
What if the Spirit Does Not Move Me? A Personal Reconnaissance and Reconciliation

Carlos A. Hoyt

The burgeoning recognition of the influence of religion and spirituality in personal, cultural, and political affairs has spurred discussions regarding the need for social work practice to be sensitive and responsive to the presence of spirituality in the lives of clients. However, though attending properly to clients' coping styles involving religion or spirituality is indeed crucial, discourse on spirituality and practice too often involves unclear definitions and problematic assumptions about the prevalence and relevance of spirituality in the lives of clients. This article considers spirituality from the perspective of a nonspiritual social worker who is nevertheless committed to practice that recognizes the importance of spirituality in the lives of many clients. This article discusses some problematic aspects of dominant discourse on spirituality and offers recommendations, pedagogy, and assessment for spirituality in clients' lives that should work well for all social workers, no matter their personal views on the subject.

KEY WORDS: *dogma; humanism; spirituality; supernatural*

At the end of a doctoral course called "Integrating Spirituality in Social Work Practice," I found myself struggling to reconcile the themes and messages of the course with my own views. In this course, through lecture, literature, activity, and discussion, the need to recognize and accept spirituality as a crucial aspect of social work practice was exhorted and methods of integrating spiritually sensitive assessment and treatment were explored. Although the course included a critical appraisal of spirituality as a phenomenon that can manifest in both positive and negative ways in the lives of clients, it proceeded from an uncritical acceptance of spirituality as a legitimate paradigm. Problems and challenges within this paradigm were considered, but scrutiny of the paradigm itself was not among the aims of the course. Thus, the course was predicated on a tacit acceptance of the ideology of spirituality among the members of the class and of people in general. For me this presupposition precluded a critical analysis of spirituality itself as a phenomenon in social work practice and neglected the crucial question of what it might mean for a nonspiritual social worker to integrate spirituality into his or her practice.

In the course of this essay I attempt to provide such an analysis. The goal of this analysis is not to

scrutinize spirituality as a valid component of a client's coping strategy that deserves proper attention in social work practice; it is to acknowledge non-spiritual ways of seeing and living in the world and to explore the crucial question of commensurability between spirituality and naturalism, especially as concerns social work practice. Calls for increased attention to spirituality in social work practice (Bullis, 1996; Ellor, Netting, & Thibault, 1999; Surface, 2006) are justified by the well-documented prevalence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American citizens; for example, 82 percent of adults believe in God, according to the most recent Harris Poll (The Harris Poll, 2005). Empirical evidence increasingly supports anecdotal indicators and long-held intuitions of a "religion-health connection" (Ellison & Levin, 1998), though responsible researchers cite the need to move beyond studying religion as "globally defined, [in favor of a] more fine-grained analysis of particular populations, grappling with particular illnesses and challenges through particular methods of religious coping" (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari, & Pargament, 2001, p. 90). In addition to the potentially adverse effects on health outcomes of religious struggles (Koenig, 2001), there is also growing consensus that spirituality is a positive factor in both medical and psychological health

outcomes. What this emerging knowledge means for social work practice, discourse, and pedagogy is receiving increasing consideration. This essay aims to deepen and refine the discourse on spirituality by challenging the assumption present in the discourse that spirituality is a universal human proclivity and by counteracting the paucity of discussion about how nonspiritual social workers might best integrate spirituality into their practice by offering my own situation as a case in point.

I undertake these considerations as an apologetic Ionian—a secular humanist social worker contemplating spirituality, its meaning, best practices regarding assessment and treatment vis-à-vis spirituality, and how I, as a nonspiritual social worker, can effectively and genuinely address spirituality as it presents in my practice. Clearly, the concept and phenomenon of spirituality is one that I find problematic. Indeed the discourse of spirituality, uncritically advanced as an essential paradigm throughout my doctoral course (and in our field in general), evokes in me the awkward feeling of being an outsider, a stranger at the door of the house of spirituality, attempting to give voice to an antithetical, subjugated, even heretical view. At the same time, my studies in the course on spirituality reinforced the recognition of the crucial and fundamental role that spirituality plays in the lives of so many individuals and its relevance in our society on institutional, political, and even policy levels.

As a social worker, grounded in an ethic of acceptance and service, I am loath to allow my personal bearing on this issue to alienate clients and colleagues who find meaning and value in spirituality, and so I feel apologetic in the sense of regret over my lack of agreement with those who have a spiritual worldview. And yet I recognize the truth that optimal use of self requires authenticity, and so I feel apologetic in the Socratic sense of wanting to offer a defense of my position. In this essay, I explicate my own nonspiritual philosophical bearing regarding spirituality and attempt a practical reconciliation between a spiritual and a nonspiritual worldview so as to effectively and authentically acknowledge, apprehend, and address spirituality in the lives of clients.

AN APOLOGETIC SECULAR HUMANIST SOCIAL WORKER

The view that people must give reasons to explain what they believe to be true, rather than just making

assertions that they expect others to believe without evidence, was the most important achievement of early Ionian thinkers (Martin, 2003).

Secular humanists accept a worldview or philosophy called naturalism, in which the physical laws of the universe are not superseded by non-material or supernatural entities such as demons, gods, or other “spiritual” beings outside the realm of the natural universe. Supernatural events such as miracles (in which physical laws are defied) and psychic phenomena, such as ESP, telekinesis, etc., are not dismissed out of hand, but are viewed with a high degree of skepticism. (Stevens, Tabash, Hill, Sikes, & Flynn, 2003)

The origin of what today is variously referred to as rationalism, empiricism, naturalism, materialism, or science is generally attributed to ancient Greek thinkers such as Xenophanes and Colophon who 400 to 600 years before the birth of Christ developed what was then the subjugated discourse of *logos*, meaning reasoned explanation (Martin, 2003). These ancient Greek thinkers, known as Ionians, sought meaning through observable evidence and logically defensible explanations and theories and rejected reliance on supernatural, magical, or mystical beliefs, and thus sowed the intellectual seeds that would give rise, through the Renaissance of the 14th to 17th centuries and the Enlightenment of the 18th century, to the present-day usage of the scientific method of inquiry.

Every person is, in one way or another, an epistemologist. We all develop theories of knowledge that inform our beliefs and guide our actions. Significant differences can exist, however, in how different individuals and groups define or construct the foundations of their knowledge systems, what qualifies as knowledge, what counts as evidence, and so forth. When such differences are extreme, they can lead to the perception or reality of incommensurability and incompatibility of rationales and justifications for assertions and claims about what is real and true. It is too often the case, as noted by Wittgenstein (1969), that “Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic” (p. 81). Indeed, name calling is the least of what often happens in such situations. As a social worker with a thoroughgoing commitment to empiricism and rationalism as the only valid grounds of knowledge,

are my views incommensurable and incompatible with spirituality? If so, is it possible for me to integrate spirituality into my social work practice? The answers to these crucial questions depend in great part on what is meant by the term and concept “spirituality.” Before attempting to provide a useful definition of this famously nebulous term, however, it may be helpful to place these considerations in the context of my own spiritual/religious heritage.

GROWING UP IN AND AWAY FROM ST. MARK’S

Spirituality, faith, and religion are invariably defined for children by parental figures. In my case, I was indoctrinated into the religion of Episcopalianism by my parents, who were members of that Christian sect in our original home of Costa Rica and who, after moving to the United States, found a place to continue their faith practice in the congregation of St. Mark’s church in Dorchester, Massachusetts. As an involuntary member of this congregation, I dutifully attended services and “Sunday school” from a young age through the age of “confirmation” (15 years old). In St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, this amounted to sitting in the pews every Sunday in my “Sunday clothes” with some coins in my pocket for the collection plate, kneeling, rising, singing, and praying in unison with the other congregants. In addition, for the children of the church it meant attending pre-service lessons in the teachings of the church toward becoming confirmed as full-fledged members who could partake in the Holy Communion. Beyond these theological routines and rituals, St. Mark’s, like countless other faith communities, was truly a connective force in the lives of its members. Picnics and parties directly and indirectly associated with the church were, to my childhood mind, the most enjoyable and valuable aspect of my membership in St. Mark’s.

But the religious (rules, rituals, institutions) and spiritual (mystical, divine) aspects of the church were neither relevant nor compelling to me. I remember finding some stories of the bible fascinating in the way that I enjoyed the fantastic tales I read in my favorite comic books. The best stories in either source involved power and mystery, struggle and hope, transformation and the triumph of good over evil. Beyond the content of the scriptures, I was also fascinated and increasingly incredulous that my Sunday school teachers and my parents believed in this ideology as fact.

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
(The Nicene Creed)

I do not recall any time in my life that I accepted or entertained the epistemology that this creed purports as factual or even possible. My years at St. Mark’s were thus spent in dutiful attendance, inauthentic participation, and skeptical fascination with religious and spiritual ideology. My proclivity was always Ionian, and this rationalist, scientific worldview only deepened as I grew and learned more about the world through primary and advanced studies in philosophy and science, which provided resounding contradictions of spiritual ideas. In addition, the study of politics and history furnished instance after instance of the potential, if not the tendency, of spirituality (whether codified in religion or not) to beget catastrophically negative and inhumane actions.

Despite my intellectual rejection of spirituality, however, I also carry within me the memories of the connective, organizing, and grounding functions that spirituality and religion provided to my parents and their fellow believers. I have always admired the beautiful meaning of the word religion itself, which comes from the Latin *religio*, meaning “to bind together again,” and which shares the same root as *ligament* (Goodenough, 1998). Thus, though I am unable to be in agreement with spirituality, I have always been appreciative of the meaning and inspiration that others find through it and sympathetic toward those who rely on it to meet the fundamental human needs of connection, meaning making, and moral guidance. This is the historical–developmental context of my relationship to religion and spirituality. It is against this backdrop that I discuss how to best define and understand the concept of spirituality to answer the crucial questions of commensurability and compatibility.

GILDING THE LILY, DOGMA, AND CONFLATION

In a subsequent section of this essay I attempt a reconciliation of my nonspiritual worldview with my desire to work effectively with clients vis-à-vis spiritual issues. Before the reconciliation, however, a personal reconnaissance is called for.

Optimal use of self requires maximal knowledge of self. In this section, I present my personal, philosophical bearing on the issue of spirituality.

To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,
To throw a perfume on the violet,
To smooth the ice, or add another hue
Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light
To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to
garnish,
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.
(Shakespeare, King John, Act IV, scene ii, in
Dawkins, 1998, p. 180)

For one for whom spirituality is not a self-evident, given aspect of the world—and yet for whom the world is filled with wonder and inspiration, obvious interconnectedness, and abundant reason for hopeful, moral conduct—spirituality seems a needless and problematic embellishment, a gilding of the lily (to use the popular misquotation of Shakespeare). But for many, spirituality as a basic aspect of human life is a truism.

- Spirituality is an *essential* aspect of being that is existentially subjective, transrational, non-local, and non-temporal. [italics added] (Tolliver, 1997, p. 478)
- ...spirituality [is] the gestalt of the total process of human life and development, encompassing biological, mental, social, and spiritual aspects. (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 42)
- As is common in social work parlance, spirituality can be considered an aspect of human experience and functioning, along with the biological, psychological, and sociological aspect...it completes a quaternity.... (Canda & Furman, 1999, pp. 46–47)
- In the consolidation of a soulful and spiritual existence, the therapist continues to come closer to an authentic self (Karasu, 1990, p. 143).
- Our work toward wholeness with the client requires that we engage in reflecting on

our own spiritual and psychological journey (Jacobs, 1997, p. 171).

These statements represent the manner in which spirituality is often discussed in social work literature. They are remarkably declarative, certain, even dogmatic. They assert that spirituality is essential, that it completes and encompasses a “quaternity” of human being, that it exists alongside mental health, and that I, as a therapist, must move toward consolidation of an existence that is spiritual (and soulful), if I am to move toward authenticity. They are, to my mind, the gilded lily forged into a hammer, pounding out dictums with the force of absolute, but unsubstantiated, certainty.

How, after all, is it determined, beyond simply and forcefully asserting it, that spirituality is essential? How can it be that I am committed to and convinced that I am on a path to increasing authenticity and at the same time be nonspiritual, if these assertions are as True as they sound? The answer to this query that seems to be offered in the discourse on spirituality is that perhaps we all are talking about the same thing, but I am just uncomfortable using the term spirituality to describe “it.” Were the perceived conflict reducible to a matter of semantics, it would be easily resolvable, but there are in the language about spirituality—and in attempts at defining it—fundamental issues of meaning that make the perceived conflict far deeper and more serious than one of mere word choice.

Definitions: Genuine versus Verbal Disputes

A genuine dispute involves disagreement regarding the “truth” of a specific proposition. Because the people engaged in a genuine dispute agree on the meaning of the words through which they convey their respective positions, each of them can propose and assess logical arguments that might eventually lead to a resolution of their differences. Merely verbal disputes, on the other hand, arise entirely from ambiguities in the language used to express the positions of the disputants. A verbal dispute disappears entirely once the people involved arrive at an agreement on the meaning of their terms, as doing so reveals their underlying agreement in belief. Apparently verbal but really genuine disputes can also occur, of course. In cases of this sort, the resolution of every ambiguity only reveals an underlying genuine dispute. Once that has been discovered, it

can be addressed fruitfully by appropriate methods of reasoning (Kemerling, 2001).

If the content of what some might want to connote with the terms “spiritual” or “spirituality” were the same as what I might want to connote by using some other term, then apparent conceptual disagreement would be revealed as such and reduced to irrelevant verbal preference. However, if the meaning of the term is clear, yet there persist disputes about validity, then a genuine and, in this case, serious conflict exists. To determine what sort of dispute we have here, we must stop and define *spirituality*. As noted earlier, efforts to define spirituality have perpetually been fraught with ambiguity, consternation, and outright resistance. Space does not permit a comprehensive review and consideration of the many definitions of spirituality that can be found, so I focus this discussion on the work of two authors who have written extensively on the matter and whose work is frequently cited in the literature and discourse on spirituality.

In their much-cited *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping*, Canda and Furman (1999) prefaced their attempt to define spirituality by observing that “Debates have continued for decades about these definitions or whether there should even be any definitions. Exactitude and consensus remain elusive” (p. 41). They then go on to offer a definition of the concept that aims to be “comprehensive and inclusive,” but which is actually circular and offers no stipulation of what spiritual means as a concept with any distinction from “the total process of human life and development” (p. 43). “. . . [S]pirituality [is] the gestalt of the total process of human life and development, encompassing biological, mental, social, and spiritual aspects” (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 42).

As noted earlier this definition is dogmatic in its declaration that spirituality is essential to human being. Beyond the issue of dogma, however, the point being made here is that the definition offers nothing that is distinctive about spirituality. If, to make the point as clear as possible, this definition is slightly altered to make the statement: “The gestalt of the total process of human life and development encompasses biological, mental, and spiritual aspects,” we are still left wanting a definition of what spiritual means.

Canda and Furman (1999) proceeded to sharpen this admittedly broad definition by stating the following:

The spiritual relates to the person’s search for 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 that are theistic, atheistic, nontheistic, or any combination of these. (p. 44)

In this definition, the authors have clearly chosen inclusiveness over parsimony and focus and make clear that *theism* (belief in a deity) is not requisite to being spiritual. But, again, if we slightly alter this definition to make the statement: “A person’s search for a sense of meaning and morally fulfilling relationships between her or himself, other people, the encompassing universe, and the ontological ground of existence may be understood in theistic, atheistic, or nontheistic terms,” we have a statement involving concepts that are clear (meaning making, morality, relationship, ontology, theism), but there is nothing here that distinguishes the place of, need for, or meaning of spiritual or spirituality.

Thus far there appears to be only a verbal dispute at hand. It seems, on the basis of the definitions examined (notwithstanding the need to define spiritual in the first definition), that I am not objecting to content, but only to what I consider the needless use of a term to refer to concepts and statements that I would otherwise find unproblematic. But there is lurking and embedded in the term “spirituality,” as used by Canda and Furman (1999) and other authors, a distinguishing aspect that, no matter what other meanings are conflated with it, creates a genuine conflict.

In the section of their book titled “Concluding Thoughts on the Conceptualization of Spirituality for Practice,” Canda and Furman (1999) stated the following:

The term [spirituality] is used to refer to many different but related themes: spirituality as wholeness and spirituality in terms of drives, experiences, functions, developmental processes, and contents. . . . The drives, functions, processes and contents of spirituality need not be discussed in religious terms. *In fact, they need not be discussed by using the term spirituality either. But whenever these drives, experiences, beliefs, function, developments, and behaviors are related to a sense of ultimacy, sacredness, or transcendence, it is useful to distinguish them with terms such as spirituality or religion.* [italics added] (p. 570)

It is here at last, when spirituality is finally given a stipulating, distinguishing definition, that the crux of what I find problematic becomes clear. There are several issues to consider. The first is the apparent contradiction and illogic of the possibility of being able to discuss properties and aspects of spirituality without using the term itself. It is hard to know exactly what this means. Either the statement means simply that whether or not the term is used, we all know we are talking about spirituality; or it means that we may talk about these properties and aspects as freestanding and able to exist apart from spirituality. If the latter is the case, then it must be asked, why add the confounding layer of spirituality, if we may discuss the matters just as well without it? An answer is supplied by the authors. It makes sense and is useful to speak of things as spiritual when they relate to deistic, inviolable, and supernatural matters. It seems clear, then, that communication, clarity, and logic would be better served if the term spirituality were used only when the supernatural is being referenced, but Canda and Furman (1999), along with many who write on these matters, resist this stipulation.

The authors acknowledged that their definition of spirituality is not limited to beliefs in spirit or the supernatural by pointing to the fact that usage of the term has long evolved into meanings that do not necessarily imply metaphysics (for example, "team spirit"; Canda & Furman, 1999). At the same time, however, the authors report that their own research determined that the descriptors most associated with spirituality included a "personal relationship with a higher power" (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 59). The other descriptors most associated were meaning, personal, purpose, values, and belief, concepts that have substance and meaning without a need for reference to the supernatural. They are nonspiritual concepts. There is nothing spiritual about these concepts unless the term spirituality is conflated with them. But when the meaning of spirituality is stretched in this way, the result is that spirituality encompasses not only nonmaterial, supernatural concerns and ideas, but also secular and nonspiritual matters and concerns as well. The question that arises in response to such a distortion of spirituality is put well by Unruh, Versnel, and Kerr (2002): "Is a secular definition of spirituality still meaningful?" (p. 7). These authors rightly pointed out that many of the ideas in a secular definition, such as meaning and purpose

in life, can be readily discussed without the added layer of spirituality.

Griffith and Griffith (2002), like Canda and Furman (1999), also advocate a definition of spirituality that is basically, initially, nonspiritual: "We offer a simple, practical definition of spirituality: *Spirituality is a commitment to choose, as a primary context for understanding and acting, one's relatedness with all that is*" (Griffith & Griffith, 2002, p. 14). However, "God" and "Higher Power," among other theistic representations with whom relationships are paramount, quickly follow this definition. But, again, there seems to be an effort to avoid restricting the meaning and usage of spiritual to supernatural. The result of this conflation is not limited to contradiction and illogic. The other main issue to be considered is that spirituality when conflated in the manner at issue gives rise to oppressive presumption, as illustrated in the following passage that aims to characterize nonspiritual individuals.

People whose own worldview rejects the possibility of sacredness, ego transcendence, and mystical experiences will view such claims [that there are ways of knowing that go beyond the physical and natural] as mere delusions, self-deceptions, or mistaken beliefs. For them, the claim of unmeasurability or inexpressibility is merely a hiding strategy; mysticism is seen as a mystification. This debate cannot be settled by argument. It rests on fundamentally different ways of apprehending and interpreting the world. It reflects two different spiritual perspectives (in the sense of worldviews and value systems). (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 56)

Confusion and contradiction abound in this passage. People described as rejecting sacredness, transcendence, and the mystical, are yet said to hold a "spiritual" perspective! It is immediately explained that *spiritual* (here used to describe what might better be called an epistemological or ontological perspective) is used in this context to mean "worldviews and value systems" (Canda & Furman, 1999), but this only raises the question, why not just refer to worldviews and value systems as worldviews and value systems? Why force the needless confusion of calling them "spiritual perspectives"? How is the nonspiritual social worker to respond to having his nonspiritual perspective characterized as spiritual nonetheless? It is as if a person with a

bisexual orientation insisted on labeling someone who is strictly homosexual or strictly heterosexual as bisexual nonetheless by inflating and conflating the term bisexual to the point that it can mean either attracted to both sexes or to just one sex. This, of course, would amount to a sort of identity oppression. No less a form of oppression is inherent in the definition and usage of spirituality at issue. The discourse on spirituality would be greatly improved if a more parsimonious, focused, and rigorous definition and usage of the term were adopted. I offer, for instance, the following:

Spirituality refers to the subjective attribution of supernatural, sacred, divine, or mystical properties to experiences (feelings, ideas, beliefs, etc.) or phenomena which are considered beyond empirical scrutiny and excluded from rational and evidentiary analysis.

This definition allows for discussion of meaning making, connection and relatedness, morality and justice, and other concepts with which spirituality is commonly bundled, without binding them together by definition. By adhering to this clear and focused definition we are able to make a clear distinction between moralities, conceptualizations of connectedness, and systems of meaning making that include spiritual aspects and those that do not, thus acknowledging and honoring the diversity of ways of viewing the world.

RECONCILIATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

For this nonspiritual, Ionian, humanist social worker, what is perhaps most concerning about spirituality is apparent in Canda and Furman's (1999) recognition/declaration that "this debate cannot be settled by argument" (p. 56). It is, to the mind of this thoroughgoing critical thinker, an unfortunate fact that spirituality precludes dissent and debate.

Things that are sacred and sacrosanct are holy, divine, worthy of worship, but another crucial aspect of anything that is sacred or sacrosanct is that it is *inviolable*, meaning it is not to be challenged or disrespected (MSN Encarta, 2003). From the standpoint of rationalism and critical thinking, however, any idea or ideology that is closed to scrutiny, debate, and critical dialogue is dogma, and dogmatism establishes an impenetrable barrier between those who assent and those who dissent. The barrier of

dogma has no locks that might be opened with the right key of reason or evidence. An individual is either within the barrier, in agreement with the inscrutable belief, or outside of the barrier with his or her mute disagreements.

The intellectual and philosophical dissidence between spiritual and nonspiritual worldviews can be represented as a juncture at which two types of thinkers together arrive and at which point they diverge. The believer moves onward to a supernatural destination, whereas the nonbeliever stands firm on the ground of nature and reason. Until the thinkers reach this juncture, they may walk together in agreement on everything that is factual about the world, or when they disagree about the facts, they might debate toward resolution using rational, scientific methods, agreeing, if not on the facts, then at least on how to debate them. But with spirituality, as noted by Canda and Furman (1999), there is no rational way to proceed in debate.

Of course, it can be reasonably argued that there are many disagreements that cannot be settled by debate; many opinions and views are not open to scrutiny or challenge. You and I may debate about which restaurant prepares the best tiramisu, who is the greatest ever basketball player, which minister gives the most stirring oratory, which policy provides the best way to deal with poverty, or why I insist on marrying this person that you insist is no good for me. And in such cases, where resolution is not possible, there can be, as a result, a feeling of loss of communion. But this need not lead to threats to the possibility of coexistence. The impossibility of total communion between spiritual and nonspiritual individuals is unfortunate. However, although it may be a cause of sadness, it is not an obstacle to constructive interaction between spiritual and nonspiritual individuals.

In significant ways, the spiritual and nonspiritual worldviews are indeed incommensurable and incompatible. Spiritual beliefs refuse to open themselves to nonspiritual scrutiny. Supernatural ideas are not compatible with, and indeed defy, natural facts, but this need not preclude the authentic interaction of a nonspiritual therapist with a spiritual client. As a social worker, I am guided by ethics that require and uphold tolerance and service and the honoring of diverse worldviews and walks of life. There are, of course, values inherent in social work, but these values pertain not so much to ideologies as to the effects and actions that result from them. After all, as

social workers, we may encounter individuals whose ideologies and values differ dramatically from our own, but we bracket our judgments of and reactions to such differences, except in instances in which the judgment or reaction is relevant to the welfare of the client or others.

Sympathy (being in agreement with) can never be a prerequisite of effective and authentic social work. If this were so, then we would all work only in narrow cloisters with carbon copies of ourselves. What makes our work possible and effective is our capacity to muster and maintain *empathy* (to understand another's position and rationales) for our clients, no matter the presenting issues or underlying ideologies. What makes our services optimally beneficial is our embrace of the diversity of manifestations of intra- and interrelational conflicts that our clients present, as well as the diversity of strengths and strength-giving sources that they incorporate into their lives. The nonspiritual social worker can and must be as open as the spiritual social worker to integrating spirituality into practice. This need not, and, as has been argued, cannot reasonably proceed from an oppressive assumption that everyone is somehow spiritual. Instead, there must be a vigilance to assess for spirituality as a relevant issue in the client's life, and, when it is found to be relevant, a willingness and ability to integrate it into practice. This concept has been well stated by Koenig (2001):

Patients who have an optimistic belief system that gives life meaning and purpose in the setting of pain and suffering, those who have a large group of supportive friends committed to their welfare, and those who live healthier lifestyles and abuse their bodies less often with drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes, are bound to be healthier and recover more quickly from illness. Who could doubt that such factors are relevant to the practice of medicine? How, then, might a sensible clinician proceed? (p. 3)

A sensible clinician, whether or not he or she is spiritual in any way, will realize that any purpose-giving, optimistic belief system that is relevant to a client, must, as a matter of sound practice, be acknowledged, explored, and reasonably integrated into the clinical process. That the given belief system might be strictly secular, deeply spiritual, or anywhere in between is what should be taught to social work students and what should guide our

engagement with clients. Rather than teach our students such false universals as "We always bring our religious faith and belief into every relationship," or ". . . that every crisis in life that brings a client to a social worker has a faith dimension to it" (Surface, 2006, p. 45), or any of the presumptuous and potentially alienating dictums such as those cited earlier, we must exercise caution and not presume universality of the presence or relevance of spirituality in the lives of clients and social workers alike.

Assessment that probes for this crucial information can be conducted without presuming spirituality as essential and universal, but also without neglecting it as a possibly relevant aspect of the client's life. Questions such as the following should be a standard part of the assessment phase of treatment.

- How do you make sense of the situation that brings you to therapy?
- Is there anything in your worldview or belief system that helps you with this situation, or that has an influence on the situation?
- What gives your life meaning?
- What are your sources of comfort, encouragement, support, and guidance?

Such unassuming questions proceed from the reliable presumption that all human beings seek and find or construct meaning and sources of strength and solace in their lives, but the questions are completely open to spiritual or nonspiritual responses. In cases in which clients give answers that indicate a spiritual (including religious) orientation, the social worker will be alerted to ask specific questions to gain more information. These questions might include inquiries about who or what "God" means for the client; which, if any aspect of the spiritual belief system or institution are challenging or conflictual, and how the therapist might best work with the client to incorporate his or her spirituality into the helping process.

It is possible that for some clients, a commonality of spiritual beliefs with the therapist is requisite to feeling that the process can be viable (for example, a client may want the therapist to pray with her). It is only at this point that the issue of authenticity arises and must be addressed. Respect for the client and the maintenance of personal integrity would require disclosure of a nonspiritual worldview in such circumstances. The client is then empowered

to make decisions about the viability of the counseling relationship.

Spirituality, defined strictly as a belief system that incorporates supernaturalism, is an ideology, like any other, that to a lesser or greater extent plays a role in the life of the client. Assessment for spirituality, thus defined, should be a standard part of practice, and the willingness and ability to integrate spirituality must be part of the mission of a social worker. As discussed in this essay, when properly understood, spirituality may present a personal, philosophical challenge to the nonspiritual social worker, but one that needs not preclude effective integration of spiritual issues in the counseling process. **SW**

REFERENCES

- Bullis, R. K. (1996). *Spirituality in social work practice*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Canda, E. R., & Furman, L. D. (1999). *Spiritual diversity in social work practice: The heart of helping*. New York: Free Press.
- Dawkins, R. (1998). *Unweaving the rainbow: Science, delusion, and the appetite for wonder*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Ellison, C. G., & Levin, J. S. (1998). The religion–health connection: Evidence, theory, and future directions. *Health Education & Behavior, 25*, 700–720.
- Ellor, J. W., Netting, F. E., & Thibault, J. M. (1999). *Religious and spiritual aspects of human service practice*. Columbia: University of South Carolina.
- Goodenough, U. (1998). *The sacred depths of nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Griffith, J. L., & Griffith, M. E. (2002). *Encountering the sacred in psychotherapy: How to talk with people about their spiritual lives*. New York: Guilford Press.
- The Harris Poll. (2005). *The religious and other beliefs of Americans 2005*. Retrieved August 1, 2006, from http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=618
- Harrison, M. O., Koenig, H. G., Hays, J. C., Eme-Akwari, A. G., & Pargament, K. I. (2001). The epidemiology of religious coping: A review of recent literature. *International Review of Psychiatry, 13*, 86–93.
- Jacobs, C. (1997). On spirituality and social work practice. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 67*, 171–175.
- Karasu, T. B. (1990). Spiritual psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy, 53*, 143–162.
- Kemerling, G. (2001). *Definition and meaning*. Retrieved May 24, 2003, from <http://www.philosophy.com>
- Koenig, H. G. (2001). Religion, spirituality, and medicine: How are they related and what does it mean? *Mayo Clinic Proceedings, 76*, 1189–1191.
- Martin, I. R. (2003). *An overview of classical Greek history from Mycenae to Alexander: The cosmos and logos*. Retrieved June 13, 2003, from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0009&query=head%3D%2399>
- MSN Encarta. (2003). *Sacrosanct*. Retrieved June 14, 2003, from <http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/refpages/search.aspx?q=sacrosanct>
- Stevens, F., Tabash, E., Hill, T., Sikes, E., & Flynn, T. (2003). *What is secular humanism?* Retrieved June 1, 2003, from <http://www.secularhumanism.org>
- Surface, D. (2006). Faith in practice: Religious beliefs in the client relationship. *Social Work Today, 6*, 44.
- Tolliver, W. (1997). Invoking the spirit: A model for incorporating the spiritual dimension of human functioning into social work practice. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 67*, 477–486.
- Unruh, A. M., Versnel, J., & Kerr, N. (2002). Spirituality unplugged: A review of commonalities and contentions, and a resolution. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 69*, 5–19.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On certainty*. New York: Harper & Row.

Carlos A. Hoyt, MSW, is associate dean of students, Phillips Academy, 180 Main Street, Andover, MA 01810-4161; e-mail: choyt@andover.edu.

Original manuscript received September 25, 2005
Final revision received November 22, 2006
Accepted April 2, 2007