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# THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE: A SURVEY OF STUDENT VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

MICHAEL J. SHERIDAN AND KATHERINE AMATO-VON HEMERT

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*This study investigated 208 students from two schools of social work on their views and experiences with religion and spirituality in education and practice. Results revealed a generally favorable stance toward the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and relatively high endorsement and utilization of spiritually oriented interventions with clients. These findings are striking given that the majority of respondents reported little exposure to content on religion and spirituality in their educational program, thus raising concern about potential harm to clients. Results from the study are compared with previous research on social work practitioners and faculty, and implications for social work education are presented.*

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**A**LTHOUGH SOCIAL WORK QUICKLY distanced itself from its sectarian roots and moved toward a secular orientation during the early years of its development as a profession (Fauri, 1988; Popple & Leighninger, 1990), the profession is currently witnessing a resurgence in interest in the role of religion and spirituality in both social work practice and education (Amato-von Hemert, 1994; Canda, 1989;

Loewenberg, 1988; Netting, Thibault, & Ellor, 1990; Sermabeikian, 1994). Evidence of this renewed interest can be found in the growing numbers of recent professional conference presentations and publications on the topic. For example, a review of the program for the 1997 conference of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) reveals 5 presentations or meetings on some aspect of religion or spirituality, and a similar review of the 1997 Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education reveals 13 such offerings. Based on a keyword search (religion, religious, religiosity, spiritual, spirituality, and transpersonal), the So-

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*cial Work Abstracts* database lists 235 articles with a major focus or finding in this area in the last 10 years compared to 167 such articles in the previous 10 years. Moreover, the Society for Spirituality and Social Work—an organization created to address religious and nonreligious forms of spirituality in the social work profession—has experienced a steadily increasing membership since its inception in 1990. It recently hosted its fourth annual conference in St. Louis, MO, drawing participants from all over the country.

Despite this growing recognition of the need to reexamine the place of religion and spirituality in social work, the empirical literature produced by social workers on the topic is still in its infancy. However, a beginning line of inquiry is emerging on the attitudes and behaviors of various social work professionals. The following literature review provides an overview of these contributions to the knowledge base.

### Literature Review

One of the earliest investigations of social work professionals regarding religion and social work practice was by Joseph (1988), who conducted a survey of 57 MSW-program field instructors of a church-related school of social work. Almost two thirds of the respondents were employed in nonreligious settings, and only 7% worked in agencies affiliated with a particular church. The study explored the extent to which practitioners considered religious and spiritual issues to be significant factors in the client situation and how much they dealt with these issues in the treatment process. Findings showed some ambivalence among this group of practitioners; for example, although 82% reported that religion was at least “somewhat important” in the lives of their clients and 46% reported that it was either “very important” or “important” for social workers to focus attention on

religion in practice, only 19% reported that they deal with such issues “very often” or “often.” This discrepancy perhaps reflects a lack of comfort in addressing such issues, particularly given that only 16% reported that religious issues and skills were an important component in their own professional training. Moreover, 66% of the respondents believed it “somewhat important” to “very important” to include such content in professional training, suggesting that they were not satisfied with the amount of emphasis they had been given. Finally, 56% of the sample were able to identify specific religious or spiritual issues associated with certain developmental stages in the life cycle of their clients, lending support to the view that increased attention to knowledge and skill development in this area is needed.

In another early study of social workers, Canda (1988) interviewed 18 professionals who were identified as contributors to the field of social work and spirituality through publications and conference presentations. All but one were social work educators, and all were or had been engaged in social work practice. The overall purpose of the interviews was to gain insights relative to spiritually sensitive social work practice. Several common themes emerged from the data analysis. First, spirituality was an integral component of the interviewees’ practice with clients, affecting both their choices of theoretical approaches and specific interventions. Second, decisions about how to address religious or spiritual issues were dictated by the clients’ preferences and goals. (For example, when the client held the same belief system as the practitioner or upon the client’s request, religious or spiritual language and techniques were explicitly used. If this was not the case, the practitioner attempted to tune into the client’s specific beliefs without bringing in his or her own. Thus, the primary

consideration in religious or spiritually based interventions was the client's own orientation.) Third, all of the interviewees expressed an appreciation of diverse spiritual beliefs and traditions while maintaining a strong commitment to their own faith's traditions or worldview. Canda states that this finding "suggests that social workers of various faiths and spiritual orientations can respond to the diverse spiritual needs and modes of expression of clients with sensitivity and affirmation" (1988, p. 245).

In a larger study of practitioners, Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, and Miller (1992) explored personal and professional attitudes and behaviors toward religion and spirituality among 328 randomly selected licensed clinical social workers, psychologists, and professional counselors in Virginia. As a whole, respondents were found to value the religious or spiritual dimension in their own lives, to respect the function it serves for people in general, and to address, to some extent, religious or spiritual issues in their work with clients. The social work respondents (33%,  $n=109$ ) showed a moderately high mean score on a scale designed to measure attitudes toward the role of religion and spirituality in practice, revealing a generally positive view. They also reported that, on average, one third of their clients presented religious or spiritual issues at some point in their work with them. Furthermore, many of the social work respondents said that they used religious or spiritually oriented interventions in practice: 95% knew their clients' religious or spiritual backgrounds; 67% helped clients clarify their religious or spiritual values; 65% used religious or spiritual language or concepts; and 33% recommended participation in religious or spiritual programs to their clients. These findings are noteworthy given the limited amount of education and training that these social work practitioners had

received in this area. Specifically, 82% reported that content related to religion or spirituality was "rarely" or "never" presented in their clinical graduate education.

In another survey of 340 NASW members in Utah and Idaho, Derezotes (1995) found similar findings. Over 92% of these respondents agreed that they "considered spiritual issues in practice" and over 55% affirmed the need to "work with the client's spirituality." However, only 27% reported that they received any content on religion and spirituality in their graduate social work classes. Derezotes states that these findings suggest the need for incorporation of specific curriculum content, such as models of spiritual development and religious traditions, content on understanding and accepting diversity in religious and spiritual values, and assessment and intervention skills related to religious and spiritually sensitive practice.

A convenience sample of 56 respondents drawn from the larger Derezotes (1995) study also agreed to participate in in-depth interviews (Derezotes & Evans, 1995). Analysis of interviews identified four key themes. First, interviewees viewed religion and spirituality as different issues, but stated that both should be considered in practice. Second, the current training provided through social work programs was seen as inadequate in terms of the knowledge and skills needed for practice in this area. Third, interviewees believed that social workers should examine their own biases about religion and spirituality and attend to their own spiritual growth. Fourth, sample participants stated that content on religion and spirituality can and should be integrated into the existing social work curricula.

Two studies have investigated the views of social work educators regarding the inclusion of religious and spiritual content in their programs. Dudley and Helfgott (1990) surveyed 53 full-time fac-

ulty from four schools of social work in two eastern states. Over 75% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that spirituality is a fundamental aspect of being human, yet less than half (47%) agreed or strongly agreed that social workers should become more sophisticated in spiritual matters. Faculty were also asked if they would support a course on spirituality and social work. Over 63% favored such a course as an elective, and almost 8% thought it should be a required course. Finally, the overwhelming majority of respondents did not perceive the introduction of spirituality content to the curriculum as a conflict with social work’s mission, the NASW Code of Ethics, their own beliefs, or clients’ beliefs, although 25% did have concern about a possible conflict with the constitutional principle of separation of church and state.

In an expanded replication of Dudley and Helfgott’s research, Sheridan, Wilmer, and Atcheson (1994) surveyed 280 full-time faculty from 25 schools of social work located in 12 southeastern states and Washington, DC. This investigation explored educators’ views and experiences related to religion and spirituality in both social work practice and social work education. Findings revealed that respondents generally had moderately positive attitudes toward the role of religion and spirituality in practice, even though over 88% had received little or no training in this area in their own graduate education. In terms of curriculum issues, respondents were generally supportive of including a course on spirituality and social work, with over 62% favoring such a course as an elective, almost 14% favoring a required course for all students, and 6% favoring a required course for clinical students only. Similar to Dudley and Helfgott’s findings, most of the respondents did not see offering such content to conflict with social work’s mission, the NASW Code of Ethics, their own

beliefs, or clients’ beliefs; only 19% perceived a conflict with the principle of separation of church and state. Finally, respondents were generally in agreement with two different rationales for inclusion of religious and spiritual content in the social work curriculum: social workers should have knowledge and skills in this area in order to work effectively with diverse client groups, and social work’s framework for understanding human behavior should be expanded to include the spiritual dimension.

These seven studies provide preliminary knowledge concerning the views, experiences, and behaviors of social work practitioners and educators in the area of religion and spirituality. However, there is a paucity of information on one group—social work students. Although students were included in the Derezotes (1995) study, separate analysis of student responses was not reported. Given the current dialogue about the need to revisit the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education, it is essential to include the views and experiences of all stakeholders in this important discussion. Thus, the present study attempts to contribute to our knowledge base through an investigation of social work student views and experiences.

## Methodology

### Design and Data Collection Procedures

The current research utilized a cross-sectional, correlational design implemented through a questionnaire distributed to MSW students. The targeted population was students from two schools of social work: one located in the Midwest and the other in a mid-Atlantic state. Both schools are part of large research universities; one is a public institution that offers BSW, MSW, and PhD degree programs, and the other is a private institution that offers MSW and PhD

programs. Neither school is religiously affiliated or located in what is considered the "Bible Belt."

All surveys were distributed to MSW students in various classes. In one school, the surveys were distributed and completed in class in a required diversity course offered during the foundation year. Surveys in the second school were distributed and completed in class in a required research course offered during the concentration year. Both groups of students had experienced approximately one year of foundation content in their respective programs prior to participating in the study. The necessary information was provided to allow students to give their informed consent to participate, and it was stressed that participation was completely voluntary and would not affect their grades in any classes. A total of 208 (104 from each school) completed surveys were collected. It is not possible to calculate a precise response rate, because various classroom instructors distributed the surveys and exact attendance on the day of distribution is not known. However, a substantial majority (over 90%) of the students enrolled in the targeted classes agreed to participate.

### Sample Characteristics

The sample was comprised of 86.4% ( $n=178$ ) females and 13.6% ( $n=28$ ) males, with an average age of 28.19 years ( $SD=6.79$ ).<sup>1</sup> Respondents were predominantly white or European American (79.2%,  $n=160$ ), followed by African American (9.0%,  $n=18$ ), Hispanic American/Latino(a) (4.5%,  $n=9$ ), biracial or multiracial (2.5%,  $n=5$ ), Asian American/Pacific Islander or "other" (2.0%,  $n=4$  each), and American Indian/Alaska

Native (1%,  $n=2$ ). A comparison of respondents from the two schools on demographic variables revealed that the students from the Midwest school were somewhat younger than their mid-Atlantic counterparts ( $M=27.20$  vs.  $M=29.17$ , respectively;  $t[180]=2.08$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Differences were also noted in race, with a higher percentage of persons of color attending the Midwest school than the mid-Atlantic school (28.0% vs. 13.7%, respectively;  $\chi^2[1]=6.25$ ,  $p<.05$ ). No significant differences emerged between students from the two schools in regards to gender.

### Study Questionnaire

The purpose of the study was explained to potential participants as an attempt to better understand students' views on the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education. To clarify definitional issues, the questionnaire began with a specification of what was meant by the two terms. Spirituality was defined as "the human search for purpose and meaning of life experiences, which may or may not involve expressions within a formal religious institution." Religion was defined as "a systematic body of beliefs and practices related to a spiritual search." Respondents were asked to note that, for the purposes of this study, spirituality was more broadly defined than religion. These definitions are consistent with others in the literature (Canda, 1988, 1989; Carroll, 1998; Dudley & Helfgott, 1990; Emblen, 1992; Joseph, 1988; Millison & Dudley, 1990).

The multifaceted questionnaire consisted of 70 questions, which included both single items and scale items. Beyond demographic information, the questionnaire comprised items on: personal religious/spiritual affiliation, belief, and background; views of the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice;

<sup>1</sup> All reported percentages are valid percentages based on the number of respondents answering the particular question.

use of religious or spiritually oriented interventions with clients and views on the appropriateness of such interventions; previous training on religion and spirituality; views on two proposed curriculum rationales; assessment of which courses in their program, if any, presented content on religion and spirituality and views about where such content should be presented; views on how a course on religion and spirituality in social work practice should be offered and if they would be interested in taking such a course; and, in one open-ended question, additional comments on the topic of religion and spirituality. Some questions were similar or identical to questions included in previous surveys of social work practitioners and educators for the purposes of comparison (Sheridan et al., 1992; Sheridan et al., 1994).

## Findings

### Personal Factors Related to Religion or Spirituality

Several questions addressed the personal experiences of participants relative to religion and spirituality. First, students were asked to identify their current religious affiliation or spiritual orientation. The largest category of response was Protestant (47.7%,  $n=95$ ), followed by Catholic (16.6%,  $n=33$ ), Agnostic (8.5%,  $n=17$ ), Jewish (6.0%,  $n=12$ ), Existentialist (3%,  $n=6$ ), Buddhist (2.5%,  $n=5$ ), Atheist (2.0%,  $n=4$ ), and Spiritist (1.0%,  $n=2$ ). Another 12.6% ( $n=25$ ) of respondents stated they had some "other" religious affiliation or spiritual orientation. When these responses are collapsed into "non-faith" (atheist or agnostic) and "faith" (all other responses) categories, the sample emerges as having considerably more respondents reporting faith than non-faith affiliations or orientations (89.4%,  $n=178$ , vs. 10.6%,  $n=21$ , respectively).

Respondents were also asked to select a belief orientation that most correctly reflected their own from six ideological positions, ranging from belief in a personal God to views that notions of God or the transcendent are illusions and irrelevant to the real world (Lehman, 1974). The most frequently selected category was belief in a personal God (42.6%,  $n=86$ ), followed by a belief in a divine dimension found in all nature (26.2%,  $n=53$ ); see Table 1 for complete breakdown. Only 1.0% ( $n=2$ ) stated that notions of God or the transcendent are illusionary products that have no relevance to the real world.

The questionnaire also contained a series of questions about respondents' participation in both religious services and personal religious/spiritual practices. Over half of the participants reported weekly religious attendance as a child (55.1%,  $n=114$ ). Current attendance at religious services was reported less frequently. Only 4.3% ( $n=9$ ) reported daily attendance, 24.0% ( $n=50$ ) weekly attendance, 15.9% ( $n=33$ ) at least monthly attendance, 37.5% ( $n=78$ ) attendance a few times a year or occasionally, and 18.4% ( $n=38$ ) reported no attendance. Despite decreased formal attendance, 37.7% ( $n=78$ ) reported that they currently participated in a personal religious or spiritual practice on a daily basis (e.g., meditation, reading scripture/spiritual texts, prayer). Others reported the frequency of such practices as follows: once a week (19.8%,  $n=41$ ); at least once a month (14.5%,  $n=30$ ); a few times a year or occasionally (15.9%,  $n=33$ ); and not at all (12.1%,  $n=25$ ).

A final measure of personal religious or spiritual factors was a single item about respondents' relationship to an organized religion or spiritual group. Responses to an ordinal listing of categories showed that only 15.5% ( $n=32$ ) described their relationship as "active participation, high level of involvement," while 23.2% ( $n=48$ )

reported “regular participation, some involvement.” The highest percentage of participants (37.7%,  $n=78$ ) reported “identification with religion or spiritual group, but very limited or no involvement.” Another 19.8% ( $n=41$ ) reported “no identification, participation, or involvement,” and 3.9% ( $n=8$ ) reported “disdain and negative reaction to religion or spiritual tradition.”

### Views on the Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice

Student views on the role of religion and spirituality in practice were measured through responses to a 19-item “Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice” scale (Sheridan, 1994). This instrument possesses good face and content validity and has previously obtained satisfactory estimates of reliability for a sample of practitioners (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=.81$ ) and a sample of educators (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=.87$ ). The alpha coefficient for the present sample was .82. The scale has also

demonstrated evidence of both convergent and divergent construct validity (Sheridan, 1994).

Scale items included both positively and negatively worded statements such as, “Spirituality is a fundamental aspect of being human,” “It is important for social workers to have knowledge about different religious faiths and traditions,” and “It is against social work ethics to ever pray with a client.” Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with scale items using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1=“strongly disagree” to 5=“strongly agree.” Following reversed scoring of the negatively worded items, responses to individual items were summated into a single score. As a whole, respondents showed a relatively high mean rating on this measure, indicating a generally positive or accepting attitude toward the role of religion and spirituality in practice. The possible range of the scale is from 19 to 95; respondents reported ratings from 48 to 93, with a mean rating of 71.77 ( $SD=7.93$ ).

**Table 1. Personal Religious/Spiritual Ideology of Respondents (N=202)**

Ideology Type	Test Statistic
There is a personal God of transcendent existence and power whose purposes ultimately will be worked out in human history.	42.6%, $n=86$
There is a transcendent aspect of human experience some people call God but who is not imminently involved in the events of the world and human history.	7.4%, $n=15$
There is a transcendent or divine dimension that is unique and specific to the human self.	14.9%, $n=30$
There is a transcendent or divine dimension found in all manifestations of nature.	26.2%, $n=53$
The notions of God or the transcendent are illusionary products of human imagination; however, they are meaningful aspects of human existence.	7.9%, $n=16$
The notions of God or the transcendent are illusionary products of human imagination; therefore, they are irrelevant to the real world.	1.0%, $n=2$

Respondents were also asked to respond to a series of 14 religious or spiritually sensitive practice interventions. First, students were asked to indicate which of the 14 interventions they had personally used with clients. Next, they were asked to indicate which of the 14 interventions they viewed as appropriate. Table 2 provides a breakdown of student responses in this area.

On 4 of the 14 items, over 30% of the sample indicated that they had already used the particular intervention with clients: gathering information on clients'

religious or spiritual backgrounds; praying privately for clients; using religious or spiritual language or concepts; and recommending participation in religious or spiritual programs. At least 60% of the respondents identified 10 of the 14 interventions as appropriate for social work practice. These findings reveal that the respondents were generally accepting of a wide range of religious or spiritually oriented interventions and had already utilized some of them with clients even though they were at an early point in their career.

**Table 2. Respondents' Use of and Views about Religious or Spiritually Sensitive Interventions\***

<b>Interventions</b>	<b>Have Utilized</b>	<b>Considered Appropriate</b>
Gather information on clients' religious or spiritual backgrounds	67.8%, <i>n</i> =139	93.1%, <i>n</i> =190
Use or recommend religious or spiritual books or writings	18.1%, <i>n</i> =37	67.5%, <i>n</i> =135
Pray privately for a client	42.0%, <i>n</i> =86	73.9%, <i>n</i> =147
Pray or meditate with a client	11.8%, <i>n</i> =24	60.2%, <i>n</i> =118
Use religious or spiritual language or concepts	39.2%, <i>n</i> =80	74.5%, <i>n</i> =149
Help clients clarify their religious or spiritual values	29.4%, <i>n</i> =60	79.4%, <i>n</i> =162
Recommend participation in a religious or spiritual program	31.2%, <i>n</i> =64	79.0%, <i>n</i> =158
Refer clients to religious or spiritual counselors	19.6%, <i>n</i> =40	88.1%, <i>n</i> =178
Recommend religious or spiritual forgiveness, penance, or amends	5.9%, <i>n</i> =12	26.5%, <i>n</i> =53
Perform exorcism (expelling evil spirits)	0%, <i>n</i> =0	1.5%, <i>n</i> =3
Touch client for healing purposes	5.9%, <i>n</i> =12	17.3%, <i>n</i> =35
Help clients develop ritual as a clinical intervention (e.g., house blessings, visiting graves of relatives)	11.7%, <i>n</i> =24	67.2%, <i>n</i> =137
Participate in client's rituals as a clinical intervention	6.8%, <i>n</i> =14	42.0%, <i>n</i> =84
Share your own religious or spiritual beliefs or views	28.9%, <i>n</i> =59	61.7%, <i>n</i> =124

\* Percentages based on different number of responses for each item.

### Education and Training in the Area of Religion and Spirituality

It is interesting to note that even though respondents had relatively high scores on the "Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice" scale, viewed many religious or spiritually oriented interventions as appropriate, and employed some of these techniques with clients, they also indicated that they received little training in this area during their graduate social work studies. Specifically, 11.6% ( $n=24$ ) stated that content related to religious or spiritual issues was "never" presented; 54.1% ( $n=112$ ) said that it was "rarely" presented; 31.9% ( $n=66$ ) reported "sometimes," and 2.4% ( $n=5$ ) reported "often." Thus, a substantial majority (65.7%,  $n=136$ ) reported receiving little or no graduate training in this area, at least after the first year.

In addition, the questionnaire rated satisfaction with the amount of education and clinical training received on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1="low satisfaction" to 5="high satisfaction." Respondents as a whole reported a slightly dissatisfied position in regards to this area ( $M=2.84$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ). Examination of the separate category responses reveals a higher percentage of respondents who were "somewhat dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with the amount of training they received (41.1%,  $n=85$ ), compared to those who stated that they were "somewhat satisfied" or "very satisfied" (28.5%,  $n=59$ ).

Finally, almost one third of the sample responding (32.7%,  $n=67$ ) reported attending workshops or conferences in the past 5 years that dealt with some aspect of religion or spirituality. This training included topics on: issues related to death and dying; bereavement and other loss issues; holistic healing; management of illness and chronic pain; addiction and recovery; forgiveness; integrating religion and psychology; transpersonal theory and practice; spirituality and relationships;

men's issues; women's issues; specialized techniques for reaching older minority clients; interventions with abuse victims; different faith traditions and practices; religious education and youth work; afterlife and alternative dimensions; personal spiritual growth and healing; and pastoral counseling.

### Views on Curriculum Issues

Data concerning views on curriculum issues related to religion and spirituality were collected in several ways. First, participants were asked to respond to two positions that are often offered as rationales for including such content in the social work curriculum (Canda, 1989; Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 1982; Goldstein, 1983; Joseph, 1987; Loewenberg, 1988; Marshall, 1991; Meystedt, 1984). The first rationale presents an argument for including religious and spiritual content because of its relevance to multicultural diversity:

Religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are part of multicultural diversity. As such, social workers should have knowledge and skills in this area in order to work effectively with diverse client groups.

The second rationale takes the position that spirituality is an important dimension of human existence:

There is another dimension of human existence beyond the biopsychosocial framework currently used to understand human behavior. Social work education should expand this framework to include the spiritual dimension.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with these two statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree." Respondents gener-

ally agreed with both rationales, although the first rationale was more strongly endorsed. Specifically, 92.8% ( $n=193$ ) rated the multicultural diversity rationale as “agree” or “strongly agree” ( $M=4.41$ ,  $SD=0.70$ ), while 71.6% ( $n=149$ ) rated the spiritual dimension of existence rationale as “agree” or “strongly agree” ( $M=4.00$ ,  $SD=0.89$ ).

The questionnaire also contained two open-ended questions that asked respondents to identify the courses that they had taken that had presented or discussed material on religious or spiritual issues, and to identify the courses in which such material *should* be presented as part of their education as social workers. Table 3 illustrates data from a content analysis of these responses.

A notable percentage of respondents identified two courses that included at least some content on religion or spirituality: human behavior courses (49.8%,  $n=102$ ) and practice courses (45.9%,  $n=94$ ). An even higher percentage of the sample indicated that these two courses *should* include such content (55.1%,  $n=113$  and 57.6%,  $n=118$ , respectively). More than

half of the respondents (53.2%,  $n=109$ ) also identified courses on diversity/special populations as appropriate for the inclusion of material on religion and spirituality. In general, a somewhat higher percentage of students stated that there was a need for this type of content in all of the various courses than were currently offered, and 18.0% ( $n=37$ ) stated that information on religion and spirituality should be included in all courses.

Finally, respondents were asked two questions concerning a specialized practice course in religion and spirituality. First, students were asked whether such a course, if offered, should be offered as an elective, as a required course for clinical students, or as a required course for all students. The majority indicated that the course should be offered as an elective (66.8%,  $n=137$ ), followed by offering it as a required course for all students (25.4%,  $n=52$ ), with only a few students stating that it should be offered as a required course for clinical students only (7.8%,  $n=16$ ). Second, students were asked if they would be interested in taking this type of course. Thirty-eight percent ( $n=78$ ) indicated that

**Table 3. Respondents' Views about Religious or Spiritual Content in the Curriculum (N=205)**

Curricular Area	Courses Included Content	Courses Should Include Content
Practice Courses	45.9%, $n=94$	57.6%, $n=118$
Behavior Courses	49.8%, $n=102$	55.1%, $n=113$
Policy Courses	2.0%, $n=4$	7.3%, $n=15$
Research Courses	2.0%, $n=4$	5.4%, $n=11$
Diversity/Special Populations Courses	27.3%, $n=56$	53.2%, $n=109$
Field Courses	2.4%, $n=5$	7.3%, $n=15$
Field Practicum	14.1%, $n=29$	14.6%, $n=30$
All Courses	0%, $n=0$	18.0%, $n=37$

they would “definitely” be interested, 44.9% ( $n=92$ ) stated that they would “probably” be interested, while smaller percentages said they would “probably not” (13.7%,  $n=28$ ) or “definitely not” (3.4%,  $n=7$ ) be interested. Thus, a substantial majority (82.9%,  $n=170$ ) of respondents reported an interest in taking a course focused on religion and spirituality and social work practice.

### Comparison of Present Findings with Previous Research

This study represented the final effort in a three-stage line of inquiry concerning the views and experiences of social work professionals in the area of religion and spirituality. As noted previously, some questions were included in the current study’s questionnaire for the purpose of comparing results on social work students with previous findings on social work faculty and practitioners (Sheridan et al., 1992; Sheridan et al., 1994). Table 4 provides a summary of the similarities and differences among these three groups.

*Personal Factors.* All three social work groups reported a high percentage of faith affiliation versus non-faith affiliation. However, there was a significant difference between the three groups, with the student and faculty samples showing higher percentages (89.4% and 86.1%, respectively) than practitioners (78.5%) ( $\chi^2[2]=6.88$ ,  $p<.05$ ). This pattern also emerged in relation to personal ideology, with students reporting a significantly higher percentage of belief in a personal God (42.6%), followed by educators (37.5%), and practitioners (29.5%) ( $\chi^2[10]=25.08$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Given this profile, it is surprising that fewer students report high participation and involvement with an organized religion or spiritual group. Educators reported a significantly higher percentage (53.1%) of either “active participation/high involvement” or “regular

participation/some involvement,” followed by practitioners (44.5%), with students showing the lowest percentage (38.7%) ( $\chi^2[8]=10.12$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

*Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice.* All three studies included the “Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice” scale, although a different version of this scale was utilized in the practitioner study. This earlier version consisted of 14 items, rather than 19, and utilized a 9-point rather than a 5-point rating scale. Thus, it is only possible to statistically test differences between the student and faculty samples on this variable. No significant differences emerged between these two groups on this scale ( $t[485]=1.02$ ,  $p=.31$ ).

However, by converting the mean scores reported by the three groups to percentiles, it is possible to compare generally the attitude scores of the three groups. Social work students’ and educators’ mean scores ( $M=71.77$  and  $M=70.89$ , respectively) were both in approximately the 70th percentile of possible scores (range=19–95). This percentile is considerably higher than the 55th percentile represented by the mean score of the practitioner respondents ( $M=74.89$ ; range=14–126). This suggests that, at least in these three samples, social work students and faculty members had more positive attitudes toward the role of religion and spirituality in practice than did practitioners. It should be noted, however, that the practitioner study was conducted approximately five years before the student study and two years prior to the educator study. Thus, more positive views on the parts of students and faculty may reflect reactions to increased interest and attention to religion and spirituality within the profession and the larger culture, rather than inherent differences between practitioners and the other two groups.

*Education and Training.* Although the majority of practitioners, educators, and

**Table 4. Comparison of Social Work Student, Faculty, and Practitioner Responses**

Variable	Students (N=208)	Faculty (N=280)	Practitioners (N=108)	Test Statistic
<b>Faith Affiliation</b>				
Yes	89.4%	86.1%	78.5%	
No	10.6%	13.9%	21.5%	$\chi^2(2)=6.88^{**}$
<b>Ideology</b>				
Personal God	42.6%	37.5%	29.5%	
Transcendent force	7.4%	10.6%	11.4%	
Divine dimension in humans	14.9%	9.5%	11.4%	
Divine dimension in all nature	26.2%	23.9%	39.0%	$\chi^2(10)=25.08^{***}$
Notions of God/transcendent illusionary, but meaningful	7.9%	17.4%	8.6%	
Notions of God/transcendent illusionary and irrelevant	1.0%	1.1%	0.0%	
<b>Participation and Involvement in Organized Religion/Spiritual Group</b>				
Active participation/ high involvement	15.5%	23.6%	13.9%	
Regular participation/ some involvement	23.2%	29.5%	30.6%	
Some identification/ limited or no involvement	37.7%	26.9%	35.2%	$\chi^2(8)=10.12^{***}$
No identification, participation or involvement	19.8%	17.1%	20.4%	
Disdain and negative reaction	3.9%	2.9%	0.0%	
<b>“Role of Religion &amp; Spirituality in Practice” Scale Scores</b>	M=71.77	M=70.89	NA	$t(485)=1.02^{ns}$
<b>Amount of Content on Religion/ Spirituality in Graduate Training</b>				
Never	11.6%	58.8%	36.1%	
Rarely	54.1%	29.7%	46.3%	$\chi^2(6)=38.65^{*****}$
Sometimes	31.9%	8.6%	13.9%	
Often	2.4%	2.9%	3.7%	

*continues...*\*  $p < .10$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*\*\*\*  $p < .00001$ ;  $ns$ =nonsignificant

students reported relatively little education and training in the area of religion and spirituality in their professional programs, significant differences emerged among the three groups. Over 88% of the educators reported that they “never” or “rarely” were exposed to content on religion or spirituality, followed by 82.4% of practitioners, with students reporting the lowest percentage (65.7%) ( $\chi^2[6]=38.65$ ,  $p<.00001$ ). Satisfaction ratings with the amount of such content revealed that practitioners were significantly more dissatisfied with their graduate training in this area (50.0% either “very dissatisfied” or “somewhat dissatisfied”), compared to students (41.1%) and educators (36.8%) ( $\chi^2[4]=53.95$ ,  $p<.00001$ ). As the student sample reflects the most recent study, it is

possible that we are beginning to see increased attention to this area. However, there still appear to be many students who are dissatisfied with the amount of such content covered in the curriculum.

*Curriculum Issues.* Finally, both students and educators were asked questions concerning curriculum issues. In terms of arguments for including content on religion and spirituality in the curriculum, the student sample showed higher endorsements of both rationales. Specifically, student mean ratings on the multicultural diversity rationale were significantly higher than faculty ratings ( $M=4.41$  vs.  $M=4.26$ , respectively;  $t[480]=2.24$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Student mean ratings were also significantly higher on the spiritual dimension of existence ratio-

**Table 4. (cont.) Comparison of Social Work Student, Faculty, and Practitioner Responses**

Variable	Students (N=208)	Faculty (N=280)	Practitioners (N=108)	Test Statistic
<b>Satisfaction with Amount of Content in Graduate Training</b>				
Very dissatisfied	10.2%	18.0%	27.9%	
Somewhat dissatisfied	30.9%	18.8%	22.1%	
Neutral	30.4%	25.7%	22.1%	$\chi^2(4)=53.95$ *****
Somewhat satisfied	21.7%	12.5%	15.4%	
Very satisfied	6.8%	25.0%	12.5%	
<b>“Multicultural Diversity” Curriculum Rationale</b>	$M=4.41$	$M=4.26$	NA	$t(480)=2.24$ **
<b>“Spiritual Dimension of Existence” Curriculum Rationale</b>	$M=4.00$	$M=3.58$	NA	$t(480)=4.29$ ****
<b>Course on Religion/Spirituality and Social Work</b>				
Required of all students	25.4%	16.8%	NA	
Required of some students	7.8%	7.5%	NA	$\chi^2(2)=4.95$ *
Offered as elective	66.8%	75.7%	NA	

\*  $p<.10$ ; \*\*  $p<.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p<.01$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p<.001$ ; \*\*\*\*\*  $p<.00001$ ;  $ns$ =nonsignificant

nale ( $M=4.00$  vs.  $M=3.58$ , respectively;  $t[480]=4.29$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

Moreover, a higher percentage of students than faculty stated that a specialized course in the area of religion and spirituality should be required of all students (25.4% vs. 16.8%, respectively), whereas more faculty than students thought such a course should be offered as an elective (75.7% vs. 66.8%, respectively). Although these findings did not reach statistical significance at the .05 probability level, they do show a statistical trend ( $\chi^2[2]=4.95$ ,  $p=.08$ ). Taken together, these data suggest that student respondents see a stronger need to address religious or spiritual issues in social work education than faculty respondents.

### Discussion

This research represents the first reported study of social work students on the topic of religion and spirituality to date, and therefore forms much of our knowledge in this area. However, findings must be interpreted within the present study's limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional, correlational design does not allow for inferences about causal relationships among variables, but only provides descriptive information about key areas. Second, the sample involved students from two schools of social work in particular areas of the country; thus, no generalizations can be made to all social work students. Furthermore, although the participation rate was high, responses of students who participated in the study may be substantially different than students who did not participate. Thus, no definite conclusions can be drawn about the total sampling frame.

Given these limitations, several general themes or conclusions can still be drawn from the data. First, in the area of personal belief and practices, student respondents revealed a strong, personal

connection to religion or spirituality. Almost 90% identified themselves as having some current faith affiliation, and 91.1% reported belief in some notion of God, a transcendent force, or a divine dimension. Indeed, the highest percentage of ideology category reported was that of "belief in a personal God" (42.6%), suggesting that many of the students in this sample adhere to traditional belief systems.

It is interesting to note, however, that for many respondents, expressions of faith affiliation and personal belief often take the form of personal practices rather than involvement with formal religious or spiritual services. Only 28.3% of the sample reported attending services at least weekly, whereas 57.5% reported participating in personal religious or spiritual practices on either a daily or weekly basis. This conclusion is further strengthened by the fact that only 38.7% reported high levels of involvement in organized religion or spiritual groups, while the remainder had far less identification and involvement with such institutions. These data suggest that this sample is similar to respondents in Roof's (1993) study of the "Baby Boom" generation, which reported that personal faith and spirituality were not necessarily tied to traditional institutional forms. Even though their mean age (28.19) places these students in a different demographic, it is possible that many of them are the offspring of this generation and have similar approaches to religion and spirituality as their parents. Understanding the personal practices and beliefs of social work students is important, as these life experiences can have significant influence on their behavior as future practitioners (Faver, 1986).

Perhaps because of these personal factors, respondents revealed a positive stance toward the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. Scores on the "Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice" scale suggest generally posi-

tive attitudes in this area, and a high percentage of students (at least 60%) endorsed 10 of the 14 religious or spiritually oriented interventions as appropriate for social work practice. Indeed, 4 of the interventions listed had already been utilized by over 30% of the sample in their work with clients, even though most have had limited practice experience.

These figures are cause for concern, nonetheless, because almost two thirds of the respondents reported low levels of exposure to content on religion and spirituality in their graduate courses. Given the nature of some of the religious or spiritually sensitive interventions that were either used or endorsed by students (e.g., pray or meditate with a client, use religious or spiritual language or concepts, use or recommend religious or spiritual books/writings, help clients clarify their religious or spiritual values), it appears that increased attention to this area is warranted in schools of social work. Inclusion of such content in the social work curriculum would be consistent with the Council on Social Work Education's most recent Curriculum Policy Statement (1992), which reintroduced references to religious and spiritual diversity in three sections of the document (diversity, populations-at-risk, and social work practice) after 30 years of omission.

Students need instruction in both assessment and intervention to adequately prepare them for practice and to reduce the possibility of client harm. Although development of specific religious and spiritual models and guidelines for social work practice are still in the beginning stages, such content is increasingly available to social work educators. Examples include Titone's (1991) discussion of areas to be addressed in conducting a spiritual assessment, Canda's (1990) ethical guidelines for the use of prayer in practice, Smith's (Smith, 1995; Smith & Gray, 1995) transpersonal model for dealing

with death, divorce, and other issues of loss, and Danzig's (1986) strategies for handling conflicts between personal religious values and professional values. An even larger body of literature exists regarding the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of diverse client populations, which provides implications and suggestions for practice with such groups (e.g., Berthold, 1989; Canda & Phaobtong, 1992; Chu & Carew, 1990; Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 1982; Haber, 1984; Millison & Dudley, 1990; Nakhaima & Dicks, 1995; Sheridan, 1995; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994; Wikler, 1986; Yellow Bird, 1995). In addition, valuable information regarding possible course focus, discussion topics, reading materials, instructional methods, and key teaching issues is presented in Russel's (1998) findings from a survey of social work programs offering specialized courses on spirituality, religion, or both. It is clear that the profession is developing resources that can be successfully utilized in presenting content on religion and spirituality within the social work curriculum, either through specialized courses or as integrated content in existing courses.

It is also evident, based on the current findings, that most students will probably be receptive to such content in schools of social work. Respondents showed high agreement with two rationales favoring inclusion of material on religion and spirituality in the social work curriculum, and a majority of the students identified practice, human behavior, and diversity/special populations courses as particularly well-suited for inclusion of such content. Students also saw the value of a specialized course on religion and spirituality, with the overwhelming majority (almost 83%) indicating a personal interest in taking a specialized course of this nature. It appears that 'if we build it (or offer it), they will come.'

Finally, comparisons of results from the present research with findings from previous research on practitioners and educators reveal both similarities and differences. A majority of all three samples reported religion and spirituality as important in their personal lives, although there were differences in the ways these aspects of personal life are expressed. As a group, students appeared to have a somewhat keener interest in the topic of religion and spirituality as it relates to social work than either educators or practitioners, although both the student and faculty samples had equally favorable attitudes regarding its role in practice. However, students saw a greater need for a focus on religion and spirituality in the social work curriculum, perhaps viewing this content area as more meaningful to their education than do educators. It is interesting to note that the student sample reported the highest percentage of receiving at least some content on religion and spirituality in their graduate training, but over 40% still reported being dissatisfied with the amount of this training. This discrepancy may result in possible conflicts between students and faculty about the appropriate amount of time and attention that should be devoted to this topic.

Future research should continue exploration of the views and experiences of different groups of social workers in various locations concurrently to create a more accurate picture of where we stand as a profession on this topic. Findings from such research will prove helpful as the social work profession struggles to determine the appropriate place for religion and spirituality in both the practice and educational arenas. During this process, we must make sure that we do not ignore the perspectives of our students. As consumers of our educational programs and as future professionals, their voices are valuable contributions in this important dialogue.

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