Spirituality and Social Work

Beth R. Crisp

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SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL WORK

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Spirituality and Social Work

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For Michael

Preface

This book has emerged from an invitation by a colleague to present a lecture on spirituality to social work students at Deakin University, in Australia back in 2006. Having degrees in both social work and theology, and having published a number or articles in the field of Christian spirituality, I agreed to give a lecture, aware of many ideas in the explicitly religious spirituality literature having some applicability in social work. However it did not take me long to realise that it would be far from straightforward to communicate these ideas within a social work setting. When writing on spirituality within the field of theology, there are assumptions which can be made regarding shared understandings with the intended audience. From the very disparate literature on spirituality which has been emerging in social work, no such assumptions could be made. For a start, I would need to define what I meant by 'spirituality' and its relationship to 'religion'.

Equally importantly, working on these ideas forced me to consider the question of whether spirituality had a valid role in social work. Like many of my contemporaries who trained in social work in Australia in the 1980s, I had been taught to separate my spiritual life from my professional practice. My professional life has been almost entirely in secular settings where my interest in religion and spirituality has been accepted by colleagues as a vagary provided I didn't want to raise these topics for discussion. To have done so would in many instances have provoked hostility and been unproductive. I am far from alone in such experiences and this book is written from the context of having to be extremely cautious in raising matters of religion and spirituality within social work practice settings.

Over the past decade or so there has emerged a body of writing on spirituality within social work, and health and social care more generally, but much of this has been in relation to very limited groups of service users, i.e. those who are bereaved, sick, and/or ageing, and not necessarily representative of the broad range of groups and issues which social workers encounter in their practice. However, at the same time, contemporary scholarship in spirituality, which is essentially an interdisciplinary exercise drawing on insights from a range of disciplines including theology, history, sociology, anthropology and literary studies, as well as psychology and the health sciences, has in fact been exploring a wide range of other issues of applicability to social work practice. Hence underpinning this book is an intentional dialogue between the discipline of social work and the broader spirituality literature. A further aim has been to avoid narrow definitions or conceptions of spirituality which are associated with a particular religion. While familiarity and ready access to literature from Christian theology has undoubtedly influenced much of my initial thinking about this project, the key themes which are

explored in this book are common across many religions as well as non-religious viewpoints, rather than being specifically Christian.

Given the various discourses on spirituality, the way I've sought to bring these together is to frame the discussion in terms of lived experience. From a social work perspective, one obvious advantage of considering spirituality within the framework of lived experience is that it breaks down any mystique and suspicion of the language of spirituality by using language and experiences which most people can identify with. Furthermore, a 'plain language' approach to spirituality minimises the use of explicitly religious language, which many people find problematic. For service users whose previous experience may have been of an ambivalence or even hostility among health and social care providers towards any mention of the religious beliefs, what is proposed here is a way of starting to understand a person's spirituality without having to ask them specifically about their religious beliefs and practices (cf. Hodge 2004b). This is not to say that an explicit discussion of religion and spirituality should always be avoided and indeed, there may be times when it is appropriate for social workers to explicitly ensure that the religious and spiritual needs of service users are being met, for example persons who are hospitalised or otherwise in an institution.

Part I of this book conceptualises spirituality as part of the lived experience of all humans and not just those who consider themselves to be religious. It also explores the not always easy and sometimes fraught relationship between religion and spirituality with social work practice.

Considering spirituality in terms of lived experience enables exploration of spiritual issues which emerge at differing stages in the lifespan, which will be the focus of Part II, whereas Part III explores a number of themes which emerge in the spirituality literature which are applicable across the lifespan. In the chapters in each of these parts a range of issues will be canvassed which may be applicable in working with individual service users. Ultimately however the aim of this book is to encourage social workers to understand what really matters for those they are working with, and to understand the spiritual resources which they have available to them. This may include practices, places, people and ways of realising one's potential. As such, this book aims not to be prescriptive as to how social workers should engage with service users or propagate any particular form of spirituality, but instead stimulate consideration as to how spirituality may appropriately be incorporated into social work practice.

Much of this book was written in London in late 2008 when the Baby P case was on the front pages of the newspapers almost daily for some weeks, with social workers being vilified and the implicit message being that the main role of social workers is risk management. In such a climate, one might well ask how already overburdened social workers can be expected to add spirituality into their work with service users. As a new graduate interested in substance misuse, the work which caught my attention was Marlatt and Gordon's (1985) research on relapse prevention with substance misusers. The key idea was that people use substances because it's one way of having various needs met. If one can identify

what's important and find other more beneficial ways of meeting the same needs, then the need for using substances will be decreased. As such it was relatively straightforward but with a focus on what was important for the individual service user, which is the approach I am seeking to take in this book. Like others before me,

> Rather than beginning by asking "what is wrong with this person", we begin our questioning from a different perspective and ask different questions: "What gives this person's life meaning?", "What is it that keeps them going, even in the midst of their psychological pain and turmoil?", "Where is this person's primary source of value?" "What can be done to enhance their being?" In asking such questions, the person's situation is reframed in a way that reveals hidden dimensions. (Swinton 2001: 138)

So in terms of the question of how social workers can fit spirituality into their workloads, one response is that it's not about doing more, but being sensitive to what matters for service users and, if possible and appropriate, ensuring that interventions respect this. On a practical level, this may be as simple as not scheduling meetings with a service user at a time when they have a regular event which contributes positively to their sense of identity and social connectedness, or trying to understand why they may reject a proposal to re-house them in what might seem a better area but one in which they sense they will feel alienated.

While the focus is predominantly on our work with service users, readers are encouraged to think about what is important in their own lives, i.e. what matters to them. As with service users, the things which matter may or may not be topics which this book broaches. Nevertheless, if this book stimulates readers to consider these questions and recognise how what matters to them influences both their professional practice and life beyond the workplace, then this book will have met some of its objectives.

The writing of this book was made possible by Deakin University in the form of six months study leave and a travel grant which enabled me to spend several months in 2008–2009 as a visiting fellow in the spirituality program at Heythrop College in the University of London. As well as the necessary infrastructure support, including library and IT access, members of both institutions provided much feedback and made valuable suggestions both at public seminars and in individual conversations.

In writing this book, I have also been aware of the legacy over the past two decades of many others who have contributed to my professional formation and thinking about social work, including teachers, colleagues and students in both Australia and the United Kingdom. Similarly, I am thankful to those who have supported and encouraged me in my own spiritual explorations over an even longer timeframe. I have received much encouragement for this project from friends and strangers in both the professional and religious communities which I inhabit, and want to especially mention Dr John Honner and Dr Michael Ross, who both gave

me feedback on the penultimate draft and whose friendships have long encouraged me both as a writer and researcher, and as well as in my spiritual explorations. I am also very grateful for other friends who shared with me their doubts about the validity of writing a book about spirituality for social workers, and in doing so provided critical feedback as to which aspects of my work were most contentious and warranted further consideration.

Finally, as always, Mark Anderson is incredibly generous in his support and understanding of how the demands of writing at times leave me rather preoccupied. However, this project demanded more of him than either of us ever expected, when due to long delays in the building process, I left for six months in London shortly after the commencement, rather than, as we had planned, towards the end, of major housing renovations. Hopefully future projects, either domestic or literary, will not be undertaken in such chaotic circumstances.

Beth R. Crisp
Melbourne
Michaelmas (29 September) 2009

PART I
Concepts and Contexts

One of the hallmarks of writing in social work is that each author (or set of authors) tends to have their own definition or understanding. This includes the most core of social work concepts such as assessment (Crisp et al. 2003, 2006). If as a profession we can't agree on what we mean by our core concepts, the chances of consensus on concepts like spirituality which are being discussed in a disparate range of academic disciplines as well as being used widely in the broader community, would seem remote. In fact so disparate are the many definitions of spirituality which are in use, especially in respect of the relationship between religion and spirituality, it has become essential to explain to the reader what is meant by these terms, at least for the purposes of this book. Explaining these concepts forms the basis of Chapter 1.

Equally contentious are the debates as to whether spirituality has a legitimate place in contemporary social work, and is something which many social workers have strong feelings either for or against. However as is demonstrated in Chapter 2, frequently this due to the conflation of spirituality with organised religion(s), with it being the latter which is far more often perceived as being problematic.

While some readers may want to skip over Part I and move straight into Parts II and III, these first two chapters seek to explore this difficult terrain of the concepts and contexts and provide the rationale for the approach taken to understanding how spirituality may be understood among different age groups and facets of lived experience.

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Chapter 1
Religion and Spirituality

Introduction

Every era has its distinguishing words, ideas and concepts that seem to emerge into the common vernacular. In this early part of the twenty-first century, 'spirituality' is one of those words which suddenly seems to be everywhere, not just associated with religious devotees of some persuasions. No longer does the purchase of books on spirituality require one to go specialist religious bookshops, with many of the large bookshops in places such as Australia, Britain and North America having dedicated sections to books on spirituality, sometimes labelled 'body, mind and spirit'. Books by spiritual writers such as Thomas Moore (e.g. 1992, 1994, 1997) and Julia Cameron (e.g. Cameron and Bryan 1992) sell in quantities which make publishers very contented and many other authors envious.

One of the ratings surprises in recent years on British television was the three-part series *The Monastery*, which was screened in 2005, attracted around three million viewers and chronicled the experiences of five very different men spending forty days living in an abbey. Whereas the hosts were Roman Catholic monks in the Benedictine tradition, their guests were not Catholic and most had relatively little involvement in any organised religion. One was involved in making porn movies, another was a painter and decorator who had spent time in jail during the troubles in Northern Ireland, a third was studying for a doctorate in Buddhism, a fourth was in legal publishing and the fifth was a retired teacher and poet. Despite the fact that some of the participants didn't see themselves as being religious, they were asking questions about where their lives were going, and how to make sense and move on from painful memories and disappointments. While the monastic setting and the occupations of the visitors provided a degree of exoticism for the viewer, arguably what made the programme attractive to a wide range of viewers was the opportunity to watch a group of adults grappling with the profoundly spiritual issues which most of us find ourselves tackling at some points in our lives. Similar series have been made and screened in both North America and Australia (Crisp 2007a).

Expertise in spirituality is no longer considered to be limited to religious professionals. Courses on spirituality, which prior to the 1990s were rarely to be found outside seminaries or institutes for the training of religious professionals (Endean 1995) are now flourishing in secular universities and frequently taught outside theology or religious studies by academics in disciplines including literature, sociology and the health sciences. The contemporary interest in spirituality is not just by individuals but has also captured the imagination of secular bureaucracies

charged with providing health and welfare services and/or training the professional workforce, many of which now include vague mentions of spirituality in guidelines mentioning the need for 'holistic' care. Increasingly, health and welfare students are finding compulsory content on spirituality in courses to prepare them for professional practice. For example, the current Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession (IASSW and IFSW 2004) mention 'spiritual factors' as amongst the types of knowledge that qualified social workers require in understanding human development and behaviour (IASSW and IFSW 2004: 6) but provide no guidance as to what this should involve or how this should occur. Similarly, in England, the National Health Service (NHS) is requiring some input on spirituality in nurse training courses. Although they will probably get no more than a few hours of training around dealing with the spiritual issues of their patients, the NHS reduced the number of chaplains it pays for in one English region from seven to one (Birmingham Diocese 2006), presumably because they are no longer considered necessary.

The contemporary interest in spirituality, which has arguably never been higher, comes at a time when participation in formal religion has never been lower (Holloway 2007; Tacey 2000, 2003). By 1990, when less than 15 percent of Britons regularly attended religious worship, in response to survey questions about religious commitment, 54 percent defined themselves as being a religious person, 53 percent claimed to 'need moments of prayer', 44 percent to 'draw strength/ comfort from religion' and 36 percent claimed to 'often think about meaning and purposes of life' (Davie 1994). Hence, it is important to consider the relationship between religion and spirituality.

Religion and Spirituality

There is no consensus as to the relationship between religion and spirituality, let alone the definitions of each. Whereas spirituality has traditionally been considered to be an aspect of religion, in the twenty-first century, there would be many people who would consider religion to be a sub-set of spirituality (e.g. Adams et al. 2008; Ai 2002) on the basis that people of very different religions report similar religious experiences (Madigan 1998). If spirituality is considered to be a universal characteristic which all humans have, the expression of one's spirituality may be understood as being socially and culturally constructed, reflecting different religious traditions or an absence of any religion (Farias and Hense 2008). Still others would maintain that religion and spirituality overlap, but it is possible to have one without the other (Gollnick 2005). Hence, it is often suggested that

> Religion is a personal or institutionalized system grounded in a set of beliefs, values and practices. In contrast, spirituality … is a personal state or manner of being. Hence, religious practice may moderate one's spirituality or religious practice may itself be moderated by one's spirituality. In addition, religion is

neither a necessary or sufficient condition for spiritual development. Likewise, spirituality is neither a necessary or sufficient condition for religious practice. (Barnett et al. 2000: 574)

A more extreme understanding is that spirituality pertains primarily to orientations and practices which are outside formal religions (e.g. Heelas and Woodhead 2005), but this viewpoint does not appear to have widescale support.

It has been argued that in the latter half of the twentieth century, the language of spirituality grew considerably in use, at least in part because of less acceptance in the wider community of the language of religion. The process of drafting the British *1944 Education Act* provides one such example. On realising that the language of 'religion' was problematic and likely to meet resistance both from a number of members of parliament who were dismissive of religion as well as the various religious groups being unable to come to a consensus, the then Archbishop of Canterbury who was trying to insert some clauses into the draft bill did so using the word 'spiritual'. As his assistant at the time noted:

The churches were in such a state at the time [that] we thought if we used the word "spiritual" they might agree to that because they didn't know what it was. They all had very clear ideas about what religion was and they all knew they didn't agree with anyone else's definition of it. (In Hay and Nye 2006: 19)

To this day there continue to be many people who use the word 'spiritual' in the belief that it is more palatable than the language of religion, but see the two terms as synonymous. However there are many others who consider spirituality a far more preferable concept than religion:

A few people see very little difference between religion and spirituality. Most make a clear distinction. Religion tends to be associated with what is publicly available, such as churches, mosques, Bibles, prayer books, religious officials, weddings and funerals. It also regularly includes uncomfortable associations with boredom, narrow-mindedness and being out of date, as well as more disconcerting links with fanaticism, bigotry, cruelty and persecution. It seems that in many people's minds religion is firmly caught up in the cold brutalities of history.

Spirituality is almost always seen as much warmer, associated with love, inspiration, wholeness, depth, mystery and personal devotions like prayer and meditation. (Hay and Nye 2006: 19)

Ironically, many practices which people who regard themselves as spiritual but not religious, have religious origins. Practices such as Zen meditation, tai chi and yoga have been adopted by many people often with little knowledge or interest in the religious origins of these practices (Sayuki Tiemeier 2006) but because of their

effects on wellbeing (Mason et al. 2007a) and as panaceas for a stressful lifestyle (Mackay 1997). As such, in today's world people often adopt a selection of spiritual practices from a diverse set of religious traditions rather than live according to the teachings and practices of a single tradition (Mason et al. 2007b). One Australian survey found 60 percent of respondents agreeing with the statement 'Different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth and may be equally right in their own ways' (Bellamy et al. 2002: 51). Thus spiritual eclecticism, drawing on the insights of a range of religions and other philosophies, rather than adherence to a single religion, is not uncommon (Barnes 1999) although considered problematic in the eyes of some (Chater 2000).

Almost a decade into the twenty-first century, there are suggestions that, in recent years, and in particular since 9/11 in 2001, there has been the rise of what is becoming known as 'post-secularism'. On the one hand, there has been a rise in people acknowledging that spirituality has a place in their private lives, and other the other there has been much more prominence of religion in the public/global stage (Boer 2008). One of the consequence of such changes seems to be a breaking down of the dichotomy where religion is seen as 'bad' and spirituality as 'good', at least in some places. As one recent writer notes:

> … the question I was faced with was why it had become perfectly acceptable, cool even, to be spiritual. It was certainly not what I had assumed was the status quo: not that long ago, if you showed a tendency to meditate and hum the sacred syllable "om", or if you actually went to church and read the Bible, you were a "weirdo", part of a fading minority, and definitely not cool. What had changed, I wondered. Why was secularism on the retreat after a century and a half of a somewhat rocky march forward? (Boer 2008: 36)

An alternate viewpoint is that it is not that interest in spirituality per se which has increased and gained credibility in recent times, but rather changes as to what is recognised as being spiritual. For example, literature, film and art have often pointed to the sacred and spiritual within a culture, even if it has not always been labelled as such (Ashcroft 2005). This is because they encourage a deep response rather than a purely factual or rational one (Wearing 2007).

Given that in contemporary usage, spirituality and religion are no longer synonymous for many people, but recognising that for some people such a link remains, it is necessary to consider what is meant by spirituality (Canda and Furman 1999).

What is Spirituality?

'When I use a word … it means just what I choose it to mean, – neither more of less' declared Humpty Dumpty to young Alice in one of her adventures in Wonderland (Carroll 2001: 188). Although made in the context of a nineteenth

century children's story, Humpty aptly describes the current situation in which spirituality is a word which is widely used with everyone ascribing their own understanding (Rose 2001). Its meaning has been described as 'obscure' (Hood et al. 1996: 115) and 'fuzzy' (Zinnbauer et al. 1997: 549). It is perhaps not surprising that spirituality is not easily defined given that it is often concerned with intangible aspects of human life, with the capacity to move beyond that which is apparently rational. Furthermore, spirituality is a multifaceted concept. Hence attempts to define spirituality vary considerably as to what aspects are identified and prioritised by different writers. Any definition is likely to be deficient and contestable (Ranson 2002). Consequently, it is easier to explain something about what is meant by spirituality than to define it (Konz and Ryan 1999). One explanation which recognises the multifaceted nature of spirituality is as follows:

> Spirituality is:
> experience of the sacred other.
> which is accompanied by feelings of wonder, joy, love, trust and hope.
> Spirituality enhances connectedness:
> within the self, with others and with the world.
> Spirituality:
> illuminates lived experience
> Spirituality may be expressed:
> in relationships, prayer, personal and communal rituals, values, service, action
> for justice, connection with the earth.
> Spirituality may be named:
> in new and redefined ways or through beliefs, rituals, symbols, values, stories of
> religious traditions. (Engebretson 2004: 269)

But what does all this have to do with social work? While service users tend to become known to us because of a particular identified problem in a discrete segment (or segments) of their lives, they are nevertheless, whole people who are intrinsically spiritual. Spirituality involves an awareness of the other, which may be God or other human or divine beings or something else, which provides the basis for us to establish our needs and desires for, understand our experiences of, and ask questions about, meaning, identity, connectedness, transformation and transcendence. While for some individuals these concerns will be integrally associated with their religious beliefs, and may only make sense within a specific religious framework, meaning, identity, connectedness, transformation and transcendence are intrinsic to the human experience, whether or not individuals regard these to be in the realm of spirituality. Most, if not all, of these concerns are, or arguably should be, issues of relevance in social work, and will now be considered in turn.