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Viewing spirituality in social work through the lens of contemporary social theory

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Abstract

This paper locates the social work literature on spirituality within the broad theoretical and epistemological perspectives of late modernity. It focuses particularly on the rise of individualism and its culmination in the theory of reflexive modernisation – life politics and subpolitics – and makes an appeal for an ‘ecospiritual social work’, one which would take social work away from individualism back to its communitarian roots. The rise of spirituality in social work is linked to individualism. Both result from the depersonalizing and alienating effects of modernity: the detraditionalization and secularization of society; the rise of science, rationality, the professions, and industrial and technological progress; and the decline in religion. Social work mirrors this process in that it has worked vigorously to shake off its religious, moralistic beginnings, and to embrace the secular trappings of professionalism in the process increasingly embracing highly individualistic values and scientific explanations of reality. The literature on spirituality in social work, where the influence of New Age spirituality is strongly evident, tries to re-instantiate our search for quality and meaning. However, social work has yet to examine broader sociological theory and the way in which it can deepen our understanding of the rise of spirituality in social work.

Keywords: spirituality, social work, reflexive modernity, reflexivity, subpolitics

Rather than a detailed review of the social work literature on spirituality which has been comprehensively handled elsewhere (see Canda et al, 1999; Rice, 2005; Sheridan, 2003), this paper attempts to place this literature in a broad theoretical and epistemological context in which the emergence of spirituality in social work is related to the rise of individualism and feelings of alienation within modern Western society (Webb, 2006). Spirituality reflects our consequent search for meaning and purpose in society. The strong influence of New Age spirituality fuels our self-help culture as *individuals* attempt to find meaning and a sense of belonging in an increasingly alienating world and, in so doing, harken back to traditional world views which embrace collective values, community, the environment, and a sense of place as implicitly spiritual (Coates, Gray and Hetherington, 2006; Lynn, 2003). It connects to contemporary concerns with environmental sustainability and the rise of the new social movements. The spirituality movement within social work could be seen as one such movement.

The paper takes a broad view of spirituality as motivated by social work's desire to make life better for others through ethical practice. Social work is seen as a practical-moral activity where purpose and mission – meaning and values – are equally important. Social work is a profession with a purpose and the literature on spirituality reflects this teleological quest. There are many aspects to the literature on spirituality in social work which reflect its multifaceted nature. For example, spirituality is an important aspect of the literature on coping with death and dying and dealing with trauma as well as the very different literature on Indigenous social work which strongly influences our afore-mentioned New Age spirituality. While these apparently diverse practice realities equally have a psychological, emotional, cognitive, hermeneutical, moral, and so on dimension each of which might be influenced by different bodies of theory, all are united by a common concern with the spiritual dimensions of our lives.

The story so far

Much of the literature on spirituality in social work tends to deal mainly with the relationship between religion and spirituality, focusing on definitional issues and on the importance of the spiritual and religious dimensions of people's lives (Gilligan and Furness, in press; Henery,

2003; Holloway, in press; Sheridan, 2003). Given that social work is a modern, secular profession it has generated some controversy, particularly about inappropriate proselytization, the imposition of religious beliefs or activities on clients, and bias against various spiritual (Bullis, 1996; Canda, 1998; Canda and Furman, 1999) or religious (Hodge, 2002) perspectives. Advocating for spiritually sensitive practice, writers in this field lament the lack of training of social workers to deal with spiritual issues and debate whether or not spirituality should be taught in the social work curriculum (Furman et al, 2004; Sheridan et al, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1999). In many ways this literature parallels that on cultural sensitivity with concerns expressed about spiritually competent practice and developing tools for conducting spiritual assessments and interventions (Hodge, 2003). This then is another aspect of the literature which is attempting to deal with diversity in social work where there is a discernible pattern in recognising an aspect of practice (whether culture, spirituality, gender, racism, or morality) and then in developing rational arguments for its importance, finding theoretical and empirical evidence in support and designing technologies to put these insights into practice. Thereafter comes the research demonstrating the widespread nature of the issue, the effectiveness of accompanying approaches, ways to teach them, and so on. However, a broader context of meaning is needed, an historic-cultural perspective demonstrating how and why something comes to be important and catches on as part of the culture of social work. Further it is necessary to interrogate the relationship between spirituality and morality in social work. This is a far greater project than can be accomplished in a single paper.

This paper focuses on developing a broad theoretical and epistemological perspective on spirituality in social work, mindful of social work's religious, moralistic beginnings; its scientific and professional quest spanning almost a century; and the consequent secular leanings of what essentially became a modernist profession. As rationalism took hold in the broader society, and within social work, religion increasingly appeared to lose its authority. Thus a central question to be asked in theorising about the rise of spirituality in social work is, 'What happens when religion is no longer the structure within which people obtain guidance on morality and on the central question of how to live their lives better?' To place this question in its widest theoretical context requires us to grapple with social theory, more especially the theory of modernity and its perspective on the detraditionalisation and secularisation of society, and then to investigate theories of reflexive modernity which

attempt to deal with the fallout from modernity and its consequences for human beings. Here the work of Giddens and Beck is most relevant, particularly for what it has to say about the reflexive, freely choosing individual, the changing nature of human relationships and the new social movements. What are the consequences of this sociological theory for social work and how is this being expressed in the current literature in social work? Where is social work going with this theory?

Inherent in much current social work and sociological thinking is the notion that individuals can successfully mastermind their own lives and that morality is possible without religion. In its stead we have an entirely subjective notion of spirituality where it is quite literally anything an individual conceives it to be, and indeed should be so given that each individual finds his or her own meaning and thus interprets spirituality in terms of this individual (constructivist) life project. However, there is also both within society and in social work a swing to more traditional, religious and indigenous ways of thinking, once again causing tension between religious moralism and religious absolutism, modern or scientific rationalism and postmodern spiritual relativism. Within mainstream social work literature the tendency is to find rational grounds for morality or spirituality or cultural sensitivity, as the case may be. There is also another branch of literature informing these debates in a different way which broadly has to do with questioning the dominance of western social work and its universalising tendencies in relation to local, culturally diverse and indigenous non-western worldviews (Gray, 2005; Gray, Coates and Hetherington, in press; Coates et al, 2006; Lynn, 2003). These are related literatures which basically concern the nature of social work in western contexts and its continued relevance to late modern society. Taking a historic-cultural perspective, the broader epistemological context of these debates is the transition from the traditional to the modern to the late modern period of reflexive modernity as the context for the rise of spirituality in social work.

Tracing the rise of spirituality in social work

Current interest in spirituality in social work stems from its very nature as a modern profession which, like modernity, is rational, secular, individualistic, and materialistic. Influenced by social theory, social workers accept that at least three aspects of modern

society shape most people's lives in the western world: *economic* dominated by industrial capitalism; *political* characterised by the rise of the nation state, liberal democracy, civil liberties, human rights, and social justice; and *cultural* where rationality has replaced traditional authority and given rise to a 'pluralistic society in which people are free to select from a number of life options' (Holden, 2002, p. 173). As we shall see, Giddens (1991) is particularly interested in the impact of these structural changes on the construction of modern identities. Some claim that the modern age is being replaced by a new social order characterised by flexible forms of technology (that is, post-Fordism), globalisation and a cultural ethos with a radically new set of art forms, lifestyles and values. Some of these ideas form the basis for postmodernity (Holden, 2002).

Postmodernist scholars argue that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, social and political movements are characterised by an aestheticism that signifies a break with earlier representations. The postmodern age of fluidity and pastiche has de-centred the self, leaving it in a state of flux and disarray. Unified conceptions of who we are and where we belong have, according to such writers, given way to media-inspired, self-contrived aspirations and identities (Holden, 2002, p. 15).

For our purposes we are most interested in the way in which this mood of uncertainty in late modernity—brought about by rapid industrialisation and the break with traditional authority—as well as the cultural changes associated with postmodernity, has led to significant changes in religion, not least the decline of mainstream religion and the emergence of new forms of spiritual expression as autonomous individuals begin to negotiate their own identities. In traditional communities 'life chances, beliefs and identities were narrowly circumscribed' (Holden, 2002, p. 35) unlike the modern situation where we see the transition from fate to choice which, at the same time, 'dissolves the commitments and loyalties that once lay behind our choices' (Sachs, in Holden, 2002, p. 35). Industrial societies freed communities from religiously sanctioned controls and gave rise to the emergence of autonomous individuals driven by their values. But without religion, where do these values come from? What happens when religion is no longer the structure within which people obtain guidance on morality and on the central question of how to live their lives

better? To place this question in its widest theoretical context requires us to grapple with the rise of individualism brought about by the weakening of tradition, the secularisation of society and the loss of community, especially in western society.

Modernity has become identified with major changes associated with industrial capitalist societies including the rise of the secular state, the expansion of a capitalist economy, the formation of classes, the emergence of distinctive patriarchal relations between men and women, racial divisions and 'the transformation from fate to choice'. Over a long period of time ... these processes brought about a materialistic social order governed by individualistic, instrumental and rationalist impulses. These historical trends and changing social patterns resulted in a variety of lifestyles and a huge proliferation of consumer products. Life chances both within and between national states have since become enormously complex and asymmetrical. Throughout the twentieth century, modernity became a progressively global phenomenon (Holden, 2002, p. 35).

Religious creeds became replaced by 'continuous self-questioning' (Davie, in Holden, p. 36) and individual freedom led to the adoption of diverse and sometimes unconventional beliefs driven by the need for self-fulfilment 'in a modern age in which people are free to construct their own aesthetic identities' (Holden, 2002, p. 1). However, Davie (in Holden, 2002) believes that, despite the mutation of religious life from the traditional to the modern nation-state to the global, western society is still rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It is this that largely characterises the spirituality movement in western social work.

The weakening of tradition and the rise of individualism ... also blurred the boundaries between the private and the public spheres, both in our emotional lives and in our relationships with wider society. Individuals have become increasingly aware of their own ability (and often their own need) to construct new identities in a world which is atomised and fluid (Holden, 2002, p. 36).

The spirituality movement accompanies this rise of a 'culture without shared meanings' in which 'faith is ... well and truly a matter of choice, and is no longer part of one's membership

in society' (Holden, 2002, p. 37) wherein it is possible to 'believe without belonging' (Davie, in Holden, 2002, p. 37) to a particular religion. 'This modern form of religious expression allows the individual to select at will from a variety of goods that can be tailored to meet his or her lifestyle ... The religious eclecticism of the modern world operates on the basis that we can *all* discern reality and that all versions of it are equally valid' (Holden, 2002, p. 37). Individuals who yearn for the security and comfort of foundational beliefs often experience personal and emotional crises of meaning. What then are the various aspects of modernity impacting on the nature of social work and the rise of spirituality?

The weakening of tradition, the secularisation of society and the rise of individualism

Sociologists do not agree on the question of 'when modern societies broke with traditional ones' (Holden, 2002, p. 34) and Garrett (2003) questions whether we have passed from simple modernity to a post-traditional society. Generally *detraditionalization* marks the break with blind faith in traditional authority, values, beliefs and cultural practices resulting from modernisation which led to changes in religious affiliations and beliefs in Western society as rationalism took hold. The latter raised questions as to the relevance of religion and the part it plays in people's lives. Some theorists have argued that one of the consequences relates to the difficulties people experience in relating to others (Bauman, 1997; Beck, 1992; Beyer, 1994) while others argue that people do quite fine without religion (Nisbet, 1970; Urken, 2003, Young, 1996). Since relationships are central to social work, so too is the changing nature of relationships brought about by globalization and consequent problems in individuals relating to one another in an increasingly impersonal, rapid paced, and individualistic world.

Secularisation has arisen from the 'demystification of culture' (Holden, 2002, p. 93) robbed of 'folk customs, magical spells, rituals and religious occasions' (Bocock, 1992, p. 261). As Western societies have become more and more secular, 'references to the supernatural have come to be regarded as inappropriate and anachronistic, except among people who are like-minded' (Holden, 2002, p. 104). Secularisation might be seen as a consequence of detraditionalization deriving from the Western Enlightenment era when the rise of rationalism causes religion to lose its foothold. As a consequence, science develops; morality,

science, art, and religion become separate entities for study; and attendance at places of worship around the Western world declines. What are the consequences of this increasing secularisation for Western society? According to Holden (2002),

One of the most important aspects of secularisation theory is the contention that, in modern societies, religious beliefs become privatised. The idea was first presented by Thomas Luckman (1967), who maintained that religious institutions have been progressively forced to withdraw from the modern capitalist economy and occupy a peripheral position in a world that is abstract, impersonal and narcissistic. Luckman's thesis centres on the claim that non-religious roles, which are both specialised and functionally rational, now dominate the public sphere (p. 104).

Sociologists have long theorised the relationship between the public and the private. Increasingly religion moved to the private sphere where it became more and more about the *individual's* relationship with God with religious pluralism giving rise to the idea of self-empowerment. Religion thus became a 'personal quest for meaning rather than a collective act of worship' in terms of which individuals allowed 'their own consciences to decide which aspects of faith (were) truly essential' (Holden, 2002, p. 105). Thus, 'one of the main components of the privatisation of belief thesis is that people are allowed the freedom to construct their own religious identity' (Holden, 2002, p. 112). This right to privacy is upheld by liberal democratic rights designed to protect individual freedoms from public encroachment.

What are the consequences of this increasing secularisation and privatisation for the social work profession which, barring its earliest beginnings has been largely secular in nature? Its professionalising project has been driven by attempts to distance itself from its religious, moralistic roots and to establish itself among the important and high status 'objective' professions.

One of the consequences was social work's embrace of *humanism* with its notion of the centrality of the individual who is no longer reliant upon or guided by a Higher Power. Thus

from the impetus of the individual comes a view consistent with the Judeo-Christian notion of free will: the valuing of free thought and autonomous action, and reason (or rationality) as the main agency for solving problems. Individuals are now in charge of their own destinies. Human experience then becomes highly valued as the main determinant of meaning and the goals of life (and of social work) derive from addressing *human* needs and interests. Thus the question of, and the rationality behind, what we (human beings) are morally obliged to do becomes central to any ethical code and provides it with its moral authority. Morality, then, is only valid in relation to real human conditions and humanity is the reason morality exists; it cannot carry any import without reference to this human context. It becomes part of the 'rules of the game' created to guide social behaviour, embedded in social norms rather than in religious discipline.

Theories widely adopted in social work cohere with this humanist perspective where individual autonomy and self-actualisation are highest on the hierarchy of human needs (Maslow, 1968). Self-actualisation is the desire to realise one's potential and to achieve personal fulfilment; the ultimate achievement of the autonomous individual. Giddens' (1991) notion of the reflexive self is borne of this view of the autonomous individual who is largely responsible for his or her own fate and life choices. *This is the starting point for individual conceptions of what spirituality is, what it means in individual lives and how it constitutes the individual's way of finding his or her way in the world devoid of religion as the paramount guide for human action and the way we live our lives.* In other words, humanist theory tends to suggest that individuals do well in the world (maybe even better) where they are not led by blind faith, prescriptions for behaviour and values, and dogmatic, absolute values. Humanism is only possible where unconstrained choice reigns and individual freedom is available, hence the importance of liberal, democratic conceptions of human rights and social justice as extolled by social work.

Examining *traditional (religious and indigenous) cultures* as a different or alternative way of understanding spirituality in social work (though this is not the dominant view which is the freely choosing individual living in a democratic society where human rights are highly valued) reveals a high import being placed on 'other-regarding' traditional virtues which lead to a valuing of loyalty, compassion, trustworthiness, responsibility, sensitivity to others and

so on, and to valuing of the collective over the individual. The dilemma for Western social work is that previously grounding for such virtues or values lay in religious explanations. Without that we now need to argue for their importance on rational grounds. Why do we need to treat people with respect, loyalty, and compassion? We are now willing to turn to Eastern religion for this explanation or New Age thinking (for example) rather than ground these qualities in Western religion (biblical teachings), such as 'love thy neighbour as thyself' and so on. In any event, individuals in many indigenous and non-Western contexts are not free to make autonomous choices as they are anchored in issues of kinship, social duty or traditional obligation. The literature on social work in traditional settings is replete with examples of implications for practice and differing views on authority, directiveness and the role of the family, group and community in decisions relating to particular individuals. Nevertheless, for the most part, social work's dominant value system derives from an inherent belief in the rational, freely choosing, and self-determining individual.

Ironically, the rise of individualism as a result of the weakening of tradition and the secularisation of society provided the very conditions for the rise of professionalism for with these events came our faith in scientific rationality and the need for knowledge to replace previously accepted sources of authority. Science and the professions have further entrenched humanistic and individualistic stances and created a world in which human beings feel alienated and at risk. Perhaps the best theorists of living in a risk society are Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1995) and Beck (1992, 1998). They provide further insight into the alienation that gives rise to the renewed search for meaning and purpose in life and a rekindled awareness of the importance of our spiritual dimension.

Living in a 'risk society'

Giddens' and Beck's sociological theory of 'risk society' provides a crucial context for the study of spirituality for, as Giddens (1991) points out, cultural changes in late modern societies have led to 'crises of personal identity' when 'individuals find themselves in a constant state of self-questioning as they learn that knowledge has no (religious) foundation' (in Holden, 2002, p. 12). Important to these cultural changes is scientific progress which has not only freed the individual from collective institutions and tradition but has also

destabilised societies by giving rise to personal insecurity and greater awareness of hazards and risk. Beck (1992) sees *modernisation* as the transitional period when western societies learn to adopt the universal principles of scientific and technological progress and come to accept the impersonal nature of social institutions. Beginning in the nineteenth century societies interested in progress underwent enormous changes in which ‘actors’ were freed from structural constraints. This is a central point in both Giddens’ and Beck’s theories of *reflexive modernization* which Giddens demonstrates through the vehicle of *life politics* and Beck through his *subpolitics*. Both are trying to take us beyond the politics of Left and Right and to overcome Leftist thinking that oppression is always situated in external structural locations. This thinking casts people as passive and put upon whereas for Giddens and Beck individual agency or freedom of choice is central. We might simplify their ideas and say that in *simple* modernity things are happening to us which we are not aware of such is the rapid pace of change in late industrial society while in *reflexive* modernity we are dealing not only with a greater awareness of its benefits – and profiting from them – but also with the way in which our capacity for choice has increased to such an extent that we are only now becoming aware of its implications in our lives. The more aware we become the more we realise that our ability to access the benefits depends on the choices we make. Giddens calls this ‘navel gazing’ aspect of modern life *reflexivity*. But there is a downside as we shall see.

Giddens’ reflexive self

Giddens’ reflexive self comes into prominence during late modern times. It arises from concerns with the responsibility of choice implicit in the idea that our lives are projects wherein we create or write our own life story. It elicits anxiety when we realise that there is a risk that we can get it wrong by making the wrong life choices for ourselves. It has an Aristotelian feel to it for Aristotle wrote about our responsibility to realise our capabilities and to choose a path in life that would bring out the best in us. This extended to choosing friends who would enable us to be the best we can be. But for Aristotle and most western philosophers who have shaped our thinking in social work, it is naturally given and widely accepted that the human subject in possession of a rational self has free-will and a conscience but Giddens’ reflexive self is not a ‘moral self’ moulded and shaped in interaction with others; it is a ‘self with independent agency’. The reflexive self is a relatively recent

invention resulting from historical and social evolution giving rise to an acute awareness of the pain of choosing and the experience of existential angst which goes with it. It is experienced as a form of oppression but it is a very different form of oppression than that of Marxist or critical theory. It is an oppression situated not in an external structural location but in the freedom and hence responsibility this brings for individuals to make the right choices. It is quite different from the reflective self which can stand back and rationally think about observations and experiences which is more commonly used in the social work literature (Ixer, 1999; Schön, 1983).

Giddens' pure relationship

Giddens' (1991) theory of the 'pure relationship' provides an interesting insight into the impact of this individualistic reflexive self on human relationships. Giddens (1991) sees individuals negotiating their relationships; a good relationship is one which provides for self-respect, individuality, mutual self-disclosure, and room for growth. It is mutually satisfying and sustaining and freely chosen. He presents his 'pure relationship' as an ideal type which relies on self-understanding and reflexive questions as to the extent to which the relationship helps me to be the way I want to be and the best that I can be. Hence commitment is contingent upon the extent to which the relationship is perceived as self-sustaining and mutually satisfying.

Giddens (1991) focuses on the psychological aspects of insecurity particularly issues of trust. He believes a shift has occurred from the impersonal trust relations of 'simple modernity' to a situation of 'high modernity' where trust must be earned. Expert (professional) systems can no longer be blindly trusted. They have to prove their trustworthiness in light of various alternatives. Nevertheless people deal with feelings of insecurity in ingenious ways. They might *inter alia* give the fear over to someone else to worry about, place it in the hands of fate, or diminish its effects by adopting the belief that we all will turn out well, or trust some higher authority to deal with it (Holden, 2002).

Life politics

Giddens (1991, 1995) developed his idea of *life politics* to move away from the old left and right emancipatory politics which emphasized ‘the negative impact ... of structurally limited life chances’ (Ferguson, 2001, p. 47) and overlooked people’s ability to rise above their circumstances. It is built on his notion of the reflexive self and life planning which reinforces notions of choice and responsibility in relation to our ‘precarious freedoms’ (p. 46) as we mould and shape our own destinies. No longer controlled by traditional institutions of church and state or helpless victims of oppressive forces, individuals can and indeed should plan their lives. Giddens (1992) saw this shift in locus of authority from external (religious and political) structures to individual choice as the ‘democratisation of daily life’ (p. 64). Thus the reflexive self becomes the site for political choice.

Life planning

Life planning is essentially about the balancing of opportunities and risks. Ideas about individual choice and ‘agency’ and self-actualisation, which have a long history in social work, were cast as individualistic within the anti-oppressive stance of most radical or critical social work discourse. But now Giddens’ theory gives renewed vigour to those keen to narrow social work’s revolutionary mission and utopian goals - to change the world, society, organisations, and policies - and to bring it back down to individuals and families and the communities in which they live as the domain of emancipatory politics. Helping people in their life planning is a role made for social work. By focusing on the ‘life political domain, emotionality and the depth of social relations ... enhancing the capacities of (vulnerable) clients to practise effective life-planning, find healing and gain mastery over their lives’ (Ferguson, 2001, p. 41) was well within social work’s capabilities. For Ferguson (2001) life planning requires that we become astute at minimising risks, recognising opportunities and benefiting from change, and Sheldon (2001) would add drawing on the evidence.

Essentially then social workers become engaged in ‘practical strategies to assist vulnerable clients to ... achieve control over their lives’ (p. 48). This is a stance well-supported by social work’s value system of self-determination and individual autonomy. The idea of

creating 'rich possibilities for personal enhancement and transformation' (p. 48) might, according to Ferguson (2001), seem a self indulgent luxury of the middle classes but 'individuals remain firmly enmeshed in a social sphere and thinking, planning and action must take place through institutional reference points' (p. 45) which, though they give poor people constrained choices, nevertheless require them to make wise choices with the limited resources they have. This indicates a central role in facilitating decision-making rather than problem-solving in social work which is appealing. However, Giddens (1994) conception of life planning is built on the choices people have as a result of the benefits of a growth-promoting economic system based on the belief that strong economic growth raises living standards, increases independence, and opens up possibilities for individual autonomy and choice. This thinking clearly has limitations.

For Eckersley (2004) reflexive individualism is likely to lead to less rather than more autonomy because the separation of self from others and the environment increases the likelihood that we will experience the social forces acting upon us as external and alien. Further, Giddens' independent self needs high self-esteem to function autonomously. One way of propping up our self-esteem 'is to believe that the things that threaten it are beyond our control' (Eckersley, 2004, p. 3). Reflexive individualism reduces our sense of control over life by encouraging the perception that we are separate from the very things that influence our lives and by requiring high self-esteem which, ironically, diminished control helps to maintain. For Eckersley (2004), rather than encouraging authentic autonomy, reflexive individualism leads to self-centredness: a preoccupation with satisfying personal wants and needs, an entitlement mentality, an abrogation of social responsibilities, and a decline in collective effort (though Beck refutes this). Certainly combined with rising materialism or consumerism, reflexive individualism has created a separate, disconnected, discontented, insecure, addicted, self-absorbed self pursuing constant affirmation and gratification and 'these cultural effects are subtle and complex' (Eckersley, 2004, p. 4). Paradoxically, while western culture promotes personal freedom, once we have it, we feel that something is missing; when we have independence we crave intimacy and belonging. Thus individualism comes at a price and we need more than a reflexive autonomous self to make the right choices. If anything Giddens (1991) notion of the reflexive self alerts us to what can happen when self-determination and autonomy are carried to the 'nth degree' – the

result is a freely choosing rational egoistic individual. However, as we shall see below, Beck (1998) attempts to give this person a *social* conscience.

Thus there would appear to be no room for spirituality within Giddens' notion of 'reflexivity' which is essentially the embodiment of reason, science, rationality, individualism, materialism, and now the inner reflexive self. Many would see this preoccupation with self wherein egoistic individuals create their own life projects with little thought for others except in so far as they serve their own selfish ends as the enemy of spirituality. The ensuing lack of a sense of meaning, purpose and connectedness people consequently feel can be diagnosed as 'humanity's sickness with itself'. Reflexivity essentially rests on the expansion of the interior world with all the consequences of Freudian repression and self delusion. Effectively it is a contract we have with ourselves pursued through inner talk, or Wittgenstein's (1953) internal language game. Modernity and reflexivity coalesce around this 'tense interiorization' or what Beck calls the 'privatization of risk'. This is the process by which certain institutions become removed from effective roles in the public sphere on a local and national scale thus undermining community and weakening norms governing social interaction (Habermas, 1996).

Of course, all these ideas are debatable, as Garrett (2003, 2004) rightly points out. While Giddens and Beck is writing mainly about affluent European culture, most social work clients live on the margins and are hugely affected by structural constraints; but the fact that people are poor or oppressed from the critical social workers' perspective, does not necessarily mean that clients construe their experience in this way. Poor people cling to religion as a source of hope and do not question God for their plight. Furthermore, the implosion of self in this reflexive individualism gives cause for concern among those who have a broad ecological awareness of our place in the Universe, see the limitations of an anthropocentric stance and danger in our loss of community (Coates, 2003) – the locus of Beck's *subpolitics*.

Beck's subpolitics

In developing his theory of subpolitics, Beck (1998) asks, 'How can the longing for self-determination be brought into harmony with the equally important longing for shared

community? How can one simultaneously be individualistic and merge with the group?' (p. 3). His answer lies in his theory of the new social movements which, through the mechanism of what he calls bottom up or *subpolitics*, is undermining government authority upheld through 'politics driven democracy'. In modernity religion and state worked together but in late modern society not only has religion lost its authority so too has politics because of people's disenchantment with 'politics driven democracy' where community and political engagement are tied to place. With globalisation comes a move to 'political engagement' through 'localities without communities and transnational (political) "communities" which are not related to a specific location' (Beck, 1998, p. 36). Thus, says Beck, social movements, citizen initiative groups and non-governmental organizations have taken power politically such that 'the compulsion to engage in the ecological salvation and renewal of the world has by now become universal' (p. 36). People are less and less interested in state-driven politics and the 'core of today's politics is the capacity for self-organization' by which Beck means 'the shaping of society from the bottom up' (p. 37). Real change is occurring more and more outside the governmental political system.

Jordan (2004) alludes to this in noting the potential 'change power' in social work being spread across a 'multitude of state, voluntary and community organizations ... in a whole range of public, voluntary and commercial agencies' (p. 17). Whether or not we agree with Beck (1998) that the 'planned economy' and 'systems theory', which conceives of society as independent of the subject, has been refuted, far from becoming apolitical, Beck sees the 'loss of consensus' or 'an unpolitical retreat into private life', 'new inwardness' or 'caring for emotional wounds' – which we see as characteristic of spirituality – as representing the struggle for a new dimension in politics. Organised programmatic responses, including trade unionism, are on the wane as 'politics is losing both its polarizing and its creative, utopian quality' (p. 38). Subpolitics emerge outside of the old model of state politics wherein politics is equated with the governmental system. It will determine future politics, opening it up and empowering it. Thus we see the 'emergence of discourses relating to citizenship, consumerism, user rights and empowerment and participatory strategies' (Skehill, 1999, p. 29), not in the Freirian or Marxist style of the uprising of the oppressed but in the subpolitics of civil society where reflexive individuals are prepared to forsake materialism for quality of life (Eckersley, 2005).

Here 'quality of life' refers to a choice of lifestyle that eschews rampant materialism where it eats into private leisure time or results in environmental degradation. It appears to underlie the resurgence of social activism in civil society as another expression of people's need for belonging and a sense of community which is touching social work and offering it opportunities to redefine its role in the social economy (Aiken, 2004), life politics (Ferguson, 2001), risk society (Webb, 2006) and the way in which it deals with diversity or *pluralism* – the coexistence of competing worldviews. In a modern pluralistic world where there are no dominant authorities, people continue to battle against a huge number of forces which threaten their identity. 'Traditional social structures are being replaced ... by a plurality of forces with no single organising principle' (Holden, 2002, p. 49). 'Anomie, dislocation and the absence of unambiguous moral guidelines lead to confusion, powerlessness and loss of meaning. Wherever there is ambiguity there is (perceived) danger' (Holden, 2002, p. 57).

In comes spirituality ...

Into this fluid world in which 'people are being forced to act as free agents in a huge global economy' (Holden, 2002, p. 50), where our sense of belonging and attachment to social institutions, such as the family and the local community, has been eroded and our identity lost comes spirituality as the individual's search for certainty in the world and attempt to deal with the fragmentation of late modern life. Thus New Age religion promotes the idea that 'we are all essentially one and that there is truth in all religion. Unity prevails within diversity' (Holden, 2002, p. 50).

New Age religion derives from individual freedom and the loss of all-embracing communities: 'much of religion – indeed, culture as a whole – tended to develop in favour of the autonomous, the privatised, the individuated, essentially the assumption that the person should shape his or her *own* values and beliefs' ... the pluralistic nature of modernity enables New Age converts to explore what (Heelas) describes as the *inner self*. By this, he means that authority is placed in the hands of the consumer who, while drawing on religious traditions, is at liberty to bypass monosemic dogma. New Agers reject traditional (religious)

beliefs and put their faith in a wisdom that they argue lies at the heart of a new spiritual domain (Heelas, in Holden, 2002, p. 50).

However, the tension between religion and spirituality in the social work literature arises, broadly speaking, because the former tends towards absolutism and the latter toward relativism. As already mentioned, social work's consistent efforts to throw off its moralistic, religious-linked beginnings have resulted in a secular, modern profession which values objective science (rationalism and advanced technology), the freely choosing individual (individualism) and acceptance and tolerance of diversity (pluralism within liberal democracy). In short, a relativist stance predominates which stands at odds with the values of 'emancipatory politics' (Garrett, 2003) which require it to take a moral and political stand on situations of social injustice and human rights violation given that the risks for those who suffer social injustice and oppressive social conditions arise from too little rather than too much choice.

As Garrett (2003) reminds us, Giddens' and Beck's theory overlooks the structural constraints and social inequalities brought about and sustained by liberal or neoliberal capitalism. However, at the same time, this 'emancipatory politics' within social work has, for the most part, derived from empowering *individuals* through enhancing their capacity for self-determination and autonomy. Social work's powerlessness in countering the quickened pace of individual rather than collective progress—now accelerated by broader managerialist and globalisation agendas—can be traced back to its roots in nineteenth century individualism (Jordan, 2004). Whichever way you look at it, whether stemming from the related phenomena of its individualistic emphasis or its modernist nature or its enchantment with rationality, these have all conspired to value science over meaning and it is in this sense that one needs to see spirituality assuming importance as part of social work's attempt to keep some hold on its humanistic values while still valuing evidence-based practice. One cannot divorce social work from its context and again, whichever way you look at it, social work's values have always promoted 'the moral individualism of the liberal tradition' (Jordan, 2004, p. 10) which go hand in hand with free market capitalism. 'The collective values of social democracy did not have an enormous impact on social work' (Jordan, 2004, p. 11).

Whether or not we believe sociologists have anything important to say (Sheldon, 2001) it was Weber (1970) who saw the rise of science and technology in industrial, capitalist societies as evidence of rationalisation whereby the economic distribution of goods and services would characterise the ordering of work and social life in modern societies. Rationalism would lead to tension with traditional cultures since it would eschew supernatural interpretations in favour of principles of cause and effect (Bruce, in Holden, 2002, p. 61). Bruce (in Holden, 2002) believes that science has changed supernatural beliefs rather than replaced them. It has done this through the undermining of places of worship—some of which have been replaced by sects or cults driven by forces of moral relativism as exemplified in the New Age movement. And, it was Weber who correctly predicted that problems of meaning could not be addressed by science alone. While ‘technical reason’ governed by rules and regulations deriving from legal-rational authority did become important features of modernity as Weber (1922) predicted, they have not replaced transcendental or metaphysical or aesthetic aspects of reality. If anything, the more rational and less personal society’s structures have become, *the more the need for some sense of human community has grown*. It has given rise to new social movements and is the premise of Beck’s *subpolitics*—politics from below rather than (government) politics driven democracy.

But still Giddens’ and Beck’s social theory lacks a moral perspective (Eckersley, 2004). It lauds economic growth while overlooking its social consequences: social inequality, social problems and environmental degradation. It creates what Eckersley (2001) calls a ‘myth of growth’ and ‘subverts moral values to this end’ (p. 13). It is also premised on the belief that we can fix the damage done by economic growth when the links between wealth and wellbeing belie what

... prevailing economic orthodoxy assumes. Increasing income confers large benefits at low income levels, but little if any benefit at high income levels. Research shows that material conditions are surprisingly unimportant to well-being once basic needs are met. *What really matters are personal relationships,*

social affiliations and spiritual beliefs, and the intimacy, belonging, meaning and certainties these provide’ (p. 13 *italics added*).

Thus, says Eckersley (2004), the materialism and individualism of modern western culture is fraudulent to the extent that it does not yield the benefits it promises.

Beck (1998) refutes the idea that Western Europeans are living in a crisis of culture or in a decline of values. He says that along with increasing freedom, individualism and declining Christian faith ‘*the willingness to exist with others, indeed to believe, is growing and not disappearing*’ (p. 3 *italics added*). He cites Wuthnow who shows that all modern societies would collapse without voluntary activities for others; 45% of the North American population over eighteen is involved for five or more hours a week in voluntary services for charitable purposes which, in monetary terms, amounts to 150 billion dollars (in Beck, 1998, p. 5). For Beck (1998), the astonishing thing is that for more than 75% of the North American population

... solidarity, willingness to help others, and concern for the public interest have prominence equal to such motivations as self-realization, occupational success and the expansion of personal freedom. The real surprise is that self-assertion, enjoying oneself *and* caring for others are not mutually exclusive; they are mutually inclusive and strengthen and enrich one another (p. 6).

This insight is blocked by four fundamental assumptions in public and scholarly debate: the equation of commitment with membership; that only through self-sacrifice can one live for others; that serving others remains invisible, unpaid and unacknowledged; and the separation of the helper and needy role—those who commit themselves to others also need help—enrichment lies in ‘mutual helplessness’ (p. 6). Rather than seeing commitment as tied to organizational membership, the overly optimistic Beck (1998) says freedom’s children, by which he means the young generation, ‘equate commitment with selflessly performed service’ (p. 6). Thus rather than bemoan a decline in values, says Beck (1998), we should accept the new diversity emerging. Instead of decrying individualism we should see it as a

... desirable and inevitable product of democratic evolution ... an expression of the Western heritage. Only then can one convincingly ask what political orientations and degree of accommodation are emerging in the individualized and globalized society of the second modernity ... The basic idea is that without the expansion and strengthening of political freedom and its social reform, civil society, nothing will work in the future (p. 7).

There is value in the changing values, such as the 'spontaneity and voluntarism of political activism, self-organization, the resistance of formalism and hierarchies, contrariness, tentativeness, as well as reservation of getting involved only where one can remain in control of the activity' (p. 7). While these values might collide with the party apparatus, they make sense in the forms and forums of civil society. This change in attitude does not amount to an inflation of material demands but a 'new weighting of priorities ... in which immaterial factors of the quality of life play an outstanding part' (p. 8), such as control over one's own time not for more career, more money, more success but for a self-determined life of *inter alia* dialogue, friendship, being on one's own, leisure, compassion, and fun. Maybe herein lies the beginning of the end of growth-oriented labour society and in its stead might come material sacrifices for an increasingly 'self-developed society' (p. 8). People can adapt better than social institutions which have done little to address problems of poverty and inequality. Individualization need not mean egocentrism for there is recognition that living beyond our means is unsustainable economically and ecologically. It can mean '*cooperative or altruistic individualism*' (p. 9). As values have changed so too has increased tolerance of diversity and individual mobility with the decline of the 'lifetime profession' (Beck, 1998, p. 9).

If anything the crisis is the fear of freedom, more specifically what Giddens (1994) refers to as the oppression of having to make the right choices. Far from making only self-interested choices, Beck (1998) believes that young people are moved by the very things that established politics largely ignores, for example, resolving global environmental destruction and loving and living with the threat of AIDS. Consequently, young people 'practise a highly political disavowal of politicians' and 'organized politics' (p. 4). Those that want to get involved politically join Greenpeace not trade unions, religious organizations or political parties. By staying away from state-based politics they are making a highly political

statement. Beck calls it the 'politics of youthful antipolitics' (p. 5) which 'opens up the opportunity to enjoy one's own life with the best conscience in the world ... supplemented and made credible by a self-organized concern for others which has broken free from large institutions. Freedom's children practise a seeking, experimenting morality that ties together things that seem mutually exclusive: egoism *and* altruism, self-realization *as* active compassion' (p. 5).

For Beck (1998) 'when advanced capitalism in the highly developed countries breaks up the core values of work society, a historic alliance between capitalism, the welfare state and democracy shatters' (p. 11). 'The economic model is capable of surviving only in an interplay of material security, social-welfare rights and democracy' (p. 12). One cannot rely solely on the market as neo-liberals do. In opposition to neo-liberalism is communitarianism and between these two extremes are the protectionists who defend the old worldview (of modernity). They rail against the decline of the nation-state, the rise of globalization and the erosion of values. Habermas (1996) and Beck (1998) advocate cosmopolitan republicanism or a strengthening of civil society and local politics. Whether via subpolitics or environmental (sustainability) movements, driven by a moral impulse to make life better for all, people appear to be seeking a new understanding of our 'relationship with the Cosmos which fosters a sense of deeper purpose, or meaning, within ourselves' (Eckersley, 2005, p. 3). Connectedness and meaning are the stuff of spirituality which is closely tied to these communitarian ideals. New forms of networks and relationships, greater participation in the social economy (Aiken, 2000) and increased activism towards social change through the mechanism of *sub-politics* may be seen as non-individualistic ways in which people are using their 'agency' to be an active participant in the creation of new social networks opening up boundaries and possibilities for change rather than being stuck within pre-given boundaries (Aiken, 2000; Beck et al, 2003).

This is all well and good, but to the extent that reflexivity is the embodiment of reason, science, rationality, individualism, materialism, and the 'inner self' as god, it is the enemy of spirituality. Its consequences can only be increased disconnection from and disinterest in the needs and welfare of others which, if our constant search for meaning and purpose is anything to go by, leads to a sound diagnosis of reflexivity as 'humanity's sickness with

itself'. By expanding the interior world of self, we open ourselves up for increasing egoism in which solipsistic selves delude themselves about what's best for them engaging in repression and denial if that suits their selfish ends. Effectively it is a contract we have with ourselves pursued through inner talk. Thus spirituality offers an alternative to this implosion of self because it posits a (external) relation with the Other (the land, the earth, the dispossessed, the marginal, and the spirit world). It offers space in which to restore some of our traditional social work concepts of instinct, empathy and care. To the extent that it encourages an individualistic focus to one's search for meaning and purpose with highly relativist values, we need to recognise New Age spirituality as part of the critical problem associated with reflexivity. The global imposition of reflexivity, through notions of life politics and subpolitics, approaches like social constructionism and treatment regimes like cognitive behavioural therapy constitute a repressive machine that re-territorializes subjectivity, thus preventing the (outward) discharge of instincts and intuition. We are taught not to trust our instincts. Instincts are literally turned inwards and rationalized. As feminists have argued this is represented by the silencing of female voices and privileging male views on the world (Gilligan, 1980; Weick, 1997). Thus we see a need for an outward focused 'ecospiritual social work' where spirituality is 'other' rather than *self*-centred, and not anthropocentric in that it embraces concerns for all life forms as well as the sustainability of the planet (Coates et al, 2006; Coates, 2003; Eckersley, 2005).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise of spirituality in social work, while essentially concerned with a desire for *individual* meaning and purpose, can be seen as broadly related to wider theoretical developments, not least the theory of reflexive modernisation—life politics and subpolitics. It can also be linked to the failures of modernity and its depersonalizing and alienating effects through the detraditionalization and secularization of society, the rise of science, rationality, the professions, and industrial progress, and the decline in religion. However, within the secular profession of social work religious beliefs have continued to influence the practice of individual social workers and the policies of faith-based social organisations within which many social workers practice. Also many of social work's core values are consistent with Judeo-Christian values. Thus the spirituality movement in social work has not been entirely

dominated by New Age spirituality. In contemporary social work within risk society (Webb, 2006), there is a quest to rediscover social work's religious roots. This quest seeks to be the very opposite of a self-centred search for meaning; it represents an attempt to revive social work's early aspirations and its potential for social change. Additionally, the quest for meaning and purpose in the spirituality literature partly echoes the wisdom of and presages a return to traditional worldviews which value collective values, community, the environment, and a sense of place as implicitly spiritual and take social work back to its communitarian roots. It connects to contemporary concerns with environmental sustainability and the rise of the new social movements, the spirituality movement within social work being one such movement.

What this article has sought to do is place this movement within a broader theoretical and epistemological perspective by relating spirituality to the rise of individualism and the alienation of living in a risk society. This gives rise to the *individual's* search for meaning and purpose and a sense of belonging and community connectedness. New Age spirituality which permeates the social work literature and Beck's subpolitics are but two expressions of this individualistic quest. Whether we are turning inwards (Giddens reflexive self and life politics) or outwards (Beck's subpolitics) we are nevertheless concerned with our *personal* (individual) search for meaning and belonging. Thus spirituality, by itself, cannot accomplish the goal of making the world a better place for all. It has to be tied to moral imperatives which drive concern for the 'other' and for the 'environment'. To the extent that the theory of reflexive modernization takes us further into egoistic views of the self it needs to be regarded with caution in social work. People might behave rationally most of the time but the most important things in life often defy rational explanation. This is the message of spirituality: it allows us to believe without evidence—and to focus on 'quality'. Rather than following Giddens' reflexivity or the New Age self-help cult let us develop it in social work to focus on the moral and relational aspects of what we do that remind us why we need to care for the stranger.

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