they must be challenged, not least because they fall short of this core benchmark, and in some measure damage the ‘common good’.

It is important, however, to note that this fundamental respect for others has a much longer history, especially within religious traditions. The three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all celebrate the dignity and uniqueness of each human being. For these religions, this dignity stems from their belief in a divine Being (referred to by these traditions as Adonai, God or Allah, respectively) whose loving generosity was outpoured into the creation of humanity as the culmination of the created world. For those who belong to these faith communities, therefore, each human being has a ‘divine’ dignity. They are unique and special in their own right and also as creatures of the Divine Being. Other religions would want to make similar claims. Buddhism, for example, has always stressed that all life and all living things are sacrosanct.

The origins of social work in the Western world were heavily influenced by the Christian tradition and the values it promulgates (Goldstein, 1990; Bowpitt, 1998). These values have found a variety of expression, but the words of the founder of Christianity, drawing strongly from his Jewish roots, are often used as the most succinct summary:

“**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind … and love your neighbour as yourself.**

(Matthew 22 vv 37–8)

Without doubt, this religious command has been the motivating force behind many acts of compassion and many of the great humanitarian movements, including, for example, the move to abolish slavery in Britain.
and elsewhere in the world. It was also the motivating force which took faith communities down the path of social caring in their various localities, and which caused individuals to offer their service in what we now call the medical and caring professions. Not only did their Christian allegiance energise their individual acts of caring and their membership of various organisations, it also informed some of the early theoretical perspectives of social work. Bowpitt (1998) reminds us, for example, that one of the early influential figures in social work, Dame Eileen Younghusband (1964), believed that

> Casework... so far as its principles are concerned is rooted in the Judaeo-Christian and democratic tradition of respect for the value of each individual person. (p. 17)

The seminal work of Biestek (1961), still widely referred to for his articulation of some key principles that underpin what was then called social casework, was undoubtedly influenced by his own underpinning Christian commitment as a Roman Catholic priest (for a recent discussion of Biestek’s key principles and their influence on contemporary social work, see Thompson, 2005).

A further dimension to this has been the number of faith-based organisations who have made a significant contribution historically to the development of social care and who continue to be active in this arena. The work of the Salvation Army, the Society of Friends, Jewish Care, together with Roman Catholic, Free Church and Anglican social care and social justice programmes, all provide examples of faith communities undertaking a wide range of caring work in their communities. Often this work focuses on particular areas of need in society: work with homeless people, children and young people, those who are Deaf, or older people, for example. Churches have also played a prominent role in fostering and adoption for many years.

This history formed and shaped the early expressions of what social work was about and the values that were needed to underpin its activity, leading Graham (2008) in his reflections on the connections between religion, spirituality and social work to observe:

> ...we are part of a long tradition. To those colleagues who state that ours is a flash in the pan, that ours is a new and ephemeral way of looking at social work, to those who choose to write us off as guitar-strumming impractical flakes who should not unduly influence mainstream social work, I think we should respond politely (and even not so politely) that ours is the continuation of a long history within social work. (p. 14)
The psycho-social tradition

Alongside this important strand, a counter-balancing influence began to make its mark in ways that contributed significantly to social work’s theoretical framework. The emerging disciplines of psychology and sociology, energised by the seminal work of Freud and Marx, radically transformed and deepened our understanding of what it means to be human and to live in relationship to each other. As these disciplines became firmly established in the twentieth century, social work educators realised that they had to respond to the criticism often levelled against them that social work was an activity without a strong theoretical underpinning. If this emerging profession was to stand side by side with the older helping professions such as medicine; if the contribution of social work was to become accepted as a well-informed, well-researched and scholarly contributor to human well-being; and if its analysis of the individual and societal factors that contributed to human misery and suffering were to be taken at all seriously; then it needed urgently and rigorously to earn its place at the bar of academic respectability. To this day, therefore, social work theory applies knowledge drawn from other disciplines, to inform and enhance our practice.

It is widely recognised, however, that the work of both Freud and Marx significantly undermined the authority of the Christian Church and the world-view it offered. In many ways this had already been significantly imperilled by the insights of the Enlightenment and of scientific developments in the field of cosmology, anthropology and by theories of evolution. But the Freudian and Marxist analyses of religion seemed to put the final nail in religion’s coffin. Freud and his successors helped people to begin to look deeply within for the meaning of what it is to be human, rather than to theological, transcendent ‘explanations’. Marx attacked religion as ‘the opiate of the people’, anaesthetising them to the ravages of human need and abuses of power, instead pinning all their hopes on a better life after death rather than working hard to alleviate human misery in the ‘here and now’.

Many people enthusiastically embraced this rejection of religion and saw the potential in rationalism for a new and better way of understanding. Hunt (2002) sums up this mood when he observes,

> Stemming from the Enlightenment, the hope for a secular society began as an academic response to the dominance of the Christian Church and continued as a reaction to religious authority by those who are inclined towards atheism. In good tradition, many sociologists have since viewed religious belief as an intellectual error which the progress of science and rationality would ultimately weaken to the point of disappearance. (p. 14)
For social work education, with its early determination to gain academic respectability, this meant that by and large religion was relegated to the ‘trash can of outmoded ideology’. Indeed, if social workers encountered religion in any of the people whom they were seeking to help, it was often seen as being ‘part of the problem’. Furthermore, Payne (2005a), in his thoughtful overview of the origins of social work, goes so far as to suggest that

These trends raise the historical question whether secularism is a necessary condition for the development of social work, and whether the religious or spiritual is inconsistent with social work practice. (p. 156)

This meant that social workers who maintained an allegiance to a faith community were careful to preserve a clear distinction between their personal beliefs and professional identity, lest they be accused of contravening the profession’s value-base by engaging in proselytising activities. Yet for many it was the caring imperative at the heart of their faith which had propelled them into social work.

**Stop and Think**

- Is secularisation a necessary ‘condition and context’ for social work to thrive as a profession?
- If so, why?

**Postmodernism and consumerism**

In contrast to this polarisation of religion and secularism which characterised the early professionalisation of social work, the advent of postmodernism has brought with it a more complex relationship between social work, religion and spirituality which mirrors developments in society more generally. On the one hand, postmodernism’s rejection of the ‘grand narrative’ clearly undermines many traditional religious narratives with their attempts to provide meaningful cohesive world-views. Thompson (2010) draws attention to ‘the cynicism of postmodernism with its failure to establish clarity and coherence as a basis for meaning making’ (p. 142). On the other hand, ‘late modernity’ (as sociologists sometimes characterise the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries) has seen the emergence of more individualistic spiritualities and new age ‘religions’. At the same time, consumerism is widely recognised to be a significant feature of contemporary societies and many argue that its influence on the
human spirit, at both individual and community levels, has been deeply corrosive.

The significance of these observations for social work is considerable. These societal trends provide both the context for contemporary social work and powerful drivers of its development. It cannot be a coincidence, for example, that health and social care systems the world over have seen the introduction of individualistic tailor-made approaches to service provision where the ‘consumer’ of services is in the driving seat, as the wider implications of postmodernism and its consequent fragmentation have taken root. Despite the implications in ‘personalisation’ of valuing and empowering the unique individual, which sit comfortably with social work’s fundamental ethos, this approach is not one that social work should accept uncritically, as Ferguson (2007) points out. He draws attention to the ‘transfer of risk from the state to the individual’ implicit in this approach, and argues that the fundamental issues of poverty and inequality risk being neglected:

“Overcoming powerlessness will involve moving beyond the individualism and market-based solutions of personalisation theory. It will require the development and strengthening of collective organisations both amongst those who use services and amongst those who provide them.” (p. 401)

This critique resonates strongly with the understanding of spirituality being proposed in this book. However important an individual’s spirituality may be, there are wider cultural and societal dimensions to being human, including the fight against injustice that still lies at the heart of social work, which are also core themes in our understanding of spirituality.

Bauman’s (2007) ideas about ‘liquid modernity’ and the impact of consumerism upon our understanding of what it means to be human and to live together in community are also significant for social work and have important things to say about spirituality. Bauman suggests that our modern sense of identity (at least in nations committed to a capitalist ideology) is inextricably linked with what we buy and the range of products we choose to import into our homes. The barometer of personal success becomes the scale of an individual’s purchasing power. Bauman is raising significant political, philosophical and spiritual issues about what it means to belong to a particular society; what credentials we need to be members of it; how we treat other people who may be at a similar point, or significantly above or below ourselves on the ladder of consumerist success; and what sort of society we want to create for ourselves and succeeding generations. All of these questions are hugely important as a context for our social work practice.
Bauman has trenchant comments to make about the legacy of individualism and the New Right, and in particular the contribution he suggests it has made to ‘the continuing decomposition and crumbling of social bonds and communal cohesion’ (Bauman, 2007, pp. 144–145). He also believes that these trends have continued to the point where political apathy and reluctance to engage with communal activity for the well-being of others are now in steep decline; there is a pervasive loss of the sense of belonging and shared responsibility, and as soon as an economy enters a downturn there is a fear that there is nothing left to fall back on. This is echoed by Tacey’s warning that as a society, we are ‘running on empty’ (Tacey, 2003).

These issues assumed an urgency during the serious global economic downturn in 2009, with the impact of the recession being felt worldwide. In what seemed a very short space of time in early 2009 national governments were dealing with banking crises and shrinking pension funds, their impact being felt by individuals facing job losses, reduced incomes and housing uncertainties. The very foundations upon which people had built their lives were beginning to crumble. A world-view founded on consumerism and ever-increasing prosperity suddenly no longer seemed ‘fit for purpose’ and the questions and issues being raised by the contemporary spirituality discourse assumed immediate relevance. Writing in the Guardian newspaper, Ann Pettifor (2008), a political economist, is trenchant in her criticisms of the ‘world-view’ which has got us into this mess:

> Let us make no bones about it. This financial crisis is a major spiritual crisis. It is the crisis of a society that worships at the temples of consumption, and that has isolated and abandoned millions of consumers now trapped on a treadmill of debt. It is the crisis of a society that values the capital gains of the rentier more highly than the rights of people to a home, or an education or health. It is the crisis of a society that idolises money above love, community, wellbeing and the sustainability of our planet.

This is not a crisis of governments and the well-off only. This consumerist ideology affects the whole of society, including those who struggle financially because they are on low-paid jobs, or because they rely on state benefits for survival. The desire to possess is powerful. Parents who are faced with clamouring desires and demands from their children to have the same goods and designer clothes as their peers often ‘give in’, irrespective of their capacity to afford. Some may be tempted into crime. Social workers and debt advisers often find that the value-base and consumerist world-view that people choose can easily exacerbate other underlying personal and family difficulties. In addition, social workers frequently
find themselves fighting for resources for those who are frail, vulnerable and marginalised, whose only desire is to survive, to be warm and well-nourished, and to receive appropriate medical and hospital treatment when required. These are people who have had to drop out of the consumerist ‘race for life’ but who are the first to suffer when the consumerist society takes a ‘downturn’ in its fortunes. At such moments social workers are left powerless lamenting the scarcity of resources, and wondering, in Bauman’s words, how

“to protect society against multiplying the ranks of the ‘collateral victims’ of consumerism: the excluded, the outcasts, the underclass. [our] task is to salvage human solidarity from erosion and the sentiments of ethical responsibility from fading. (Bauman, 2007, p. 143)"

The resurgence of ‘religion’

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the pendulum is beginning to swing back. Firstly, the prediction that religion, religious faith and belief would be in terminal decline has been shown to be mistaken. Even if formal Christian religious observance in the UK may be in numerical decline (Bruce, 1995; Brierly, 2000; Moss, 2005; Glendinning and Bruce, 2006; Crabtree, 2007), there are examples of rapid growth of less formalised house and community churches, especially among young people. Elsewhere in the world, especially in Africa, numbers of Christians are rapidly increasing: some churches in the USA and the Far East report over 10,000 members. Papal visits attract huge attendance figures. In the 2001 Census for England and Wales, 37.3 million people (72 per cent) stated their religion to be Christian. Islam is growing in popularity and influence in the UK and worldwide. Although such statistics need careful exploration to discover their true significance, they are sufficient to justify Ford’s assertion at the beginning of this chapter that we live in a society that is both secular and religious. For social work, we cannot make any assumptions about the secular (or religious) orientation of any service user, or colleague, with whom we work. Religion, therefore, is firmly back on the agenda.

Secondly, one of the by-products of the postmodern fragmentation discussed earlier is the escalation of diverse expressions of spirituality. This is evidenced not only in a range of New Age movements, faith-based organisations and an explosion of new religions, but also in the development of secular spirituality whereby people who steadfastly eschew a religious commitment nevertheless feel that the concept of spirituality is important to them. In a similar way Bailey (2002) explores this notion of a secular spirituality through his concept of ‘implicit religion’. We will return to
these issues in Chapter 2, but at this point it is important to note these developments as part of the pendulum swing against wholesale secularism. For social work, this raises challenges about how to engage with people who may have a very individualised spirituality and world-view but which nevertheless has a profound impact upon how they choose to live their lives.

Thirdly, there is an emerging research literature about the positive effects of religion and spirituality upon health and well-being. Far from being part of the problem, religion and spirituality are being increasingly seen as positive factors that enhance well-being and health. The classic work in this field has been produced by Koenig et al. (2001) in a book which critiques 1200 separate studies in America into the effect of religious and spiritual activities on health and well-being. Koenig’s findings are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4 when we look at quality of life, but, in summary, they demonstrate many positive correlations across a number of health issues, including mental health and physical disorders – a sharp challenge to those who regard religion as an exclusively negative influence upon people’s lives. In the UK, the National Institute of Mental Health in England (NIMHE) pioneered important work to ensure that the voices of survivors are heard. Their pilot spirituality projects reveal that religion and spirituality are for many people crucial components in the journey to recovery (Coyte et al., 2007). The Royal College of Psychiatrists has also been highly influential, through their Special Interest Group in Spirituality, in highlighting the importance of this issue. In terms of secular spirituality, the increasing popularity of complementary therapies and treatments may also be seen as a beneficial development (if used wisely) that enhances health and well-being. For social work, these developments present an important challenge both for inter-professional working and in listening to, and taking seriously, people’s attitude to healthcare, treatment and the enhancement of their health and well-being as part of our holistic approach.

Finally, faith community leaders are making serious attempts to contribute positively to the debate about health and well-being, social cohesion and the nature of society. The visit of the Dalai Lama to the UK in 2008, for example, demonstrated a thoughtful approach to many of the issues that are troubling people. He reminded those who flocked to his meetings about the efficacy of an inner peace and stillness to their well-being and health. In another instance, The Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, commented in his visitor’s keynote address to the Anglican Bishops at the international Lambeth Conference in summer 2008 at Canterbury on the ways in which globalisation and the new information technologies were fragmenting the world ‘into ever smaller sects of the like-minded’. He went on to suggest that a society that has lost its religion also loses a sense of ‘graciousness’ and risks the breakdown of relationships. Communities
can atrophy, and the result is that people feel vulnerable and alone (Sacks, 2007).

**Social work’s rediscovery of spirituality**

In the middle of the twentieth century, recently qualified social work practitioners in the USA began to draw attention to what they perceived to be a major deficit in their education and training curricula. Having moved into the complex multi-cultural and multi-faith contexts of social work practice, they began to experience serious disempowerment as professional workers. They were constantly being challenged to deliver appropriate services to people who practised a wide variety of religious faith and commitment, yet felt themselves ill-prepared even to begin to engage with this cultural diversity. They began therefore to challenge their former teachers and college curriculum designers to ensure that steps were taken to address this serious deficit and to ensure that the ‘holistic’ approach, which was *in theory* underpinning their training, began to deliver ‘what it says on the tin’ (Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert (1999); Sheridan et al. (1994)). These argued that a ‘holistic’ practice that ignores religious and spiritual dimensions was selling practitioners, students, educators and, crucially, the people who needed and used social work services, seriously short.

The following decades began to see a quantum shift in attitudes among social work educators, as Furman et al. (2004) describe.

> The United States has also... experienced renewed attention to religiously and spiritually sensitive social work practice. The revised Code of Social Work Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (1996) includes an understanding of and respect for religious belief as part of the social worker’s responsibilities to clients, colleagues, professionals and the broader society. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) now recognises that religion and spirituality are vital parts of the cultural diversity of clients and requires that social work curricula on diversity and populations at risk include some content on religion. (CSWE, 1994)

A seminal moment in the development of social work’s understanding of the importance of spirituality came in October 2004 when the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) held their conferences jointly in Adelaide. For the first time, a major stream of papers focused on the topic of spirituality. In the same year, in its revised statement of principles, the IFSW affirmed that social workers should uphold each person’s
‘spiritual integrity and well-being’ (IFSW, 2004). In their jointly formulated global standards, both organisations identified that *spiritual issues are part of the knowledge base needed by social workers to understand human behaviour and development* (IASSW and IFSW, 2004) (our emphasis). Spirituality as a core theme for social work had arrived on the global social work agenda.

The international dimension to these issues was well represented in the First North American International Conference on Spirituality and Social work held in Waterloo, Ontario, in May 2006, where all parts of Canada and the United States, as well as from India and South Africa, were represented. In their editorial reflections on the conference, Coholic et al. (2008) commented that

> If we ignore the spiritual dimension of people’s lives, we may be missing an opportunity to help people construct holistic narratives that accurately fit their experiences. (p. 42)

Important work is also being undertaken in Australia, including the significant contribution of Aboriginal perspectives. Rice (2005) reports that

> The Australian Association of Social Workers National Ethics Committee rewrote the Code of Ethics (1999) to include spirituality as a basis for conscientious objection (Section 5.1.3.) [and that] two Australian schools of social work currently offer courses on spirituality in social work…. (p. xvii)

Eastern perspectives find expression in the important work of Professor Cecilia Chan of Hong Kong University through her work on the meeting place between eastern and western traditions (e.g. 2005). Social workers in New Zealand have acknowledged the challenge to their established practice and training models from Maori expressions of spirituality and are working to fully integrate spirituality into their standard approaches (e.g. Nash and Stewart, 2002).

Social work in the UK (with some notable exceptions such as Cree and Davis, 1996; Lloyd, 1997; Bowpitt, 1998, 2000; Moss, 2002; Gilligan, 2003; Holloway, 2005, 2007; Mathews, 2009; Gilligan and Furness, 2005, 2010) has for too long been guilty of neglecting spirituality, and as a result it has a lot of catching up to do with the rest of the social work world if its stated commitment to holistic care is to be taken seriously. Social work in the UK has, however, led the way in developing transcultural and interdisciplinary work in the field (Holloway, 2006; and the contributions of the authors as well as Peter Gilbert to the National Forum for Mental Health in England and the British Association for the Study of Spirituality).

Although some recent findings suggest that in the UK some significant changes of attitude are taking place among social workers, it is not at all
clear whether these are also reflected in the views of social work educators (Furman et al., 2004). Building on their experience of a similar survey in the USA (Canda and Furman, 1999; Furman et al., 2005), Furman and her colleagues surveyed a random sample of 5,500 practising social workers from the list of 11,000 strong British Association of Social Workers (BASW), and had replies from 798 members, a 20 per cent response rate. They found that approximately 47 per cent of all respondents thought that it was compatible with social work’s mission to include religion and spirituality in their practice (Furman et al., 2004). Clearly it is not possible, or wise even, to seek to extrapolate from this set of findings any broader messages from the profession as a whole, not least because the proportion of social workers belonging to BASW remains fairly low. Nevertheless, Furman found that more than 50 per cent of their respondents felt that using a whole range of religious or spiritual interventions was appropriate – for example, using religious language or concepts; helping service users develop spiritual rituals; discussing the role of religious and spiritual beliefs and assisting people who use services to reflect critically on religion and spirituality; considering the spiritual and religious meaning of current life situations; reflecting on what happens after death. When working with bereaved people, those with terminal illness and foster parents, the majority of social workers in this study felt it was appropriate to raise the topic of religion, and that exploring religion or spirituality did not conflict either with social work’s mission or with the BASW Code of Ethics. Yet the study reported that

In the UK nearly 77 per cent of the social workers indicated that they had not received content on spirituality or religion in their social work education, a finding similar to reports in the USA…. This is a cause for concern, because at least half of the social workers in this study were integrating some form of religion and spirituality into their practice without the benefit of training. (p. 788)

These are but a few of the many examples of social work educators throughout the world beginning to engage seriously with the themes identified in this chapter. The international character of these explorations is a timely reminder that there is no single ‘system’ that can be imported uncritically from one context to another. What ‘works’ in America, for example, cannot be translated uncritically into the UK context, but that does not invalidate the journey that has to be made in each cultural context, including the context of multi-culturalism. We shall explore this material further in our final chapter. Critically, however, each country-specific work is concluding that spirituality and social work should not be confined to a specialist area of practice but has everything to do with mainstream social work education and practice.
stop and think

- To what extent has your own education and training so far equipped you to explore issues to do with spirituality and religion in your professional practice?
- What are your main learning needs in this area?

Conclusion

The relationship between religion, spirituality and social work education and practice has historically been tentative, and at times hostile. Social work does not take place in a vacuum but in political, social, economic and philosophical contexts. We have traced some of the influences arising from these contexts and the impact they have had on social work’s relationship with religion and spirituality. In identifying some of the contemporary ‘pressure points’ we have also entered territory in which our understanding of spirituality makes a significant contribution. In particular we have looked at Ford’s analysis that we live in societies which are simultaneously secular and religious and the challenges that this presents for contemporary social work. One aspect of this is the role of religion in political conflict. This is an important issue of which social workers in some parts of the world (e.g. Northern Ireland and Israel) have been acutely aware for some time. More recently, the popular linking of Muslim identity with terrorist attacks and the disaffection of young Muslims in countries of the West is an urgent question in which issues of discrimination, religious culture, faith and beliefs are complexly intertwined. We acknowledge the importance of these discussions but do not have the space in this book to do them justice. However, spirituality and fundamentalist religious beliefs is something to which we give some attention.

Against the backdrop of these and other significant challenges, we argue, however, that a focus on spirituality and religion also presents new opportunities for social work. There is beginning to be wider recognition that these issues are not to be relegated to the margins of society so that social work can more or less comfortably ignore them. Instead we are beginning to see that they take us to the very heart of what it means to be human, how we live our lives together and what sort of societies we need to create. This book, therefore, is essentially about the spirit of social work, but it is also challenging us to think about ourselves, who we are and what gives our lives meaning and purpose.

We claimed at the beginning of this chapter that we will arrive in this book at a model for social work practice which facilitates the engagement...
of every social worker with spirituality, at least up to a point. We call this the ‘Fellow Traveller Model’. In one sense this book is all about journeying. Our own personal journeys are embedded in this book, informing but also continuing as we reflect on the past, present and future of ourselves as human beings who have chosen to be social workers. Although both from firm religious backgrounds (sometimes described as ‘committed Christian’) our own spiritual journeys have taken many turns and loops, tunnelling in the dark as often as we have breathed the exhilarating mountain air! We continue to learn much about spirituality from other spiritual traditions, including secular expositions of concepts which we had assumed belonged to the main religions of the world. We continue to learn much about social work from service users, social work students and practitioners who engage on a daily basis with those scenarios with which we have illustrated our arguments.

So we invite you as readers, from your different starting points, to make your personal journey into the relationship between spirituality and social work. The benefits, we believe, are two-fold. This is a process which will help you to reconnect and/or stay connected with those values and skills which traditionally have been acknowledged as at the heart of social work but which all too frequently feel to be under threat in a climate of technicist responses and measurable outcomes. Just as importantly, understanding how to draw on the spiritual resources both within ourselves and around us helps us to face the new challenges of contemporary social work.

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**taking it further**

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