

## Chapter 1

### Achieving a social work degree

This chapter will help you meet the following National Occupational Standards

#### Key Role 6 Demonstrate professional competence in social work practice

- Work within the principles and values underpinning social work practice
- Critically reflect upon your own practice and performance using supervision and support systems
- Devise strategies to deal with ethical issues, dilemmas and conflicts

It will also introduce you to the following academic standards as set out in the social work subject benchmark statement

#### 4.7

- think critically about the complex social, legal, economic, political and cultural contexts in which social work practice is located
- acquire and apply the habits of critical reflection, self-evaluation and consultation, and make appropriate use of research in decision-making about practice and in the evaluation of outcomes.

#### 5.1.1

- the nature and validity of different definitions of, and explanations for, the characteristics and circumstances of service users and the services required by them, drawing on knowledge from research, practice experience, and from service users and carers

### 5.1.2

- the location of contemporary social work within historical, comparative and global perspectives, including European and international contexts
- the changing demography and cultures of communities in which social workers will be practising

## **INTRODUCTION**

I wonder if you have ever grappled with a word or an idea which is commonly used and widely understood, but is difficult to pin down and define. Words like community or care might fall into this category as we all know what they mean but when we begin to explore them they become more elusive.

Spirituality could be considered such a word and it will require some clear thinking and hard work over the next few chapters if we are to gain a fuller understanding of its many meanings and nuances.

I think that the best place to start is with your own experience.

### Activity 1.1

I want you to spend a few moments thinking about yourself and your life. Make a list of those experiences, beliefs, and places which you think may have a spiritual element or relate to spirituality. You might find it helpful to write down your ideas on a piece of paper under the three headings I have suggested. Think broadly about your life and don't be afraid to write about things which may seem off beat or not strictly relevant.

Comment

How did you get on? I did not find this exercise easy and I imagine that some of you found it difficult as well.

Here is my list.

Experiences;

- Receiving help and support from both friends and strangers at difficult times in my life.
- Seeing my children born and being made aware of the beauty and fragility of life.
- Experiencing the power of nature in storm, wind and rain.
- Experiencing dreams and visions.

Beliefs;

- I believe in God.
- I believe in the search for economic and social justice, especially through fair trade.
- I believe that all people are equal.
- I believe that all people have a spirituality, and have a right to express it in different ways and in freedom.

Places;

- My local place of worship is important to me as a source of friendship and learning.
- The hills and mountains remind me of the beauty of creation and provide me with stillness and quiet.
- I find Stonehenge inspiring and mysterious.
- Being on a boat surrounded by the sea reminds me of my small place in the universe.

Did your list look very different to mine? You might have been surprised to see some of the things I have mentioned and wondered why I included mountains, night time dreams, and those values that shape who we are as people. Don't worry too much if you feel a little lost at the moment, there is a long way to go on our journey and spirituality is a topic where there are many different responses; all of them equally valid.

In this chapter we are going to start and end by considering the role of religion. I want to be clear with you that this book is not about religion. It is about spirituality, and that is different to religion. Consequently, I am not intending to give you an in-depth understanding of religion, more of a thumb nail sketch by way of introduction.

## **RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY**

I wonder what comes to mind when you think about the term religion. I imagine that many of you instinctively thought about the major religions of the world – Christianity, Islam and Judaism and the influence they have on the world. Of course there are many more smaller religious groups, some of them very new, which you may also have considered. So what characterises a religion and how does it differ from spirituality?

I think that religions and religious groups share some of the following characteristics.

- All of are based on a well structured and organised set of beliefs. There is often debate about the nature of these core beliefs and they may evolve over time, but nonetheless, adherence to them is required if you are to become a member. Frequently, beliefs will be based on teachings and rituals which are set down in holy books, such as the Talmud or the Koran.

- These beliefs differ between religions of course, but share a common theme – a belief that there is a spiritual realm beyond our own physical world which exercises an influence on the affairs of the world. Within this understanding there is a Divine Being or Beings who exemplify justice, power, love and truth.
- Crucially, these beliefs are shared by a number of people, sometimes millions of people across the world. This gives a strong communal element to religion and you may have experience of a faith where it is an expectation that believers will meet together to sing, pray, discuss, or purely enjoy the company of like minded people. Often these religious beliefs are of huge significance to the individual. They do not merely inform or influence a persons' understanding of themselves and the world, they become the very driving force behind their existence. And as such give purpose, meaning, satisfaction, and structure to many millions of people.

Spirituality is at the heart of religion. The shared rites, traditions and rituals of religion, as well as the use of worship, song, dance and prayer all draw us out and away from ourselves and into a different spiritual realm.

But religion is separate to spirituality, it is merely one way of expressing spirituality, and it is not essential to be a member of a faith group in order to have or to express spirituality.

### **The human spirit**

At the core of any thinking about spirituality is the word *spirit*. I am sure that you must be familiar with the word because it is used often in everyday conversation. For example, if we feel positive and happy about ourselves we say that we are in 'good spirits'. If a team is working well and in harmony we say that it has a 'good team spirit'. If we are making the

best of adversity or a difficult situation we are 'keeping up our spirits.' The converse is true of course, and there are a number of more negative connotations connected to the word spirit – low in spirit, lacking in spirit and mean spirited.

So the word spirit is used in everyday language. It has also been a key concept in religious and philosophical thought for thousands of years.

### Research summary

Gilbert (2006) provides a very helpful list of some of the different ways in which the word 'spirit' has been defined.

- The Ancient Greeks used the word pneuma to describe air, breath and spirit. They believed that the body, mind, spirit and heart were all inter dependent, a view that is becoming increasingly common in holistic ways of working and one which we will be exploring later.
- The Hebrew language uses the word ru'ach which means both breath and the core spirit of every person, which belongs to God and returns to Him at death.
- In Latin, the word spiritus is used. This can mean a number of things; breath, the human soul and vigour. This is where the English word spirit comes from and immediately reminds us of some of the phrases we used earlier.

As you can see, there are a number of common themes that we can identify within these definitions. For example, all of them indicate that the spirit is integral to the wellbeing of the person, much like breath or oxygen. It is so intrinsic to our well being that we could not live or thrive without it.

### **Different definitions of spirituality**

Whilst religious and philosophical ideas from past times are helpful in developing our understanding, we need to consider some more contemporary definitions which will help us in our quest.

The first definition of spirituality (the human spirit) I want you to consider comes from the National Institute for Mental Health in England (NIMHE), an organisation that facilitates change in mental health services.

*It can refer to the essence of human beings as unique individuals, what makes me, me & you, you.*

*So it is the power, energy & hopefulness in a person.*

*It is what is deepest in us – what gives us direction, motivation. It is what enables a person to survive bad times, to overcome difficulties, to be themselves. (NIMHE, 2003)*

A similar definition is provided by Slay (2007) who suggests that '*.. spirituality (is) the expression of a person's humanity, whatever it is that helps to shape that person, & the well of inner strength from which that person draws support at time of crisis.*'

I am sure that you will have noted the connections between these definition and some of the older ideas we previously considered. There is an emphasis on the spirit as being what defines who we are as people, what makes us unique as people. It is also a source of power, inspiration and drive; what moves us forward in life and what enables us to overcome difficulty.

I don't want to overly burden you with different definitions as this may only confuse you. What I would like you to do is to try and work out a definition of spirituality for yourself. In order to help you to do this, I want to look now at some of the many characteristics of spirituality, using the definitions we have considered as a starting point.

## **Meaning and purpose**

So what is spirituality? Firstly I want to suggest that spirituality is what gives meaning and purpose to our lives. The gift of purpose and meaning is very precious and sometimes in social work you will come across people who lead lives that seem devoid of both. How people achieve a sense of purpose and meaning is highly individualistic. Some will see themselves as having a major goal in life which they are working towards. Others will have a gift, may be music, art, language, writing, acting or sporting ability, which is extremely important to them and defines who they are as people. Some may find meaning in having a specific role or relationship – parent, friend, social worker, doctor or nurse for example. Still more will achieve meaning through personal faith or adherence to a particular political or philosophical position.

If you like, it is what makes us tick as people, what motivates us to carry on in life, what compels us to get out of bed every morning. This may well be a combination of things which could, and will, change over time, almost from day to day. They will be highly individualistic and will be those roles, relationships, attributes and gifts that we hold most dear and define who we are as people.

In passing, it is important to note that achieving a sense of meaning and purpose by gaining a role can be dependent on factors beyond your immediate control. For example, you may be an extremely gifted musician but if your family are too poor to purchase a musical instrument or to send you to music lessons, this may well impact on your musical development. Equally, if you are a gifted sports person but sustain a bad injury, it is possible that this will end your career. Or if you attend a poor school with limited aspirations it may be difficult for you to go to university or to undertake professional training. This is an important consideration as

many people in our society are unable to achieve their full potential due to social exclusion, poverty and the effects of a range of oppressions such as racism, ageism and homophobia.

### **How we view the world**

Another important aspect of spirituality is an understanding of those core beliefs which enable us to make sense of the world and the events that shape our lives. The world is often a baffling place where things happen over which we have little or no control. Some people may believe that God is in control, whilst others may believe in fate – what will be, will be. Others believe in the ability of humanity to dominate the planet, whilst others believe that the forces of nature or ‘mother earth’ ultimately decide the affairs of men and women.

Our beliefs concerning the world and how it operates helps us to find answers to those questions in life with which we all struggle - Why has this happened to me? What more could I have done? Where am I going? How can I make things better? How we make sense of the world, and gain a sense of security, is important to all of us who work in health and social care. For how can we support vulnerable people who are at a point of crisis in their lives if we have never struggled to find answers to uncertainty and doubt? As Lloyd (1997) points out, practitioners are often working with people whose lives are characterised by loss and distress. If we do not feel comfortable addressing the question ‘why has this happened’ we will not be able to provide a holistic, professional service when it is most needed.

### **Spirituality and values**

Spirituality is not only about our world view and what gets us out of bed in the morning, but it is also what guides our behaviour for the rest of the day. For spirituality is directly related to our value base. Those beliefs,

values and morals which are integral to us and from which we will not deviate. Put another way, it is our moral code or moral compass. Again, these positions may be informed by religious belief, or they may be entirely secular. For example, in social work we emphasise such values as choice, empowerment, dignity, respect, anti oppressive practice and so on. These could be seen as the spiritual basis of social work.

### **Spirituality and relationships**

So far you may be thinking that spirituality is very much a private affair, something which is unique and personal to each individual. Whilst this may be true, there is another dimension that we need to consider.

Moss (2005) begins to tease out this particular aspect by posing a series of questions

*'What difference does all of this make to you and to what you do with your life? What impact does it have upon how you treat other people both individually and within communities?'* ( p13)

In other words, spirituality is what we do to demonstrate our world view in action. It is shown in how we respond to others, how we develop ties and relationships, how we demonstrate a sense of responsibility to other people and communities.

Spirituality then is not just a personal matter it has an outward looking dimension. It would be impertinent of me to ask why you had chosen to become a social worker or care professional. But I suspect that at least some of you chose this path because it parallels your own spiritual values and beliefs. You believe in social justice, compassion, the promotion of opportunity and the protection of those who need it, and social work is an excellent way of demonstrating those beliefs in action.

Often when I am interviewing prospective students for my social work degree course, they confess that one of the main reasons they want to enter the profession is to 'help people'. Whilst this may demonstrate a limited understanding of the complexities of the job, it is nonetheless a positive starting point and is a good example of how we seek to demonstrate spirituality in action.

Research summary

### **How is spirituality expressed?**

You may feel that we have already answered this question by looking at the expression of values and the importance of relationships. But I want you to see that spirituality is expressed in a number of ways, many of which are quite mundane and ordinary, but are of significance nonetheless.

The Mental Health Foundation (2007) provides this list of possibilities.

- Religious practices such as worship, prayer and reading religious texts.
- Coming together as a spiritual community.
- Living by certain values
- Rituals such as burning incense.
- Wearing particular clothes or eating particular foods.
- Cultural or creative activities such as making music or creating art.
- Getting closer to nature.
- Activities that develop self awareness or personal control such as contemplation of yoga.
- Physical activity.
- Friendship or voluntary work.

This list is by no means exhaustive, and we will be looking at more ways of expressing spirituality throughout the book

## **WHY IS SPIRITUALITY IMPORTANT TO SOCIAL WORK?**

So far we have spent a lot of time trying to tease out the different meanings and characteristics of spirituality. Before we get any further in our exploration, however, we need to consider why we are making the journey in the first place. Why is spirituality important to social work and how does it inform and influence professional practice?

### Activity 1.2

I want you to spend some time reflecting on what you have learnt so far about spirituality. Using your own words, define spirituality and make a list of reasons why you think it is of importance to social work.

I want to suggest that spirituality is important to social work for a number of reasons.

### **Spirituality and better health**

Firstly, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that religious belief, belonging to a place of worship, and spiritual expression is good for both physical and mental health.

Social work is increasingly concerned with health promotion and social workers work closely with colleagues from health backgrounds to promote well being in both individuals and communities. Clearly, anything that helps in this difficult task should be of interest to us and should be encouraged.

### Research summary

Koenig, et al, (2001), undertook research in America which showed that commitment to the Christian faith and the regular observance of religious rites and rituals, such as attendance at church, led to a number of health benefits. These included;

- An extended life expectancy.
- Lower blood pressure.
- Lower rates of death from heart disease and heart attacks.
- An increased success in heart transplant surgery.
- Reduced cholesterol levels.
- Reduced levels of pain in people with cancer.

#### Comment

These results have been replicated in a number of different studies and settings. For example, a recent influential report from the Mental Health Foundation claimed that

*...spirituality may reduce feelings of negative emotions, such as anger, fear, and revenge, reducing tension levels. This reduction may lead to a stronger immune system, lower blood pressure and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and strokes. For example, an individual who practises yoga is likely to experience a reduction in anxiety, depression, post traumatic stress disorder, stress and other stress related medical illnesses.*

(Lindridge,2007,p15 )

Other studies have also highlighted the benefits of spiritual belief and practices to recovering from bereavement ( Walsh,et al.,2002, Coleman,et al.,2002), working through the gradual loss of dementia ( Pointon,2007) and dealing with near death issues in palliative care. ( Langlands,et al.,2007).

## Research summary

The reasons why spiritual expression might promote better health are complex and may include the following;

- Attendance at a place of worship increases your sense of identity and a sense of belonging. It provides company, stimulation and a reason to get up in the morning.
- Religious rites and rituals, such as specified times of daily prayer or a religious calendar which marks the passing of the year, provide structure and meaning to your life.
- Places of worship and religious groups provide practical and emotional support at times of need.
- Spiritual expression and getting in touch with forces and powers outside of the individual enhances psychological well being.
- The view of the world promoted by spirituality gives reassurance and a measure of security in an uncertain world.

Adapted from Chatters (2000)

You may have noticed that many of these benefits are related to identity, meaning, and belonging all of which are crucial to a sense of who we are and how we relate to the wider world.

### **The inadequacy of science, logic and rationalism.**

Another reason why social workers need to gain an understanding of spirituality is that the profession often grapples with problems and questions where logical and scientific explanations offer little help.

For example;

- the breakdown of family and personal relationships;
- abusive behaviours and experiences;

- the problem of emotional pain, separation and loss;
- wider structural issues such as community breakdown, unemployment and poverty;
- issues of oppression such as racism and homophobia;
- the influence of gender, class and education.

Often science and rational thought do not provide us with either an explanation or, more importantly, a solution to these situations. Some would argue that human life is not a rational process and that science can only ever offer inadequate and unsatisfying explanations. ( Tacey,2004) So we need to look elsewhere for guidance in our practice and seek alternative explanations.

Other professions, which interestingly have more of a scientific background than social work, notably nursing, have been grappling with this issue for some years. Tanyi ( 2002), for example, argues that science is unable to address such issues as the search for peace and meaning, which are as important as *cure* to many patients, and that spiritual care has been an essential component of nursing for generations. This is an important point. Often when we think about nursing and medicine we envisage professionals in uniforms in busy wards with machines, procedures to follow and treatments to deliver, often to meet targets set by the Department of Health. Whilst all of us would want efficient and modern care, there is still room for what we might call a good 'bedside manner' where time is taken to listen to the concerns and worries of patients and patients can engage with carers as fellow human beings.

Gilbert (2006) takes this argument further and suggests that as contemporary societies grapple with such events as 9/11 and terrorist bombs in London, that spiritual explanations are becoming increasingly important. Simply put, I think that Gilbert is saying that in a world which seems more divided than ever, there is an increasing need for care

professionals to identify and use those common elements of humanity, which we all share, as a basis for their work.

It would be clearly unwise to dismiss scientific explanation or the need for logic and rational thought in social work. After all there is an increasing demand for what is termed *evidence based practice* where social work is asked to prove that what it does is based on solid foundations and is not merely the exercise of commonsense. It would be equally foolish to suggest that spiritual ways of thinking hold the answer to all of the problems that social workers have to grapple with on a daily basis. But, I would argue, there does need to be an increased awareness of spirituality and a more holistic understanding of problem solving.

### **Holistic assessment**

Another reason why social work needs to take spirituality seriously is the recent emphasis on holistic assessment. With its emphasis on working with the body, mind and spirit and recognising the validity of service user experience and context, holistic ways of working have become something of a 'holy grail' in social work in recent years. It can be seen as a revolt against the managerial prominence placed on outcomes, targets, and processes that have increasingly defined the profession.

Again, social work is not alone in seeking to reclaim a way of working where people and their lived experience are recognised and valued for who they are, rather than for what problems they bring, or for which boxes they tick. Basset and Basset (2007), who write from a nursing background, reflect on the shortcomings of their profession in the National Health Service;

*The time is certainly right for a re-birth of spirituality. We work in a system that is perfectly at ease with itself in referring to older people who have*

*nowhere to go and remain in hospital as 'bed blockers', and a bad day at Accident and Emergency is sometimes described as 'we had a lot of rubbish to deal with today.'*

We will be spending some time later in the book looking at holistic ways of working in more depth. What I would like you to appreciate at this early stage is that any work in the caring professions which values and promotes humanity, and reinforces identity and self worth, has a spiritual aspect.

### Case study

Sandy, a woman of Indian descent who has a nominal Buddhist background, was admitted to hospital with a terminal illness. It soon became clear that little could be done to cure the disease and an appointment was made for her to see a social worker regarding alternative care arrangements.

When the social worker arrived to see Sandy she found that she was tearful and upset because the consultant had made a number of comments about needing her bed and had made her feel uncomfortable and threatened at a very vulnerable point in her life. Coupled with this, staff shortages had meant that Sandy had not been able to access the hospital chapel where she knew that she would be able to meditate in peace and quiet away from the noisy ward. She had also been unable to receive a telephone call from her family in Delhi due to a lack of 'phones on the ward.

The social worker found Sandy a place at the local hospice. During her first week, Sandy was introduced to a range of alternative therapies including reiki and aromatherapy. She was encouraged to bring in ornaments and photograph albums from her home, and staff took a special interest in her collection of photographs from India. The hospice

had a specially designated quiet area where Sandy spent many hours meditating and quietly chanting to herself.

I know that the case study is not an accurate picture of care in the National Health Service as many hospitals take very good care of their patients and offer a holistic service which meets the needs of body, mind and spirit. But the contrast between the care provided by the hospital and the hospice in our fictional account is very marked. In the hospital, Sandy's need for time, quietness, and the opportunity to speak to her family are disregarded. The physical and medical care provided may have been first rate, but her spiritual needs were not met.

### **Service users want their spiritual needs to be recognised and taken into account**

This may seem a very obvious point, particularly after reading the case study about Sandy. Thankfully, there is a growing acknowledgement, particularly in the field of mental health, that service users see their own spirituality as being of immense significance to them and as pivotal to their well being; although this is only recognised by approximately one third of psychologists and psychiatrists. (Gilbert, 2007b)

Service users are sometimes frightened to voice their spiritual beliefs in case they are met with indifference, hostility or ridicule. Even worse, some mentally ill service users deliberately hide their religious beliefs in case they are seen as a form of delusion or illness which may lead them to be detained longer in hospital. (Gilbert, 2006)

Lindridge ( 2007) recognises that staff may feel uncomfortable assessing a service users' spiritual needs if they do not come from the same background. Even so, this is not an excuse to disregard these needs for, as the Mental Health Foundation highlights in recent guidance, the right to

freedom of thought, conscience and religion is an essential component of the Human Rights Act. (Mental Health Foundation, 2007)

## **THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON SOCIAL CARE**

The final reason I want to suggest why spirituality is important to social work is that religion and religious values have always been closely connected with the provision of social care services. In a sense, professional social work has been built on the foundations provided by religious organisations.

As we have already established, there are clear links between religion and spirituality. Although they are not the same, they are related to one another - close cousins one might say. This relationship between religion, spirituality and social work is a large area of study and requires a separate section in its' own right.

### **The historical role of religious organisations.**

Faith groups have been providing a wide range of medical, nursing and social care services to needy people for centuries. The values of compassion, service and civic responsibility that underpin all of the major religions have compelled many people of faith to commit themselves and their resources to meeting the needs of others.

In Britain, the connections between Christianity and the evolution of social care are inescapable. In medieval times hospices, which were places of rest and recuperation for travellers were Christian institutions. The only access the poor had to any form of nursing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was via Catholic nursing orders. (Neuberger,2004) Education, particularly the education of poor children, was undertaken by schools established and run by religious orders. The giving of alms, small amounts of money or food, to the impoverished was considered a

Christian duty. ( De Swaan,1988) It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that Christianity's involvement in the organisation and delivery of social care reached its' peak.

### Activity 1.3

I wonder if you can work out what links all of the organisations listed below. Apart from the fact that all of them are voluntary organisations which were founded in Britain in the nineteenth century.

- The YMCA/YWCA.
- The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children .
- The Boy Scout movement.
- Mildmay.
- Shaftesbury Young People.
- Spurgeon's.
- Barnado's .
- NCH – the children's charity.

### Comment

All of the above voluntary organisations were founded either by individual Christians or by church groups. It has been suggested that by the middle of the nineteenth century, in London alone, that there were six hundred and forty charitable organisations with a combined income of two and a half million pounds per annum. (Fraser,1976) A significant proportion of these charities were founded by Christians, as is reflected in many of their titles and mission statements;

- Sabbath meal Society – to provide strangers with meals on the Sabbath.
- Midnight meeting movement – to rescue fallen women.
- Church Penitentiary Association – refuges, and houses of mercy.

- Christian Union almshouses – to provide accommodation for destitute protestants.

Other faith groups, notably the Jewish community, also provided a range of services to the destitute, poor and needy in a time characterised by significant poverty and a lack of state help.

### **The current role of religious organisations**

Whilst faith groups have helped to shape social work through their involvement in the evolution of care services, we should not fall into the trap of assuming that their role is purely historical. For example, all of the organisations quoted in activity 1.3 remain important service providers to this day; although some of them have largely departed from their Christian basis.

In recent years, with encouragement from central government, hundreds of voluntary organisations have been formed to assist in the delivery of social care services. Many of these newer organisations have been created by faith groups and are entirely reliant on people of faith for funding and staffing.

#### Case study

Guru Ram Das project;

The Guru Ram Das project in north London was created in 2003 and works with a range of people including those with substance misuse issues, homeless people, people with HIV/AIDS, older people and mental health service users. The project also visits Wormwood scrubs prison to provide support to prisoners who have mental health problems. It has an active outreach programme and provides services to all, regardless of their faith or ethnic background.

It uses Sikh religious teachings as a foundation for its work and uses Kundalini yoga, acupuncture and meditation as a basis for holistic treatment. It relies on public donations to fund its work although it has recently received some funding from the National Lottery to expand its services.

The project is an excellent example of a contemporary charity which has developed from a religious perspective. Further information on the work and history of Guru Ram Das can be found at [www.grdp.co.uk](http://www.grdp.co.uk)

## **THE AMBIVALENCE OF SOCIAL WORK TOWARDS RELIGION**

So far I have offered an uncritical view of the significant role of religious organisations and faith groups in the history and delivery of welfare services. But not everybody in social work shares this positive view. On the contrary, I would argue that the relationship between social work practice and religion has often been characterised by ambivalence, even hostility.

### Research summary

Canda and Furman (1999) writing from an American perspective, have traced the evolution of the connection between religion and social work. They divide the relationship into three distinct phases.

First phase- in the nineteenth century many elements of welfare provision were provided by faith groups, particularly Jewish and Christian organisations. Non religious humanistic approaches were also common but official, government sanctioned social work drew heavily on religious values and beliefs

Second phase – from the 1920s through to the 1970s social work became increasingly professional, bureaucratic, and centrally organised. It became a job for well educated, qualified people who were increasingly sceptical about the value of religion. Doubts about the answers provided by religion,

and concerns about the beliefs and actions of some faith groups, led to an increasingly secular profession.

Third phase – from the 1980s onwards there has been a re-emergence of interest in spirituality and more of a willingness to explore the value of spiritually sensitive social work. This has been demonstrated by increased scholarly activity and a growing recognition that service users do have spiritual needs.

### Comment

Whilst the analysis offered by Canda and Furman may seem a little simplistic, I would suggest that there are parallels with the development of attitudes towards religion and, by inference, spirituality in British social work.

In order to understand this relationship better, we perhaps need to spend some time thinking about why it is that religious belief has often been viewed negatively within social work.

### Activity 1.4

Write down the reasons why you think that social work and social workers have viewed religion and religious belief unfavourably. As always, I would encourage you to 'think big'. Don't be afraid to put down whatever comes to your mind first, even if it does seem a little odd!

Here is my list.

*The oppressive nature of some religious systems.* Sometimes it is difficult to think about religion without considering the role some religious groups have had in discriminating against women, upholding patriarchy, promoting homophobia, and in legitimising violence and wealth. In recent years there have been a succession of scandals involving the Christian

church where power has been misused by those in positions of trust and responsibility.

For example, in April 2008 on his first visit to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, said that he was deeply ashamed of the activities of a number of priests who had engaged in paedophile activities or sexual abuse. One report estimates that over four thousand Catholic priests, or 4% of all Catholic priests in America, have engaged in sexually abusive activity. ( United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003) Other high profile cases of abuse and oppression from within the Catholic community have led to a number of court cases, exposes, books and films.

*The actions of religious fanatics*- this is closely related to our last point, where a very small minority of people from within faith groups have sought to enforce their views and beliefs on others through violence and terrorism. This is not a new development ~ from the Crusades in medieval times, through to colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, people have often been inspired by religion to use violence. In more recent times, the actions of Islamic fundamentalists have led to such atrocities as 9/11 and the bombing of the underground system in London, both of which led to a heavy and tragic loss of life.

*The loss of faith and the growth of secularism* – Moss ( 2005) argues that the horrors of two world wars, and the impact of such events as the Holocaust where over six million Jews, and others, were systematically murdered by the Nazi regime in Germany, led many people to question the value of faith in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Simply put, God seemed absent when most needed, and was subsequently replaced by more secular world view. We too can echo these thoughts. One of the many challenges of faith is how can people believe in a just and loving God when there is so much poverty, hunger, starvation and injustice in the world. This question has been around as long as faith itself.

The above suggestions are not specific reasons why social workers alone would distrust religion. Most people would struggle to find much that is appealing in this negative portrayal. But there are at least one other more particular reason that we need to consider.

*The knowledge base of social work* – many of you reading this book will be undertaking a social work qualification course, or will be newly qualified. I imagine that what you were taught at university remains fresh in your mind. Significant elements of it would be based on traditional disciplines within the social sciences – sociology, social policy and psychology. All of those disciplines are secular and often have little sensitivity towards faith or religion. For example, the German sociologist Karl Marx, whose work has inspired and informed radical social work for many generations, describes religion as being the *opiate of the masses*, and *pie in the sky when you die*. Other influential sociologists, such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, recognised the importance of religion but predicted in a modern world with enlightened views that it would become extinct. In psychology, Sigmund Freud, the father of the psycho analytical approach, viewed religion in a number of ways – none of them complimentary. For example, religion was a mass delusion, a reaction to infantile helplessness, or a form of paranoia.

In other subject areas, such as mental health, it is common to hear how mentally distressed people in former years were deemed to be possessed by the devil, or were being punished by God for their wrong doings.

In social policy, the role of the church in encouraging punitive legislation, designed to manage the poor and the rebellious from the Poor Law onwards, is often cited. The way the Anglican Church and the state were intertwined in past centuries leading to a domination of the educational system and an active shaping of the school curriculum is often portrayed as historically oppressive.

It is not a surprise that social workers pick up on this hostility and tend to echo what they have been taught in practice. Often on social work courses

there is no teaching on spirituality and no recognition of the role of faith to provide a more balanced perspective.

Living as we do in a secular society where decreasing numbers of people attend a place of worship or profess any religious affiliation, it is uncommon to come across a health or social care worker who is entirely comfortable with religion – for the simple reason that few have an in-depth knowledge of religion, few attend a place of worship, and many express a disinterest, even antipathy, towards religion. As you read earlier in this chapter, sometimes service users feel unable to raise their spiritual needs due to the embarrassed response they may receive from workers. As Baskin (2002) states in relation to social work training the topic of spirituality is usually met with silence and the lowering of the eyes.

This diffidence, I would argue, detracts from the vibrancy and validity of social work. Our lack of spiritual understanding and our inability to harness the tools that this would bring to our practice has led to nothing less than an impoverishment of social work.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

In this chapter we have come a long way in a short time, and I am aware that you have grappled with a range of ideas.

I started by introducing you to the differences between religion and spirituality, and then talked about the different ideas of 'spirit'. We then began to think about spirituality and some of its characteristics;

- The ways in which it helps us to find meaning and purpose in life.
- The way it can inform and transform the way in which we view the world.
- How values and beliefs are an intrinsic part of spirituality, and how both influence one another.
- How spirituality is expressed in action.

We then took a step back and thought about why we were engaging in the debate. Why is spirituality of importance to social work? If you remember, we decided that there were a number of reasons why we must acknowledge and respond to spiritual needs.

- A healthy spirituality leads to better physical and mental health.
- How science and logic sometimes do not provide a good answer to the complex problems faced by people and how it can be helpful to seek spiritual solutions.
- The importance of spirituality in providing a holistic, person centred service.
- The fact that service users want to have their spiritual needs recognised and sometimes feel that this does not happen.

We then returned to the theme of religion and looked at the influence of faith groups on the historical development of social work and how contemporary religious groups continue to play a vital part in the delivery of social care.

Finally, we looked at the ambivalence that sometimes exists between social work and religion and teased out some of the reasons why this might occur. I concluded by suggesting that this hostility had impoverished social work.

One thing I would encourage you to do at the end of each chapter is to return to the National Occupational Standards and the social work subject benchmark statement highlighted at the commencement of the chapter. You may find it helpful to review how these have been addressed within the chapter. Sometimes this is explicit, some times it may be less easy to discern. For example, I hope that you can see that the discussion of the ways in which religious thought has impacted on the evolution and delivery of social care enables critical reflection about the complex social, legal, economic, political and cultural contexts in which social work practice is located.

(social work subject benchmark statement 4.7)

Further reading;

*Reaching the spirit, study day paper nine*, from the Social Perspectives Network (SPN) An interesting summary of a vibrant conference run by the consistently excellent SPN. Available on line at [www.spn.org.uk](http://www.spn.org.uk)

Sue Holt (2003) *Poems of survival*, Brentwood, Chipmunk publishing.  
This is an excellent and thought provoking collection of poetry from a survivor of the mental health system. Amongst other things, it talks about how spiritual need is often ignored by professional workers.

Moss, B (2005) *Religion and spirituality*, Lyme Regis, Russell House publishing.

This was one of the first social work based books written on spirituality and remains an excellent starting point. I will be referring to the work of Bernard Moss throughout the book and the clarity he offers on what remains a contested theme.