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## CHAPTER 6

# Faith-based Approaches

*Philip Gilligan*

### Introduction

Faith-based social work is characterized by the recognition and acknowledgement of faith and faith-based values as significant sources of motivation and guidance. These may enhance professional values, but may also draw practitioners into direct conflict with secular values within the mainstream. This chapter explores the religious or faith-based origins of social work, the nature of faith-based practice, contemporary faith-based issues, and the global spread of social policies aimed at increasing the involvement of faith-based organizations in service delivery. It also seeks to highlight some of the dilemmas involved.

Religious or faith organizations – and individuals who subscribe to spiritual or religious beliefs, notably particular types of Christianity – had a sometimes dominant influence on the origins of social work, at least as constructed in English-speaking (Anglophone) countries and colonial contexts. Their influence continues but varies across contexts. For example, in postcolonial contexts, western – Christian – and non-western traditional religious values sometimes conflict with local cultures and at other times exist side by

**Comment [-1]:** 5348 words – okay for now – Gray et al ref added

**Comment [PG2]:** Gray et al. was, already in the references, but inserting 'missing' references has given us 5,407 words.

side in a hybrid belief system (see Gray et al. 2008a). Faith-based social work practice extends the range of interventions and challenges to the bureaucratic services provided by statutory agencies. Social work with asylum seekers and refugees in Britain and elsewhere provides a stark example of this, with statutory agencies implementing oppressive legislation, while faith-based organizations provide sanctuary for those whom the authorities seek to detain, exclude and deport (Cemlyn and Briskman 2003; Hayes and Humphries 2004). However, there is the risk that faith-based organizations may ‘abuse’ their position as service providers, while also being exploited by neoliberal social policies which charge them with major responsibilities in the absence of adequate resources (De'Ath 2004; Jordan 2000). It is sometimes inappropriate to give faith-based organizations responsibility for particular tasks, most notably risk assessment of clergy suspected of abusing children (see Plante 2004). Organizations may prioritize their reputation over the needs of individuals (see Bryant 2004) or religious conversion of service users<sup>1</sup>. They may advocate spirit possession (see Gilligan 2008; Stobart 2006) or oppressive views of gay men and lesbian women (see Hicks 2003; Trotter et al. 2008) or deny the equal rights of women or other groups (see Busuttil and ter Haar 2002).

## Key ideas

There is no single faith-based approach to social work. However, approaches arguably fall into two contrasting types: ‘fundamentalist or exclusive’ and ‘liberal or open’ approaches

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, [www.caringforlife.co.uk/](http://www.caringforlife.co.uk/) or [www.teenchallenge.co.uk/content/view/23/49/](http://www.teenchallenge.co.uk/content/view/23/49/)

### *Fundamentalist-Exclusive*

Fundamentalist-Exclusive approaches begin with the view that the experience of, or adherence to, a faith is an essential starting point, not only for eventual spiritual salvation, but also for a fulfilled and satisfying life in the present. Acceptance of the faith may be seen as an essential component in being able to move on from current difficulties or overcoming past trauma. In such approaches, faith is an integral part of practice which is likely to involve at least an invitation to service users to accept aspects of it. Faith is seen as beneficial, protective and potentially life changing and becomes part of, perhaps fundamental to, practitioners' repertoire of interventions. For example, the Social Work Christian Fellowship (SWCF) in the UK states that it 'seeks to develop Biblical thinking, challenge secular assumptions, and promote Christian perspectives in policy-making and practice', while its aims include encouraging 'Christians working in social work and social care settings to integrate their personal faith with their professional practice'<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, the North American Association of Christians in Social Work says that its goal is to provide members with 'the ability to tap the resources of faith to provide more effective and faithful social work services', while the Catholic Social Workers National Association describes its mission as being 'to promote implementation of Catholic social teachings in social work practice as we support competent professional social workers living out their baptismal call by being the hands and feet of Christ'.<sup>3</sup>

Pressure groups, such as the British Humanist Association, argue that organizations whose motivation is a manifestation of their beliefs are in danger of discriminating

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.swcf.org.uk/aims.html](http://www.swcf.org.uk/aims.html).

<sup>3</sup> See [www.cswna.org/](http://www.cswna.org/)

against potential employees and clients. They cite the example of the Salvation Army whose mission is 'to proclaim his [Jesus Christ's] gospel, to persuade people of all ages to become his disciples and to engage in a programme of practical concern for the needs of humanity' (BHA 2007: 6).

### *Liberal-Open*

Faith-based agencies adopting more Liberal-Open approaches, while they usually involve individuals and organizations who profess faith, express the part it plays very differently. Faith is seen as a motivation for action, but not necessarily as an essential part of that action. Practitioners may believe that their faith requires them to act and to provide services, but they will do so without attempting to engage those people in their particular faith or any faith other than as beneficiaries of actions motivated by it. In such approaches, faith may sometimes appear almost incidental to face-to-face interventions. For example, in the United Kingdom, organizations like Barnardos and the Children's Society, which provide many social work services to children and families, clearly acknowledge their faith-based origins. However, in policy statements, they are explicit in emphasizing their inclusiveness and, by implication, the absence of conditionality or proselytizing. Barnardos, for example, tells prospective employees:

In today's multi-faith society we continue to recognise and respect our Christian foundation, and we also embrace the changing society in which we live ... We welcome, value and need staff from many world faiths and philosophies, and the diversity and talent they bring (Narey 2007).

The Children's Society (2008) says:

Our Christian values drive [our] ... work ... and are our motivation for working with children and young people ... We understand our Christian mission in terms of changing the society in which we live so that it models the values of the re-ordered world of the Kingdom of God. These values are love, justice and forgiveness.

Social workers are unlikely to quibble with this set of values, regardless of their particular outlook. BHA (2007: 6) suggests that such organizations 'despite a religious foundation, do not (or no longer) discriminate on grounds of religion or belief in either employment or service provision, being motivated wholly or principally by the desire to provide a useful service'.

## Overview of the social work literature

### *The nature of faith*

Commonly held western understandings of faith, together with the shared characteristics of different faiths, allow construction of what might be called faith-based approaches to social work practice. Faith involves numerous beliefs and perspectives. While there are many commonalities within and between sects, denominations and other religious groupings, there are also wide differences. The broad differences and commonalities between major world religions are relatively easy to identify. However, there are many important issues on which even co-religionists place different degrees of emphasis, which may have significance for individuals, but will often be relatively difficult for

external observers to identify. They include matters such as the degree to which a particular faith is viewed by adherents as the only 'true faith' and the relative significance given to 'Good Works' *vis-à-vis* 'Belief'.

At the same time, some faiths, such as Islam or Sikhism, have no generally accepted spokespeople to offer collective viewpoints and the official statements of institutional religions do not necessarily reflect the beliefs of all adherents. Additionally, the nature of governance for different organizations is extremely varied. Generally accepted constructions of social work are contested. Nevertheless, Gray et al. (2008a) note that social work is essentially a western construction informed by a broad array of western social and behavioural science theories, methods and approaches. It attracts individuals and organizations with complex, contrasting and sometimes contradictory motivations.

Western theology draws clear distinctions between concepts of religion, spirituality, faith, and culture (see, for example, Canda and Furman 1999; Gray and Lovat 2008; Henery 2003; Patel et al. 1998). However, definitions tend to overlap and, especially among groups and communities where faith is central to their understanding of events and experience, distinctions made by outsiders may have little practical meaning for believers, including social workers and service users. As a result, there is some risk that overemphasis on theoretical distinctions diverts attention from actual beliefs guiding behaviour and providing frames through which events are understood (Goffman 1975; Park 1990).

### *Social work's religious origins*

Payne (2005) reminds us that social work is a western idea that arises largely from activities in some Western European and North American societies in the late 1800s. Constructions of social work arise within a particular social, political and historical context, and thus change over time. Western social work has, perhaps, undergone several transformations from charity or philanthropy, or what Franklin (1986) calls its period of 'moral certainty' to 'rational enquiry' beginning with Richmond's (1922) notion of 'social investigation'. Social work might have developed differently had it followed Addams' (1902, 1964) model of community-based 'cultural education'. But instead it pursued a science-based professional model and targeted clinical intervention. Harris (2008) emphasizes that the construction of social work is always a 'conjunctural settlement', a 'combination of events and ideas in which the interests represented by different discourses are subordinated by a specific configuration of a dominant discourse for a period of time' (Harris and Kirk 2000: 111). However, for the most part, the nature of social work remains contested and varies across socio-political contexts though vigorous attempts are made to promote the dominant scientific and philosophical ideas of western social work despite calls for cultural relevance (Gray et al. 2008a).

Social work's origins are distinctly Judeo-Christian. Payne (2005) traces the roots of British social care to religious influences from medieval Catholic Europe, particularly Augustinian and Thomist philosophy. In so doing, he emphasizes the difference between charity, welfare and social work with the latter being a specific and paid professional activity. Guttman and Cohen (1995) note the influence of Jewish teaching on social work's conception of social justice, human rights and mutual responsibility.



However, there is much debate on whether it is possible to identify a distinctly Jewish approach to social work (Chaiklin 1982; Gidron 1983; Mittwoch 1983; Prager 1988). Many Muslims would, meanwhile, see the concept of social work within Islam as arising from chapter 2, verse 177 of the Qu'ran:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day and the Angels and the Book and the Messengers; to spend of your substance out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask; and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayers and practice regular charity ... Such are the people of truth, the God fearing.

Crabtree et al. (2008: 52) observe that 'the principles governing Islam itself are ... essentially compatible with social work values' (see Lovat, Chapter 16). Similar observations can be made about other belief systems, including atheism or secular humanism and even, perhaps, social work itself.

### Application to social work practice

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, there has been a rekindling of recognition of the potential significance of religion and spirituality in social work practice (Canda 1998; Crisp 2008; Crompton 1996, 1998; Furman et al. 2004; Furness 2003; Gilligan 2003; forthcoming; Gilligan and Furness 2006; Gray 2008b; Patel et al. 1998). This work includes a necessary critique of tendencies within mainstream literature and professional

education to ignore the potential significance, both positive and negative, of faith and religion in difficulties faced by service users and in potential solutions to them.

In such a context, some social workers in Anglophone countries are increasingly confident about using religious or spiritually sensitive interventions in their practice, although the likelihood of their doing so varies with geographical location. In a sample of social work students in the USA, Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert (1999) found that 31.2% had already recommended participation in a religious or spiritual program to service users and 79% approved of this practice. However, Gilligan and Furness (2006) found that only 15.5% of a British sample of student social workers had done so and that 65.5% would not approve. In general both qualified social workers and students in Britain were less likely to consider such interventions appropriate. Rankin (2006), like Canda (1998), emphasizes that spirituality is a neglected area of social work practice, which can provide strength and support for many service users, while Miley et al. (2004:235) suggest that:

Affiliating with a community of faith provides a network of personal relationships and concrete support in times of need. Specifically, spiritual beliefs and practices strengthen the ability to withstand and transcend adversity and are virtual wellsprings for healing and resilience.

Hodge (2001: 204) notes the need to capture the 'subjective, often intangible nature of human existence'. He offers a framework for assessing people's personal subjective spirituality as a real force in their lives. He suggests that an individual's relationship

with 'the Ultimate' facilitates coping, promotes a sense of purpose, instils a sense of self-worth, and provides hope for the future, while rituals serve to ease anxiety and promote a sense of security and being loved. Hodge (2005) also advocates the collection of spiritual histories and the use of life maps in assessing a person's spiritual journey and relationship with God or a transcendental force, and the use of spiritual ecomaps and ecomaps to focus on the individual's spiritual relationships.

### *Three contemporary moral issues*

It is instructive at this point to reflect on the ways in which religious affiliation, faith and beliefs may profoundly influence attitudes and perspectives in relation to specific moral issues. For secular organizations and a secular profession with national accrediting bodies, such as the General Social Care Council (GSCC), Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) or Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), such matters raise important questions regarding the extent to which individual conscientious objection can be accommodated, while for governments, professional and funding bodies the attitudes and behaviours of faith-based organizations may raise important concerns. This has recently been illustrated by the difficulties caused for, and by, faith-based agencies and individual practitioners in Britain in relation to three moral issues:

#### *1. Adoption by same-sex couples*

Faith-based agencies have needed to make decisions about whether to continue to offer services in a legislative context (Adoption and Children Act 2002; The Equality Act 2006 (Sexual Orientation Regulations 2007)), which may require them to act against

their duty to God. At the same time, government has had to consider whether to grant those providing previously acceptable and valuable services exemption from legislation, which the chief executive of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering describes as ‘very important at a time when too many children wait too long in temporary care ... for an adoptive family or, in some cases, never have the chance of adoption at all’ (Mulholland 2005:1, see also Community Care News 2003a, 2003b; Hicks 2003; The Christian Institute 2002a, 2002b; O’Donoghue 2007; Price 2008).

## *2. Child abuse by clergy*

In relation to responses to the abuse of children by clergy, professional social workers, often with strong religious faiths, have been recruited by churches in significant numbers to develop and improve safeguarding procedures, only, in some cases, to experience professional frustration in the face of ongoing institutional resistance to what, in mainstream western social work, would be seen as standard practice. Cumberlege (2007: 22), while reporting generally positive progress in the Catholic Church in England and Wales, notes:

We are concerned that five years after Lord Nolan reported Bishops and Congregational Leaders may be minimising the distressing consequences, the harmful impact and the anguish that follows in the wake of child abuse. This... , has impeded the delivery of consistently good – let alone excellent – safeguarding arrangements (2.21: 22).

At the same time, there is a clear discrepancy between the number of Catholic priests known to have been convicted of criminal offences against children and sentenced to serve a term of imprisonment of 12 months or more and the number reported by the Catholic Office for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (COPCA) as laicised, in line with Recommendation 78 of Nolan (2001) (COPCA 2002 – 2007, see also Armstrong 1991; Carlson Brown and Parker 1989; COPCA 2006; Gamble 2002; Kennedy 2000, 2003; Kennison 2008; Plante 2004).

### *3. Spirit possession*

Controversies over appropriate responses to beliefs in spirit possession illustrate, perhaps in an even clearer way, the potential difficulties involved when practitioners or policy makers hold particular beliefs (see Gilligan 2008). Stobart (2006: 30) suggests that what is needed is ‘child protection procedures ... together with information about good practice in “praying for”, “delivering” or “exorcising” children’. However, Pearson (2007: 1) argues that even this ‘may inadvertently end up alienating those faith communities who already feel marginalised’, while Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA 2006:2) ask Parliament to ‘make it an offence for anyone to ... describe a child as possessed by the devil’.

### *Faith-based organizations and social welfare*

Faith-based organizations play a significant role in social welfare beyond the day-to-day practice of social work. Their role is politically controversial and their influence is vehemently opposed by some. Sanderson (2007) asserts that ‘Faith-based welfare is a dangerous concept that should be stamped on’. Similar views are expressed by the

British Humanist Association (BHA, 2007) which suggests that the British government's plans to expand the role of religious organizations within public services involves dangers of discrimination against staff and potential barriers to accessing services for the public.

BHA (2007: 6) suggests that some of the organizations being encouraged by the government to take on public service delivery are 'religious with a deeper hue' than traditional providers and that the British Government has been influenced by the policies of countries, such as the USA and Australia, where religious organizations, such as the Catholic Church, Salvation Army and Mission Australia have considerable involvement in public services, e.g., Mission Australia (2007: 2), as an equal opportunity employer, requires employees to adhere to Christian values, while 'standing up and advocating for the most disadvantaged people in Australian communities'. Gray (2008c) notes that Australian community service organizations are often staffed by volunteers and employ relatively few qualified social workers and that their rise has paralleled government cutbacks in the direct provision of services.

In the USA, the Welfare Reform Act (1996) requires states to give faith-based providers equal consideration with secular, non-profit non-government organizations when bidding for social service contracts. The trend, for at least the past decade, has been for religious groups to accept and compete for public money (see Chambré 2001; Wuthnow 2004). Nagel (2006: 2) suggests that 'Charitable Choice' and 'Faith-Based-Initiative' are expressions of a political ideology advocated by successive administrations, which seek to include religious organizations in public welfare. Faith-based organizations

receiving federal funds cannot make services conditional on participation in religious activities and cannot use funds to support 'inherently religious activities'. However, Cnaan (1999) reports that they are allowed to control the lifestyles of employees outside of the work environment and that many social services are becoming more openly religious. Meanwhile, in the Republic of Korea, by 2003, 53.4 percent of social welfare agencies were run by religious organizations (Koh 2006) and this is a common pattern in postcolonial contexts (see Ling, in Gray et al. 2008a).

## Conclusion

There are several faith-based approaches to social work. All, perhaps, share strong religious motivations, values and beliefs as defining characteristics, which have a powerful impact on the practice of social welfare agencies and social work practitioners, and cannot be ignored. They also give rise to perplexing dilemmas and heated controversy, especially when it comes to moral matters. The impact of faith-based approaches may be to extend, enhance and enrich the services available to vulnerable individuals and groups, but it may, also, serve to restrict access to them. Some faith-based approaches challenge oppressive practices by the state, while some may promote what are seen by others as equally oppressive views and practices. Any faith-based approach needs to be analyzed and evaluated, not only by those responsible for the regulation of social work, but, perhaps more especially, by those adopting it and those on the receiving end of its services. It may provide exactly what is needed in particular circumstances, either because of or despite its faith characteristics, but, at the same time, it may fail to do so, for the same reasons.

## Key concepts box

Faith is a profound belief or fundamental trust in a particular truth or doctrine, most frequently used in relation to religion. It usually refers to beliefs in a spiritual and transcendent reality involving an external God or Supreme Being who guides adherents or controls their ultimate destinies.

Religion and Spirituality, from a pragmatic and phenomenological viewpoint, are largely what individual believers or communities say they are. While this definition creates space for inconsistent meanings, it also suggests that this reflects concrete experience and ensures that what individuals see as 'religion' or 'spiritually' is respected. Canda and Furman (1999: 44) draw a distinction between religion as 'an organized structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community related to spirituality' and spirituality as the 'search for meaning, purpose and morally fulfilling relation with self, other people, the encompassing universe, and ultimate reality, however a person understands it' (see Chapter 18).



## Research study questions

1. Have you worked with any social work practitioners or agencies that have been influenced by connections with faith, either to the benefit or detriment of their service users?
2. How do your personal beliefs and connections, if any, with a faith or faiths impact on your social work practice?
3. Do faith-based agencies have a useful role to play in the delivery of social work services?

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