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Faith, Spirituality, and Social Work Education: An Exploration into the Quest for Integration

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Faith, Spirituality, and Social Work Education:
An Exploration into the Quest for Integration

By
Shannon Cassidy Cousineau

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Social Work

St. Catherine University | University of Saint Thomas
School of Social Work
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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the integration of faith and spirituality in higher education, more specifically for social work students. Faith and spirituality are important aspects of many people’s lives, and it is important for social work students to understand and comfortably discuss issues and strengths around religion and spirituality. Due to its proposition that people are spiritual beings, who believe in something beyond themselves, Transpersonal Theory is used as a guide for this banded dissertation. At its core, Transpersonal Theory provides a foundation for the journey many people take to find a belief in something outside themselves, either physical, emotional, or existential.

The first part of the dissertation is a review of academic freedom in higher education as it relates to religion, faith, and spirituality. The primary focus management of academic freedom in United States institutions of higher learning. The main conclusion is: ultimately, if discussions of religion and spirituality are not accepted at the institutional level, then social work programs could have difficulty integrating topics that relate to faith and spirituality into their curriculum. The paper also demonstrates how a school’s demography/type, secular or faith-based, can impact its acceptability of discussions related to religion and spirituality.

The second part of the dissertation consists of a qualitative study on integration of faith and spirituality into the social work curriculum. In the study the author collected 53 syllabi from nine Bachelor of Social Work programs in the New England region. Data was analyzed to identify content related to faith and spirituality. The syllabi were reviewed for the depth of faith and spirituality integration in the studied syllabi. Lessons learned from the study indicated that the topics pertaining to religion, faith, and spirituality are incorporated at minimal depth in the Bachelor of Social Work programs in New England.
The third section of this dissertation provides information regarding a poster presentation conducted at the North American Association of Christian Social Workers (NACSW) in November 2017. The poster utilized the data from the research conducted for part two of the dissertation. The outcome of the research, along with part of the literature review, data collection and references were included in the presentation. The results from this presentation were positive. Participants commented on the importance of integrating religion, faith and spirituality in social work education.

Keywords: Faith, spirituality, social work education, Transpersonal Theory, academic freedom
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to my husband, Kevin, whose unending support and love gave me the continued encouragement to move forward and complete the work. To my mother, Diane, whose unconditional love and guidance provided strength to a young girl who struggled in school, helping her fight through the many challenges and to become now the woman who has earned a doctorate. To my brother, Sean, sister-in-law, Susan, niece and nephew, Corinne and Christopher, who provided distractions when needed, laughter, and support throughout the program and completion of this dissertation. Lastly, to my late father, Donald, who is cheering me on from above and showing his pride with a beaming smile. He provides the best sunsets on the most trying of days to remind me of his love and support.
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Faith, Spirituality, and Social Work Education: An Exploration into the Quest for Integration

This banded dissertation examines the areas of faith and spirituality in social work education. Social workers are sometimes faced with serving people who turn to their spirituality or faith in times of need, grief, sorrow, or difficulty. In order to fully understand the importance of this aspect of the person’s life, it is imperative that the social worker have some reasonable training in the knowledge, strength and solace that can come from having a spiritual or faith presence in the life of the person served (Morgan, 2007). As Hodge (2005) so clearly articulates, “many consumers desire to incorporate their spirituality with therapeutic concerns” (p. 78).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the accrediting body for social work programs at the baccalaureate and masters level in higher education in the United States (CSWE, 2015). The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) provide the necessary components of every program accredited by CSWE.

CSWE defines social work education by saying,

Social work education at the baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral levels shapes the profession’s future through the education of competent professionals, the generation of knowledge, the promotion of evidence-informed practice through scientific inquiry, and the exercise of leadership within the professional community. (EPAS, 2015, p. 5)

It is this definition, that pushes social work education to ensure that students graduating at the baccalaureate level can practice as generalists. In order to accomplish this goal, students ought to have a multifaceted lens to view the challenges, and a variety of interventions that can be used in empowering others to overcome the difficulties.
The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics states that a fundamental aspect of social work “is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living” (NASW, 2008). These “environmental forces” can be any number of things, such as poverty, child or elder abuse/neglect, oppression, and privilege, all of which are discussed in social work curriculum. By not integrating faith and spirituality, social work faculty could be missing a key aspect of the biopsychosocial framework of preparing students to have a full generalist perspective and a means by which to discuss hard topics. Perhaps this is the explanation as to why fewer social workers are “engaging in behaviors related to integrating a client’s religion and spirituality [RS] into treatment” (Oxhandler, Parrish, Torres, & Achenbaum, 2015, p. 231).

Social workers often complete a biopsychosocial assessment, which comprehensively provides information regarding the person’s background and identifies the current supports and barriers the person served faces. Hodge (2003) posits that the spiritual assessment is a critical area of gathering information and provides insight into how the person views themselves and the world around them. The social worker begins to learn about biopsychosocial assessments in their social work education. However, and unfortunately, this does not always include the person’s spiritual aspect (Pargament, 2007). At a time where technology is at the forefront of society, the need to attend to Hippocrates’s statement that “it is more important to know the person who has the disease than the disease the person has” is ever more important and reminds practitioners to take a client-centered approach; that includes faith, religion, and spirituality (Altenberg, 1998).

There are distinct differences between religion and spirituality. Historically, religion and spirituality were essentially the same thing; however, recently, after years of inquiry, they have been separated so that they are individual elements, rather than as a whole (Hodge, 2017).
Religion is more formalized in ritual and typically encompasses others in an external exhibition of the main tenets of that religion (Bergamo & White, 2016; Spencer, 1961). Whereas, spirituality is a more general and internal approach to beliefs and values held by one person (Bergamo & White, 2016). In a recent survey, more Americans identified as spiritual, and there is a decrease in those considered following a formal religion (Masci & Lipka, 2016). Tomas, Sancho, Galiana, and Oliver (2015) found that spirituality, more than a formal religion, had a large impact on health and well-being.

Highlighting the importance of faith, religion and spirituality to practitioners who are then able to create a holding environment capable of incorporating faith, religion, and spirituality in a non-judgmental way starts with the practitioners’ social work education. It is the final goal of any social work program to have practitioners who are ethical and do no harm, which includes spiritually, to the people they serve (Sheridan, 2009). This includes questioning and understanding self. Gummer (2005) defines understanding as “recognizing one’s own limited angle of vision and the ways in which we come to know” (p 47). Gummer (2005) goes on to describe understanding as a process that involves questioning, engaging others in a dialogue, and learning from others, not only about them. It is this process of understanding that is highlighted throughout the dissertation.

Through the first part of the dissertation, academic freedom is discussed as a means to discussions on faith and spirituality in the higher education classroom. If professors are not provided the liberty to discuss such topics and challenge their students to think critically about the pros and cons of faith and spirituality, students will not be provided the opportunity either. The autonomy of professors to teach these important topics without fear of retaliation, discipline, or even termination, is the focus of the first dissertation product.
The research provides a glimpse into how faith, religion, and spirituality are integrated into the social work curriculum. While it is a small portion of the bachelor of social work curriculum, the results indicate that schools are not incorporating faith, religion, and spirituality at any depth into the curriculum. The syllabus or course objectives may mention the topics, but there is little evidence of class discussions, readings, or assignments related to gaining understanding and comfort with faith, religion, and spirituality.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework guiding the work is Transpersonal Theory. A limb of humanistic psychology, Transpersonal Theory integrates human values and spiritual experience as relating to human behavior, and it is a useful practice through which spirituality can be viewed (Canda, 1991; Kaspro, W & Scotton, 1999; Barker, 2007). Transpersonal Theory goes beyond what social workers already know of how people manage their struggles on the surface to view a person’s strength as more than a biological, sociological, or psychological being.

Transpersonal Theory integrates that which is greater than the person to an area of self-actualization and strength. Challenging the traditional views of Western psychology, Transpersonal Theory uses tenets of Eastern philosophies to assist in developing a spiritual identity beyond what would be found in a formalized religion (Cowley & Derezotes, 1994). Instead, “a transpersonal perspective accepts religion as a viable way to express spirituality but does not limit spiritual expression solely to religion” (Barker, 2007, p. 156). While certainly formal religion could be included, it is neither the entirety of spirituality nor a Transpersonal perspective.

Transpersonal Theory was chosen as the conceptual framework for this author’s banded dissertation because of its usefulness in explaining a spiritual presence. The banded dissertation
reviews how spirituality and faith are acknowledged in the general classroom and their integration into social work education. Without a theory related to spirituality, the dissertation could not fully express the desire of many persons served by social workers to experience and include a higher power or something beyond themselves.

As mentioned, Transpersonal Theory is a limb of humanistic psychology. As Grof (2008) discusses, Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich, founders of humanistic psychology, recognized the limitations of this framework and determined a need to include the spiritual aspect of the whole person. Grof (2008) goes on to say, “Transpersonal psychology, as it was born in the late 1960s, was culturally sensitive and treated the ritual and spiritual traditions of ancient and native cultures” (p. 50). Taking the ancient philosophies of the East and integrating them with the newer views of the West, Transpersonal Theory provides a framework of understanding humanity and behavior above oneself.

Beginning with a group of psychiatrists and psychologists determining the core concepts and base for the theory, Transpersonal Theory has changed and become more prominent in social work and other professional fields. Ferrer (2002) describes Transpersonal Theory as more than “another academic discipline. It is a way of thinking and living” (p. 7). Ferrer (2002) goes on to say that it is “manifested in relationships, community…and almost any other area of human thinking, feeling and action” (p. 7).

In creating Transpersonal Theory, there are several major historical factors that impacted its development. First, as stated, is the creation of the area of humanistic psychology. Specifically, the founders of humanistic psychology saw the limitations in this area of understanding the person. They saw that the person is more than a physiological or emotional being, and has an identity that incorporates spirituality.
Second, Freud’s ideas and psychodynamic approach, along with the “environmental approach of behaviorism,” impacted the development of humanistic psychology and therefore influenced Transpersonal Theory (Canda, 1991, p. 138). Both theories had areas that were lacking for a holistic view of the whole person.

Stanislov Grof’s research and practice had one of the largest impacts on Transpersonal Theory. He coined the term “holotropic”, meaning “that in our everyday state of consciousness we identify with only a small fraction of who we really are” (Grof, 2008, p. 48). Furthermore, as a psychiatrist, Grof researched transpersonal experiences by psychedelics such as LSD, including his own use (Grob, 2009).

**Assumptions, Concepts and Propositions**

Transpersonal Theory has three main assumptions: The first, experientialism, is defined as “the assumption that transpersonal and spiritual phenomena are fundamentally individual inner experiences” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 1). In effect, this means that no two people have the same spiritual insight into themselves. Unlike other areas, even if two people are in the same situation, they would have a spiritually unique view. While they may share a similar view of their spiritual experience, the impact it has on the individual would be very different.

The second assumption is inner empiricism. Inner empiricism denotes a scientific examination of one’s transpersonal journey (Ferrer, 2002). This is an area that some may struggle with because it is so personal. The spiritual experience is found through one’s own journey and examination of the experience. It is through this examination that a person can validate whether or not it was something beyond themselves.
The third assumption, perennialism, is identified as “the assumption that spiritual knowledge, spiritual liberation, and spiritual ultimates are most basically universal” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 2). This assumption posits that while experiences are individualized, everyone has them. Perennialism takes the other two assumptions and generalizes them to the entire population. The “universal” impact is that everyone, at some time or another, has experiences that are beyond what they know to be true and challenges their own self-consciousness.

Within these assumptions is the most common and widely discussed concept that a state of consciousness is not necessarily a negative experience. Often spiritual or transpersonal experiences are considered an “altered state of consciousness,” but Grof, as cited in Friedman and Hartelius (2013), challenges this because of “its one-sided emphasis on the distortion or impairment of the ‘correct way’ of experiencing oneself and the world” (p. 3). As professionals, we primarily tend to explain things we don’t understand as being a distorted point of view, rather than that of something beyond what we can understand.

The propositions related to the assumptions and main concept are connected through their positions of individuality and strength rather than as a pathology or generalization. The experiences one has related to their own spiritual development are their own. Each of the assumptions is interconnected because of this. The idea that a person should do their own individual inquiry into the experience, understand that it is theirs alone but that everyone does have them, makes Transpersonal Theory unique. In addition, understanding that having these experiences does not make a person eccentric, ill, or mentally unstable adds viability for people who encounter a transpersonal event.

Transpersonal Theory also has a strong person-in-environment component. The whole concept is that the person is experiencing their environment in a way that is beyond the physical
or emotional. In relation, the environment is impacting the person’s world view through their understanding of what is happening and their analysis of the event. While everyone encounters things differently, the same is true for the impact the person’s world view has on their environment. A traumatic event in a community may have a different impact on a person with a higher transpersonal understanding. Additionally, the person’s impact on the environment in the same traumatic event could decrease the stress they feel if they have a more in depth understanding of things beyond themselves.

Using the major assumptions, Transpersonal Theory is the thread that connects the three dissertation products and provides a lens to show the importance spirituality has in relation to social work and social work education. This theoretical framework was used as a reminder that faith, religion and spirituality are different for everyone in every circumstance. It was chosen for each part of the dissertation because the assumptions speak to the journey that many people follow, regardless of their involvement in a formalized religion. The first assumption, experientialism is pertinent because it highlights the individuality of the religious or spiritual experience (Ferrer, 2002). Throughout the dissertation, this assumption is apparent through the literature reviews and serves as a reminder that each person experiences spirituality differently. The second assumption, inner empiricism, brings the view that a person’s spiritual or religious experience can be validated by self-exploration and reflection (Ferrer, 2002). As with the various parts of the dissertation, each aspect has been viewed through the reflection of the topic and its relation to the people served by social workers. Lastly, perennialism, the third assumption, reminded this author that the information provided can be interpreted in several different ways (Ferrer, 2002).
Transpersonal Theory is shown as an effective means to include discussion of spirituality into social work education. It is used in the curriculum to guide social work educators in the dialogue of spirituality, as well as how faith and spirituality can be presented to students while keeping with the ethics and values of social work.

**Summary of Banded Dissertation Products**

The first scholarship product is a conceptual article. The purpose of the article is to address the topic of academic freedom in higher education, both in faith-based schools and non-faith-based schools. A literature review of peer-reviewed articles and news media provides current information related to academic freedom. The article speaks specifically to academic freedom in relation to faith and spirituality, through case studies. The paper provides a foundation to delve deeper into the area of academic freedom, specifically in relation to faith and spirituality. The results of the inquiry showed vast management of academic freedom across schools.

Scholarship product number two is a qualitative study that investigated whether religion and/or spirituality are included in baccalaureate programs of social work and to what depth the integration occurs. The research focused on the 27 schools of social work in New England offering baccalaureate programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education. Some of the schools are in urban settings, where others are in suburban areas in the region. The design of the research was a content analysis to review the curriculum at these schools. This researcher contacted each school to request syllabi related to courses where spirituality and religion are most likely to be discussed, including practice and human behavior and the social environment. Nine of the 27 schools responded, providing 53 syllabi. The data collected was coded and
analyzed using Nvivo software. The results showed minimal depth to which religion, faith, and spirituality are incorporated into the social work curriculum.

Scholarship product number three was a poster presentation at the annual national conference of the North American Association of Christian Social Workers (NACSW). The conference was held from November 2 to November 5, 2017, in Charlotte, North Carolina. The presentation was on the findings from the qualitative study conducted for dissertation product two. The conference participants spoke highly of the research, including the importance of integrating faith, religion, and spirituality into the social work curriculum at considerable depth versus mere mention in the syllabus.

Discussion

Faith and spirituality are important aspects of social work. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) and CSWE (2015) each provide faith and spirituality as part of a person’s diversity and culture. Having social work practitioners who understand the importance of integrating faith and spirituality into their work with people requires having a means to provide training (Derezotes, 2006). Especially when clients want to discuss these topics as a means of healing, forgiveness and peace (Hodge, 2005; Seinfeld, 2012).

The exploration that takes place through this dissertation is a clear indication that there is more to be done to make this integration part of social work education. It is through the works provided we can see discord in academic freedom and reactions to faith and spirituality. Galambos (2010) discusses the attrition to academic freedom, and the need to protect it. This presents a challenge to the students and clients, if religion and spirituality cannot be spoken about freely in the classroom. It is by increasing the comfort level of discussing religion and
spirituality that practitioners will feel more at ease with integrating it into their practice (Bergamo & White, 2016).

This concern for academic may be one cause for a lack of integration into the social work curriculum. Further research would be required to see if there is a correlation. Given the results of the qualitative study completed for this dissertation, it is clear that there is more to be done to fully integrate faith and spirituality into the social work curriculum. Sheriden, Wilmer, and Atcheson (1994) recognized that the social work curriculum is lacking topics of faith and spirituality. This appears to still be true, 24 years later, based on the study conducted. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) and CSWE (2015) have placed more emphasis on inclusion, however, it will require more time to see more comprehensive inclusion of faith and spirituality into the social work curriculum.

**Implications for Social Work Education**

Social work education is in a unique situation regarding discussions of faith and spirituality. Social work professors are not meant to be “neutral” in their ideas but are meant to “profess not only what is but what is meant to be” (Boehm, 1971, p 37). Sometimes the people whom social workers help turn to their faith or spirituality in times of need, and the skilled practitioner understands this aspect of diversity and culture (Dudley & Helfgott, 1990). However, this experience and skill cannot happen without a strong foundation in social work education. In order to create skilled practitioners, social work faculty must have the freedom to discuss many ideas, challenge personal values and difficult topics such as trauma, abuse and faith and spirituality, while concurrently ensuring students understand that everyone has a certain amount of bias (Dudley & Helfgott, 1990; Anderson, 2014).
Academic freedom must allow not only the social work educators’ point of view but that of the students as well. Students who are ridiculed or criticized for sharing their faith or spiritual views and/or experiences by peers or professors are having their academic freedom challenged (Cnaan, 2006). Speaking openly, expressing opinions and values, and gaining an understanding of diversity are key factors of ensuring academic freedom for social work education. This begins in the social work education classroom and ensures students can not only express their opinions but challenge their own values and thoughts. Faith and spirituality cannot be taught singularly but need to be incorporated as part of the other topics relevant to social work. Given the standards of accreditation, it seems the most suitable place in the curriculum is in social work practice courses at both the baccalaureate and masters level (Sheffield & Openshaw, 2009).

The qualitative study conducted shows that faith and spirituality are not integrated into the curriculum as much as they could be at the BSW level. Social work programs need to make decisions for themselves as to how to incorporate these topics effectively. BSW programs should find the natural places in the curriculum to include faith and spirituality. Doing a full curriculum review and syllabi revisions is one way to begin, which would include an in-depth review of the NASW Code of Ethics and CSWE standards.

The social work curriculum includes Introduction to Social Work courses, Human Behavior and the Social Environment, practice courses, are a natural fit because students are learning how to be social work practitioners and this is often paired with field education where students are interning at agencies and working with the people served. Additionally, courses regarding policy, research, and ethics could also incorporate conversations of faith and spirituality by considering dilemmas that may arise, continuing to review aspects of integration,
and reviewing policies regarding the client’s right to discuss faith and spirituality with their social worker.

In addition to integrating faith and spirituality into the explicit curriculum, it is important to include these topics in the implicit curriculum as well. Students should be encouraged to become more self-aware in their own spiritual journeys, and one way to do that is to have open discussion that others invite in the classroom. The culture of social work is one of openness and acceptance in relation to diversity, so it is logical to include faith and spirituality in this.

**Implications for Future Research**

Future research will continue the inquiry into academic freedom and where there may be gaps in professors’ ability to teach freely is a necessary step to ensuring the successful integration of faith and spirituality into the classroom. While the literature review functions as a foundation for future inquiry into academic freedom, especially regarding social work education, future research can include reviewing further issues related to academic freedom, as it specifically relates to topics of faith and spirituality. As stated earlier, to truly integrate faith and spirituality into the curriculum, professors must be able to teach the tenets of faith and spirituality in an open, non-judgmental forum. The future of research regarding academic freedom will parallel the continued discussion and integration of faith and spirituality. Demands on faculty, and the institutions where they teach are consistently changing as the needs of the students, the college, or university, and other stakeholders change, meaning that the accountability to academic freedom, too, is always evolving (Weidner, 2003).

The results of the qualitative study provide a guide for future research into this topic. Having a small response rate from the schools, certainly impedes the generalizability of the results. Further research can include more schools and more syllabi across other regions of the
country. Similarly, future studies could, and should, consider surveying the treatment of this topic area in syllabi from Master of Social Work programs. It is possible that some programs surveyed have intentionally introduced faith and spirituality in a graduate program but not in an undergraduate program.

Future research will include current inquiry into the beliefs of clients and their views about including faith and spirituality into their work with social workers. Additionally, how faith and spirituality affects them in their daily lives. The results could assist in creating a social work curriculum that is inclusive of faith and spirituality as an element of cultural competence and diversity.
Comprehensive Reference List


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Academic Freedom: A Review in Faith-Based Higher Education and Social Work

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Abstract

Faith and spirituality are topics of discussion throughout higher education. This often is manifested in relation to academic freedom and the viewpoints of the professors or other staff at colleges and universities. In this conceptual paper, topics of faith and spirituality in relation to academic freedom were reviewed using information from media and peer-reviewed journals, using Transpersonal Theory as the guiding conceptual framework and lens to view the information. A literature review was conducted to inform a discussion concerning the ways in which faith and spirituality are managed in colleges and universities throughout the United States. The goal of this article is to provide insight into academic freedom as it relates to faith and spirituality. Case studies are used to show the impact of academic freedom on professors and institutions. This impact on professors and institutions provides a foundation for further inquiry into faith and spirituality in social work education.

*Keywords*: faith, spirituality, academic freedom, Transpersonal Theory, higher education
Academic freedom: A Review in Faith-Based Higher Education and Social Work

Faith and spirituality can be difficult topics to discuss, but they are important areas for consideration in social work, especially for those in direct social work practice. There are challenges because faith and spirituality are very personalized topics, and each person is on an individual journey regarding a spiritual life. Social workers are sometimes faced with serving people who turn to their spirituality or faith in times of need, grief, or difficulty. To fully understand the importance of this aspect of the client’s life, it is imperative that the social worker have some reasonable training in the knowledge, strength, and solace that can come from having a spiritual or faith presence in the life of the person served. This can be especially true when a person served wants to integrate their own beliefs into the therapeutic process (Hodge, 2005). In order to accomplish this goal, social work students ought to have a multifaceted lens to view the challenges, and a variety of interventions that can be used in empowering clients to overcome the difficulties.

On a larger scale, this manuscript will begin with the liberal arts education required by many undergraduate institutions. The bachelor of social work students’ exposure to discussions of faith and spirituality may not be included, in an academic sense, in the context of social work education. The exposure to the topics of faith and spirituality might be through the perspective of a professor in another class exercising their right to academic freedom. The discussion could take place in a philosophy course where the professor speaks about their world view related to spirituality, or in a science course speaking about evolution or “the big bang theory,” an art course reviewing paintings depicting scenes from the Bible, or an English course reading the great literary works of the world. However, the views, actions, or teachings of a professor may or may not be well received by the institution employing the professor. Carol Precious (2014)
writes in her doctoral dissertation, “Academic freedom is a controversial and contested concept within higher education generally… Definitions of academic freedom vary considerably” (p. 7).

Academic freedom has many facets, and much of the discussion of what constitutes academic freedom comes down to freedom of speech as stated in the U.S. Constitution (Wolterstorff, 2001). Some of the aspects include topic discussions that bring personal values and ethics to the forefront of the educational process in higher education. These topics bring about emotion and passion to those involved, because the conversations can be about topics that are challenging to discuss, some of which are religious beliefs, politics, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Academic freedom does not mean that professors have the ability to discuss any topic or idea at any time; they are still bound by their professional proficiency and the confines set by their individual area of expertise (Wecker, 2015). In addition, when a professor is thought to have stepped beyond these boundaries, an aspect of academic freedom is due process for terminating a professor, including a hearing by their peers (Wecker, 2015).

**Purpose**

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to highlight areas where academic freedom, faith, and spirituality intersect in higher education. This will provide a foundation for further inquiry into the integration of faith and spirituality in social work education. If academic freedom is not present at the institutional level, it likely does not exist at the program level. Because faith and spirituality are an important aspect of social work, teaching these concepts in the classroom is crucial, and therefore, professors must have the freedom to do so.
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this manuscript is Transpersonal Theory. A branch of humanistic psychology, Transpersonal Theory integrates human values and spiritual experience as relating to human behavior, and is a useful practice through which spirituality can be viewed (Canda, 1991; Kasprow & Scotton, 1999; Barker, 2007). Transpersonal Theory considers what social workers already know of people and how they manage their struggles on the surface, so that they can view the strengths of the person as more than a biological, sociological or psychological being. Social workers are challenged to look holistically at clients, and faith and spiritually is a key area of this ability.

Literature Review

Academic Freedom in Colleges and Universities

Academic freedom in colleges and universities commenced in the field of science, specifically in relation to creationism versus evolution (Binns, 2013). It has evolved to what it is today, inclusive of all fields of study. Colleges and universities are meant to challenge students to think critically and to see topics from a variety of sides; these academic environments are meant to challenge students to achieve their academic objectives and exhibit some extent of radicalism, challenging others to find the truth (Cole, 2009). In addition, it is important to realize that the institutions themselves are not alone in protecting and maintaining academic freedom; person in academia has the same responsibility (Biedenkopf, 2009).

In a 2006 article in *The New York Times*, the author Neela Banerjee writes about various faith-based institutions setting limits on extracurricular student activities on campus. She discusses Roman Catholic schools that have restricted such activities as “The Vagina
Monologues” and groups promoting homosexuality, such as one school that was holding a gay and lesbian film festival (Banerjee, 2006). The limitations not only restrict activities but also censor materials that can be used in the classes, including books and curriculum building, as well as research conducted by faculty (Galambos, 2010).

However, there are some who believe censorship and limiting activities are negating academic freedom. As Banerjee (2006) reports one priest, Father Hesburgh, believes the professor’s words can be interpreted as ensuring students are getting all sides of a topic to understand what the opposition believes, and then students should seek their own truth. Malin (1953) first asserted something similar when he wrote that professors have the job of transmitting what is currently thought and known about a topic, providing the opportunity for students’ critical inquiry, and expecting students to then provide information and feedback for the next steps in that field.

**Academic Freedom for Faculty in Faith-Based Higher Education**

At its core, academic freedom in faith-based institutions of higher learning shares the same tenets as in secular colleges and universities. A college or university is defined as faith-based when the faculty are integrating areas of faith into the curriculum (Lyon, Beaty, Parker, & Menecken, 2005). All institutions of higher learning are working toward the same goal of student success and, ultimately, employment that will benefit everyone alike: students, faculty, staff, and the school’s reputation (Wecker, 2015b). In order to accomplish this, professors must have the ability to explore their ideas through research and teach within the confines of their area of expertise, rather than those set by the college or university (Reichman, as cited in Wecker, 2015b). To truly understand academic freedom in the context of faith-based institutions, it is
important to appreciate the colleges’ and universities’ viewpoint when it identifies as faith-based.

There are some who are concerned that a faith-based school can be in violation of academic freedom because it prescribes to a specific creed (Beckwith, 2009). A faith-based institution typically has a mission to uphold the tenets of that faith, so it would make sense, therefore, that it would want faculty sharing the beliefs of the faith. However, it should have to have clear expectations for obedience to specific religious policies, values, and tenets to maintain academic freedom (Jones 2010-2011). On the other hand, it could be argued that employing faculty through “faith-based hiring requirements” protects the academic freedom of these colleges and universities.

The disparities between secular and faith-based institutions presents a unique concern for academic freedom. There needs to be discussion regarding how to maintain the expectations of faculty upholding academic freedom, while at the same time staying true to the faith or religion with which the school is related. Such a discussion took place at the University of Notre Dame in October and November of 2015, as reported by Wecker (2015a) for the National Catholic Reporter. Thomas Smith, as quoted in Wecker (2015a), spoke at the conference on how “political correctness” impacts academic freedom. Smith also listed other issues impacting academic freedom, including instances where major companies or even governments become partners with colleges and universities, which in turn can insert the views and capitalistic goals of the for-profit company (Smith as quoted in Wecker, 2015a). The impact could mean the faculty of a school is exploited for business purposes versus being encouraged to share knowledge with student for academic sake (Hao, 2015).
Another example of the impact of commercialization on higher education is when an institution’s ultimate purpose is for students to obtain a skill set that makes them experts and employable, to boost graduation and employment rates. In this way, the school could be more marketable and increase enrollment versus offering a comprehensive education that could produce graduates who are successful but who also think critically about a wide variety of topics (Smith as quoted in Wecker, 2015a). These issues are important to academic freedom because, again, professors are not able to teach to increase critical thinking but should focus on the task at hand, thereby stunting their creativity.

While it does not seem that future employability would have an impact on academic freedom, it can affect academic freedom because it does not fully allow professors to lecture and teach creatively, express different ideas, or challenge students to do the same. Faith-based schools have specific challenges related to academic freedom in that if faculty are “teaching to the test,” there is little room for discussion that challenges viewpoints or personal beliefs, and there could be philosophical or theological discussion that does not have specific reason or purpose. There can often be tension and controversy because of differences in academic freedom and the tenets or religious mission of a particular institution (Smith, 2013). The interpretation of the information by others is not necessarily valid, leading to the conflict regarding what is accurate and adding to the debate of what constitutes the limitations of academic freedom specifically, inquiring whether or not a professor’s opinion can be considered within the bounds of academic freedom (Pike, 2009). Professors teaching social work have a unique challenge in terms of academic freedom because of the varied topics discussed in the classroom, along with the goal of creating social work practitioners who have a multi-faceted point of view.
Social Work Education and Academic Freedom

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) competency number two specifies that social workers must understand diversity, including diversity related to spirituality (CSWE, 2015). Furman, Benson and Canda (2011) found that less than half of the respondents to their survey had educational exposure to faith and spirituality in their social work education. This statistic is surprising because of the report by social work practitioners that faith and spirituality are ways clients who are facing a crisis find resilience and strength (Furman, Benson & Canda, 2011). Conversely, Sheridan (2009) writes that inclusion of faith and spirituality in social work education brings about issues related to “sectarianism, bias and dogmatism” (p 100). It is these two viewpoints that bring academic freedom into the discussion for social work education.

Social work educators are committed to ensuring the curriculum is current to the social issues of the times, being thoughtful about how they teach these issues and making judgments about whether or not to change their own beliefs or hold true to beliefs they have held all along (Boehm, 1971). This, in turn, can lead to scrutiny within the academic setting (Boehm, 1971). The commitment is not only in the classroom discussions, but also the social work educator’s own participation in activities related to social work, such as service, direct practice or advocacy, which are prominent roles for social workers (Davis, Cummings, MacMaster, 2007). Academic freedom offers the social work faculty the capacity to choose how they practice as social workers, whether it is through direct practice, advocacy, or service. It is the freedom for educators to make the choice that can then influence students to make an informed decision about the social work activities in which they will partake.
Cases of Academic Freedom Inquiry

There are cases related to academic freedom in the press and academic journals. Many cases are managed between parties, but on occasion, the situations are brought to the attention of mainstream media coverage or even the U.S. Supreme Court. The following cases highlight the areas where academic freedom has been a focus. These real case examples are important aspects of this paper because they show the varied interpretations of academic freedom specific to faith and spirituality. The cases also amalgamate the prime issues of professors having the freedom to challenge students’ critical thinking while staying within the confines of their area of expertise. 

Pacific Union College-California. Pacific Union College (PUC) is a liberal arts college in California that is associated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Wilson, 2014). PUC has faced at least two incidents where their commitment to academic freedom has been questioned. First, in 2014, a psychology professor was facing dismissal from his position because of his teaching regarding sexuality (Wilson, 2014). PUC cited that the professor’s lectures were not in line with the teachings of the Seventh Day Adventist Church because he spoke of pre-marital sex, which is forbidden by the tenets of the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Wilson, 2014). The professor cited the faculty handbook’s section regarding academic freedom (Wilson, 2014).

This incident brought about discussions regarding what is considered academic freedom versus disregard for the tenets of the faith guiding the institution. The impact was the resignation of several members of the faculty because of their concerns that PUC’s commitment to academic freedom had lessened and they were not following the guidelines set forth by the faculty handbook on academic freedom (Wilson, 2014). The professor also received support from alumni who felt as though he was fulfilling the role of a good professor, challenging students to think beyond what they had already been taught, to come to their own truth (Duarte, 2014). In
the end both parties had supporters for their point of view and, ultimately, the professor was not terminated.

A second incident at PUC involving the same professor and school administrators took place in 2016. In this circumstance, the professor had invited a guest speaker for a colloquium who identified as an atheist but formerly had been a pastor in the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Fernandes, 2016). This issue not only highlighted discourse between the professor and the school but had a secondary consequence of the resignation of several other long-standing professors in the department, because of their view that the school no longer supports faculty and their right to academic freedom (Fernandes, 2016). As of this writing, it is still unclear as to whether the issue has been resolved.

The PUC incidents are an example of where the tenets of a faith-based institution and academic freedom collide. On the one hand, PUC has its contract requirements, including the professors agreeing that they will not teach as truth any information that is against the tenets of the faith (Wilson, 2014). However, the professors clearly take academic freedom very seriously and do expect to have a level of freedom to “speak freely” in their classrooms (Fernandes, 2016). The tension that comes from how academic freedom is defined and applied is apparent in this situation. It requires a strong commitment for continuing discussion from both the academy and faculty.

**Wheaton College-Illinois.** Wheaton College is an interdenominational Christian college in Illinois. In this particular case, a professor of political science was placed on administrative leave because she wore a hijab and spoke on social media in solidarity with Muslim students (Ray, 2016). The college stated that the professor was “at odds” with the school’s doctrine and was speaking in a theological sense (Ray 2016). Wheaton requires all faculty to sign a
“Statement of Faith” and, in their point of view, the professor was speaking in contradiction to this statement (McMurtrie, 2016).

The professor’s comment that “we worship the same God” was called into question (Hawkins as cited in McMurtrie, 2016). The professor asserts that she was not speaking in a theological or political sense but showing support for people of Muslim faith, a discussion that began with her students wanting to know how to provide support to people of this faith (McMurtrie, 2016). Despite the professor’s justification, some members of the administration have called into question her own Christian faith (Ray, 2016; McMurtrie, 2016; Graham, 2016; Dias, 2016). Despite an apology from the provost for doubting the depth of the professor’s faith, there was no resolution to the situation, other than to have a mutual agreement that the professor would leave her tenured position at the college (Graham, 2016; McMurtrie, 2016; Dias, 2016). This case not only affected the professor in question but many of the other faculty at Wheaton as well. Many of them have questioned their ability to speak freely and have spoken against the Statement of Faith (Ray, 2016; McMurtrie, 2016). Some students have protested and some alumni have made their opinions known, both for and against the professor (Graham, 2016).

This case provides insight into the various viewpoints related to faith and spirituality in relation to academic freedom. It prompts the continuous discussion as to what is acceptable and what is expected of college professors. This case has underscored the discussion regarding professors’ personal beliefs, what they teach their students, and their freedom to do so.

University of North Carolina-Wilmington, North Carolina. In the case of academic freedom at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington (UNCW), a public, state-sponsored university, the highlighted circumstance brings a different perspective to the right to academic freedom. The students and others in the community have complained that there have been no
repercussions for one professor’s continued anti-homosexual posts on social media, in class, and in area newspapers (Hoffman, 2016).

The professor, a faculty member of criminology, has written comments blaming victims of hate crimes (two openly gay students who were beaten), commenting about a “queer” Muslim student being part of a jihad, and writing that the “government shouldn’t protect these people” (Hoffman, 2016). Many at the school, including faculty in his department, have reproached the professor and his views (Bellamy, 2016). The faculty of UNCW wrote a letter to their students and the school proclaiming their commitment to inclusivity and diversity of students of all backgrounds (Bellamy, 2016). Yet, the university has said it cannot stop the professor because he is expressing his personal views, and doing so would violate his right to academic freedom (Hoffman, 2016). In the case at UNCW, personal safety was also a concern, prompting the chancellor to issue a press statement stating that freedom of speech does not negate safety, and any instances where anyone feels their personal safety is threatened should be reported to campus authorities (Stancill, 2016).

This case establishes a differing interpretation of academic freedom. Academic freedom does provide the right of a professor to profess their views, regardless of how controversial they may be (McConnell, 1990). However, there are certainly moral and value-based components to academic freedom and its limitations regarding poor behavior (McConnell, 1990). Academic freedom is creating a place for students to learn, hear differing perspectives and make their own decisions (Cole, 2009). Fashioning a classroom that considers diversity in opinions, culture, political views, and more while concurrently stimulating thought-provoking discussion can be challenging and requires the skills of a professor who is able to reduce discourse while promoting learning (Thompson, 2006).
Columbia University-New York, New York. In the case of Columbia University in New York City, students rather than university officials are bringing the concern for dismissal of academic freedom to the forefront (Dawson, 2007). Graduate students made accusations of anti-Semitism and pro-Palestinian bias from some of the faculty in the Department of Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures (MEALAC, Dawson, 2007; Gaines, 2005). According to Gaines (2005), many of the complaints came shortly after September 11, 2001, when one of the professors had an indignant exchange with a student about the student’s pro-Israeli military commentary (Gaines, 2005; Dawson 2007). In addition, another professor commented that he wished for “an Iraqi victory over the U.S.” and “would like to see a million Mogadishus” (Wilson, 2005). This then began a cascade of discussions in other classes, leading to students protesting and making complaints about the professors (Gaines, 2005).

The school condemned the professor’s comments regarding an Iraq win over the United States, but did say the professor was within his rights under academic freedom (Wilson, 2005). Ultimately, the university investigated and found that neither professor had violated any one’s rights, and that they were operating in a stressful climate that was filled with tension following 9/11 (Gaines, 2005).

The case at Columbia University parallels the discussion taking place at UNCW, mentioned above. In both situations, the right of free speech is cited, while the universities are cautiously reproaching the actions of the professors. The operationalization of academic freedom and the manner in which it exists continues to incite thoughtful discussions, especially in the cases at UNCW and Columbia University.
Discussion

The literature review conducted functions as a foundation for future inquiry into academic freedom, especially regarding social work education. As stated earlier, to truly integrate faith and spirituality into the curriculum, professors must be able to teach the tenets of faith and spirituality in an open, non-judgmental forum. Continuing the inquiry into academic freedom and where there may be gaps in professors’ ability to teach freely is a necessary step to ensure the successful integration of faith and spirituality into the classroom.

The future of research regarding academic freedom will be parallel to the continued discussion and integration of faith and spirituality. Meanwhile, the demands on faculty and the institutions where they teach, accountability to the students, the college or university, and other stakeholders, academic freedom, are ever-changing (Weidner, 2003).

Implications for Social Work Education

Social work education is in a unique situation in relation to academic freedom. Social work professors are not meant to be “neutral” in their ideas but are meant to “profess not only what is, but what is meant to be” (Boehm, 1971, p 37). Sometimes the people with whom social workers help turn to their faith or spirituality in times of need, and the skilled practitioner understands this aspect of diversity and culture (Dudley & Helfgott, 1990). However, this experience and skill cannot happen without a strong foundation in social work education. In order to create skilled practitioners, social work faculty must have the freedom to discuss many ideas and challenge personal values and difficult topics such as trauma, abuse and faith and spirituality, while concurrently ensuring students understand that everyone has a certain amount of bias (Dudley & Helfgott, 1990; Anderson, 2014).
Academic freedom must allow not only the social work educators’ point of view but that of the students as well. Students who are ridiculed or criticized for sharing their faith or spiritual views and/or experiences by peers and/or professors are having their academic freedom challenged (Cnaan, 2006). Speaking openly, expressing opinions, values, and gaining an understanding of diversity is a key factor of ensuring academic freedom for social work education. This begins in the social work education classroom and ensures that students are able to not only express their opinions, but challenge their own values, and thoughts. Faith and spirituality cannot be taught singularly, they need to be incorporated as part of the other topics relevant to social work. Given the standards of accreditation it seems the most suitable place in the curriculum is in social work practice courses at both the baccalaureate and masters level (Sheffield & Openshaw, 2009).

**Conclusion**

Academic freedom, faith, spirituality, and social work education are evolving as society and higher education change. The case studies presented and literature reviewed show this evolution and prove that academic freedom exists both for secular and faith-based schools. The way academic freedom is managed may change depending on the type of institution, but it is certainly present. To ensure that academic freedom continues to be a prominent topic in higher education, inquiry and discussion of its existence, are essential. Confronting potential issues where academic freedom is challenged or absent will only strengthen its presence and validate its importance for faculty, students, and institutions of higher education.
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Faith and Spirituality in Social Work Education: An Exploratory Inquiry

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Abstract

Faith and spirituality are important to clients served by social workers. The Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers provide guidelines for cultural competence, that includes spirituality. However, spirituality is not always taught in social work education. This study used a purposive sample of bachelor of social work (BSW) programs in New England (N=27) to gather the data. A total of 53 syllabi were analyzed from nine schools for content to determine if faith and spirituality were integrated into the curriculum and to what depth. The findings of this content analysis suggest that faith and spirituality are incorporated into the curriculum with minimal depth. To provide more content on faith and spirituality, BSW programs can find ways of better integrating faith and spirituality by finding places within the courses that are already taught.

Keywords: social work education, faith, spirituality, religion, curriculum
Faith and Spirituality in Social Work Education: An Exploratory Inquiry

Social workers are taught to partake in practice that includes cultural sensitivity (NASW, 2008). Culture includes spirituality and in some cases the person’s formal faith base or religion. Spirituality and religion help foster resiliency for people facing crisis and dealing with day-to-day human affairs (Pargament, 2007). However, it seems that discussion of spirituality often is an afterthought in the assessment, treatment, and recovery process in social work practice. This could be due to several reasons, one of which is that social workers may not have a basic understanding of how to discuss and incorporate faith and spirituality into their practice. Social work education integrates many sensitive topics such as trauma, abuse, substance use, death, and more, so it would be sensible to expect that spirituality and faith would also fit into these categories. Like these other topics, spirituality and faith are potentially very personal topics that each person experiences in their own way. For social workers to feel comfortable integrating faith and spirituality into their practice with clients, they need to have a foundation that should begin with their education.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics identifies that social workers are responsible for obtaining knowledge regarding cultural matters of the people they serve (NASW, 2008). In addition, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) agrees, and the second competency in the 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) addresses the expectations for cultural competence. Both NASW and CSWE identify spirituality and religion within the definition of culture and diversity (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2008).

It is reasonable then, to expect that schools of social work have included matters of faith and spirituality into their curriculum. Thus, this study describes a content analysis of a) bachelor
of social work programs curricula to identify if spirituality (defined as belief in a power beyond oneself) and religion (defined as a formalized institution with specific rituals related to faith and a deity) are included in the curriculum, and b) if they are, at what depth they are discussed.

**Literature Review**

**Spirituality and Religion**

Spirituality is defined as “those aspects of individual feelings, aspirations, and needs that are concerned with man's [humankind’s] effort to find a purpose and meaning in life experiences (Spencer, 1961, p. 162).” In turn, Spencer (1961) defines religion as “a systematic body of beliefs or practices or an organized group of people who believe in certain doctrines concerning the nature of the universe and of man in relation to the universe (p. 162).”

These definitions provide the foundation for understanding why spirituality and religion are found throughout people’s everyday lives. From formalized religious services to daily interactions and popular culture, religion and spirituality can be found everywhere. There has been a renewed interest in spirituality and religion at the start of the 21st century (Pargament, 2007). Perhaps this is due to a rekindled belief that religion and spirituality provide influence, solace, and resilience in people who face the worst circumstances (Moss, 2005).

There is a distinct difference between religion and spirituality. Historically, religion and spirituality were seen as essentially the same thing; however recently, after years of inquiry, they have been separated so that they can be seen as individual elements, rather than as a whole (Hodge, 2017). In a recent survey, more Americans are identifying as spiritual, and there is a decrease in those considered following a formal religion (Masci & Lipka, 2016). An article in *Time* by David Johnson (2016) discussed a Gallup poll from 2014 that shows 85% of American’s
consider themselves to be religious or spiritual. This speaks to the importance of having a cultural sensitivity related to faith, spirituality, and religion in social work education and practice.

**In social work practice.** Given the resurgence of spirituality and religion in the United States, it is important to have social work practitioners who, through a lens of cultural sensitivity and diversity, understand the importance of spirituality and religion to clients. Sermabeikian (1994) posits the harm that can be done by social workers who do not understand the spiritual development and dimensions of people served. Sermabeikian goes on to say it is akin to the harm that can be done with other roles of oppression. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) outlines the value of competent social work practice and more specifically, requires that social workers practice within their competencies but also that they are continually increasing their knowledge.

Clients often experience significant events in their lives that cause suffering and oppression. It is when these life events happen that healing takes place, and spirituality and faith can be an important factor of the healing process (Van Hook, 2016). Hodge (2005) found that clients want to discuss spirituality and religion, often being the first to broach the topic. Seinfeld (2012) identifies that incorporating spirituality and faith into practice requires an understanding that life events sometimes include anguish. From that anguish, some people can find healing, forgiveness, resilience, and, at times, a greater sense of self. More specifically, research has shown the impact of faith and spirituality on disadvantaged persons and older adults as an additional coping skill in combination with more traditional ways of coping (Krov, 2016).

Derezotes (2006) identifies that an effective social work practitioner is one who understands the significance of the integration of spirituality into practice. This integration takes place in the assessment, treatment planning, and termination process, and throughout the
intervention process. Per Sheridan and Amato-von Hermert (1999), social work practitioners agree with the need for the incorporation of spirituality and faith in practice. One of the ways practitioners have done this is through guided meditation and progressive relaxation, where spiritual or religious terms, pictures, or music is used (Oxhandler & Pargament, 2014).

However, Oxhandler and Giardina (2017) identified that when surveyed, licensed clinical social workers nationally noted that one barrier to incorporating spirituality into their practice is the lack of training and education on the topic. This is significant because religion and spirituality can be integrated into many areas of social work. As discussed earlier, spirituality and religion tends to be higher for older adults and the disenfranchised. Also, religion and spirituality can be found in the criminal justice system, and in some states, is a main part of the programming that includes specific sections of the prisons dedicated to those considered spiritual or religious (Schroeder & Frana, 2009). There are some who would include spirituality as a part of human development, not separate from or one more than the other, but holistically assisting people to grow in their spirituality as they grow developmentally (Lunn, 2009).

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations are also groups of people who have a relationship with religion and spirituality. Often, this has not been a positive relationship because of conflicting ideologies between the LGBT person and a formalized religious group. Furthermore, the LGBT population has to face challenges such as moral discord in terms of what they may have been told as youngsters about sexuality, self-awareness, and, at times, their own spiritual or religious exploration (Koepke, 2016). Henrickson (2007) discusses the need for social workers to have knowledge of their own beliefs about faith and spirituality as well as issues facing LGBT persons in order to help the person served meet their own goals.
Spirituality and religion is not just a matter for micro and mezzo social workers, but those who work at a macro level as well. In one study, “92% of the participants believed in the relationship between spiritual health and the health of the community” (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Kilmer, 2002, p. 166). This is an important recognition because of the collaboration done by macro social workers with various agency and community organizations, including spiritual or faith-based organizations.

**In social work curriculum.** In order to create effective social work practitioners who are able to incorporate spirituality and faith into their work with clients, they have to have a foundation for understanding ways to use faith and spirituality in practice, such as discussions in therapy sessions or asking about spiritual/religious beliefs in an initial biopsychosocial assessment. The social work curriculum, using both classroom teaching and field placement, is a way to assist future practitioners to use spirituality and religion with clients. It the expectation that social work educators will challenge students in their biases so that they are self-aware when working with clients.

The topics of spirituality and faith are often overlooked in the social work curriculum because of potential biases (Williams & Smolak, 2007). Students who consider themselves spiritual or who are of a specific religion, often are reluctant to voice their views, based on their understanding of social work values (Cnaan, 2006). With this, the implicit curriculum of schools of social work needs to ensure a non-judgmental space to encourage students to share their experiences, and to be able to hear what other students have to say.

It is clear that how religion and spirituality are addressed in the classroom will impact how they are viewed in practice (Streets, 2009). One way of doing this is to integrate matters of faith and spirituality into areas of the curriculum already discussed. Ai (2002) provides
suggestions of how to include faith and spirituality in discussions of social work theory, human
development, and in the history of social work. Because the profession of social work began
from Judeo-Christian principles, it would then be logical to compare the impact these principles
had at the start of social work to where the profession is now (Barker, 2007).

There are some schools that are incorporating religion and spirituality into the social
work curriculum. While mentioning faith and spirituality in the course work is important, so is
the depth at which it is discussed. The following study will provide insight regarding schools
integrating spirituality and religion into the curriculum and the depth to which it is incorporated.

Methods

Sample

This study used a purposive sample of CSWE- accredited bachelor of social work
programs in New England (n=27). This region was chosen due to its accessibility and feasibility.
New England consists of six states: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode
Island, and Vermont. Bachelor of social work programs were chosen because of their total
number of schools offering a BSW, in contrast to the large number of schools who have master
of social work (MSW) programs.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study did not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, due to its lack of
human subjects. However, in order to ensure that proper standards were followed, the consent
form provided at a program’s request was reviewed by the IRB at the University of St. Thomas,
in St. Paul, Minnesota.
Data Collection

The design of the research is a content analysis in which the author reviewed the syllabi of the above-mentioned sample. Each of the 27 BSW program was contacted by email letter to request syllabi related to courses where spirituality and religion are most likely to be discussed, including practice and human behavior and the social environment. BSW programs could provide syllabi of other required or elective courses as they saw fit. Schools were also provided with a research description and consent form as requested. The syllabi collected were from nine of the 27 schools, or 33%, with the final number of syllabi analyzed totaling 53.

Data Analysis

The data collected for the research were analyzed using Nvivo software. The syllabi were uploaded into the program and then each syllabus received a numerical identifier, so as not to identify which syllabi was from what school. Once complete, each syllabus was coded based on where (if at all) mention of faith, spirituality and/or religion took place. The categories created were assignments and reading, course description, course and learning objectives, and class content based on the course calendar. Once coded, a matrix coding query was completed in Nvivo.

Using this matrix coding query, the data were then composed according to how many domains mention spirituality, religion or faith, to show the depth to which the topic is discussed. The domains used were the same as the nodes used for coding. They were assignments and reading, course description, course and learning objectives, and class content. Where zero to one domains were mentioned, the syllabus had minimal depth, thereby providing the students minimal areas to learn about faith and spirituality; two to three domains showed moderate depth,
where students have more opportunity to learn about faith and spirituality; all four domains showed significant depth, showing where students had the most opportunity to learn about faith and spirituality. This coding was used to determine if the syllabus spoke about faith and spirituality in all four areas. The content of the course shows that faith and spirituality is a main component of the course. Where two or three domains are fulfilled, the course may not have a main component of faith and spirituality, but it is mentioned, bringing a beginning awareness to students. The results were then exported into charts as shown in data grids 1 and 2, as well as charts 1 and 2.

**Strengths and Limitations of Research**

The strengths of the research include the sample of syllabi analyzed. While there were nine schools out of 27 that responded, the nine provided a large number of syllabi to be analyzed. While the primary syllabi requested were for human behavior and the social environment and practice courses, the schools provided syllabi for other courses as well. In addition, another strength is the in-depth analysis of syllabi and the organized review of the content of these syllabi. Organizing the data into the various codes to determine the level of depth provides information that could not be gathered otherwise.

One of the limitations of the research is the small sample size of schools responding to the request for syllabi. Only 33% (N=9) of the BSW programs responded. While there are many BSW programs throughout the United States and globally, the sample represents a small number of schools. The number of schools responding to the inquiry also challenges the ability to generalize the results to the larger population. In addition, the study focused primarily on the syllabi of BSW programs, but did not consider that faith, spirituality, and religion may be discussed in other undergraduate courses required for graduation.
Another limitation is the information gathered from the syllabi alone. The syllabi provide information but do not have the same impact as reviewing actual classroom discussions, thorough reading of the articles and books assigned, or a detailed explanation of assignments. A more exhaustive examination of the entire curriculum that includes classroom discussions would be needed to build on the foundation of this research.

Results

Integration

The question regarding whether faith and spirituality are integrated into the social work curriculum is an important one. The data showed that the number of syllabi (n= 53) mentioning these topics is 58.49% (n=31). A total of 169 references to religion and spirituality across syllabi were noted, with the most appearing in assignments and readings in the courses. Twenty of the syllabi recorded a total of 48.52% (n=82) of the references to religion and spirituality. Course and learning objectives had 20.12% (n=34) of the references to religion and spirituality, followed by class content/course calendar with 17.75% (n=30). Finally, the course description had the least amount of references to the topics with 13.61% (n=23). The chart and table below organizes this information clearly. It is important to note that the sources (n=64) are higher than the total number of syllabi collected because, in some cases, there were more than one assignments/reading, objectives, or classes related to the topics of faith and spirituality, and initially the combined categories were separated in the coding.
Table 1

Distribution of the Integration of Faith and Spirituality in the Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Category</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Percent of sources</th>
<th>References</th>
<th>Percent of references for each node</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assignment Related/ Readings</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>48.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Calendar/Class Content</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17.19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Description</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course/Learning Objectives</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26.56</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1:* Table one shows the areas of the syllabi used for coding. Column two identifies the number of syllabi having mention of faith and spirituality in each category in column one. Column three presents the percentage of syllabi related to the categories. Column four is the total number of references to faith and spirituality in each category. Column four is the percent of references to faith and spirituality in each category.
Figure 1: Distribution of Results

Figure 1. Pie chart showing the distribution of religion and spirituality across the syllabi.

Depth in the Syllabi

Knowing now that faith and spirituality are incorporated into the curriculum of nine BSW programs responding is not enough. Mere mention of faith or spirituality does not create culturally competent social work practitioners regarding faith and spirituality. The depth to which the courses integrate these topics is where predictions can be made regarding the level of competency in the social work curriculum.
The data show there is little depth in the curriculum as reflected in the syllabi collected. Three syllabi showed a significant depth where there is mention in all four domains of faith and spirituality, which is 5% of the total syllabi. Eleven, or 21%, had moderate depth, having mention across two to three areas of the syllabi. A large majority, or 74%, had no depth in the incorporation of faith and spirituality into the curriculum.

Table 2

*The Depth to which the syllabi discuss Religion and Spirituality*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depth in Curriculum</th>
<th>Domains Coded Numerically</th>
<th>Number of Syllabi</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimal Depth</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>73.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Depth</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Depth</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2:* Column one describes the level of depth. Column two shows the numerical coding of the domains which is equal to the number of times mention of faith and spirituality are mentioned in the syllabi. Column three reports the number of syllabi in each depth category. Column four is the percentage of syllabi in each depth category.
Discussion and Conclusion

In beginning the research, this author was confident that faith and spirituality would be mentioned in many of the syllabi, which was the case. The data show that at least nine of the 27 schools in New England are at least mentioning these topics into their curriculum in at least one section of one of their syllabi. This is an indication that, to some extent, students are at least exposed to the terms of spirituality and faith.

The data also show that including faith and spirituality in the curriculum is an important part of social work education, and BSW programs realize this, as reflected in the syllabi.
analyzed. The research is in line with the literature and previous research showing the importance of this topic. The schools sampled seem to see the need for faith and spirituality as a part of diversity in the curriculum, which parallels the need for social work practitioners to understand the worth of integrating spirituality into practice (Dezerotes, 2006). The data show that some schools are doing more in terms of inclusion, going so far as to assign readings and projects, which is a crucial part of learning that invites students to consider this material in greater depth.

Lack of sufficient depth was expected in integrating faith and spirituality into the curriculum. In other studies, students have noted that they hadn’t had exposure to faith and spirituality in their social work education (Oxhandler & Giardina, 2017). After reviewing the data, it was apparent that the hypothesis was accurate. That only three of the syllabi had depth was discouraging, and it shows that even though the BSW programs have mention of the topics, there is not a full inclusion into the curriculum.

**Implications for Further Research**

The results provide a guide for the future research into this topic. Having a small response rate from the schools certainly impedes on the generalizability of the results. Further research can include more schools and more syllabi across other regions of the country. In addition, having an increase in response rate would also provide a better view of the depth of inclusion for faith and spirituality in the social work curriculum. Similarly, future studies could, and should, consider surveying the treatment of this topic area in a master level syllabus from master of social work programs. It is possible that some programs surveyed have intentionally introduced faith and spirituality in a graduate program but not in an undergraduate program.
Lastly, future research could build on this research to create a social work curriculum that is inclusive of faith and spirituality as an element of cultural competence and diversity.

**Implications for Social Work Education**

The research discussed here certainly shows that faith and spirituality are not integrated into the curriculum as much as they could be at the BSW level. Social work programs need to make decisions for themselves as to how to incorporate it effectively. Some things for programs to consider are the logical courses where faith and spirituality would fit best.

Because of social work’s humble beginnings that were also ingrained in spirituality, an introduction to social work course could provide a foundation for the topic. Human behavior and the social environment, at a micro level, could provide a more in-depth discussion in relation to theory, human development, and marginalized populations (Ai, 2002). Considering that spirituality and religion can be considered part of human development, courses discussing the lifespan would be key places for integration (Lunn, 2009). From a macro social work practice perspective, human behavior and the social environment can provide areas for collaborative efforts with spiritual and faith-based organizations. Practice courses are a natural fit because students are learning how to be social work practitioners and this is often paired with field education where students are interning at agencies and working with the people served.

In addition to the integration of faith and spirituality into the explicit curriculum, it is important to include it in the implicit curriculum as well. Students should be encouraged to become more self-aware in their own spiritual journey, and one way to do that is to have open discussion in the classroom that is invited by others. The culture of social work is one of
openness and acceptance in relation to diversity, so it is logical that faith and spirituality are included in this.

Integrating spirituality and faith into the social work curriculum directly correlates to the EPAS and the social work Code of Ethics, as a part of diversity. Social work practitioners cannot be considered culturally sensitive without exposure to the various types of diversity with which they will encounter. Faith and spirituality are often areas overlooked. This research provides a foundation to consider the social work curriculum related to faith and spirituality.
References


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Faith, Spirituality and Social Work Education:

Findings from an Exploratory Inquiry

Poster Presentation

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School of Social Work
Abstract

The various sections of a poster presentation displayed at the North American Association of Christian Social Workers are described. Transpersonal Theory is the theoretical framework used in discussing the need for the research. The entire poster is shown, then broken into each individual part of the poster. Each section shows a highlighted area of the research conducted in dissertation part two. The poster shows the introduction that consists of the idea behind the research. The abbreviated literature review highlights previous research and concepts that have been previously published. The methodology slide explains the sample used for the research, along with the data collection and data analysis. The results of the research are shown along with a condensed discussion and implications for future research and social work education.

*Keywords:* social work education, faith, spirituality, religion
Faith, Spirituality and Social Work Education: Findings from an Exploratory Inquiry

Spirituality and faith are recognized by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) as important aspects of social work education and have been incorporated into the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). CSWE’s second competency for social workers speaks to diversity and cultural competence, which includes spirituality and faith. It is this competency, that pushes social work education to ensure that students graduating at the baccalaureate level are able to have an understanding and appreciation for diversity, including spirituality and faith.

To accomplish this goal, students must have a multifaceted lens to view the challenges and a variety of interventions that can be used in empowering others to overcome their difficulties. By not integrating faith and spirituality, social work education could be missing a key aspect of the biopsychosocial framework of preparing students to have a full generalist perspective and a means by which to discuss hard topics. The incorporation of faith and spirituality into the social work curriculum at a basic level through conversations in the classroom, during field placements, and in assignments is a necessary beginning.

The theoretical framework guiding the research is Transpersonal Theory. Transpersonal Theory integrates that which is greater than the person to an area of self-actualization and strength. It accepts what social workers already know of people and how they manage their struggles on the surface to then view the strengths of the person as more than a biological, sociological, or psychological being. This framework provides a foundation with which to analyze and understand the data of the research.

The following poster was presented on November 2, 2017, at the North American Association of Christian Social Workers (NACSW) National Conference, held in Charlotte,
FAITH, SPIRITUALITY, AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

North Carolina. It a presentation of the research completed regarding the integration of faith and spirituality in social work education.

Figure 1: NACSW Poster Presentation
Segments of the Poster Presentation

Figure 2. Introduction

Social workers are taught to partake in practice that includes cultural sensitivity in its most basic sense. Culture includes spirituality and in some cases the person’s formal faith base or religion. Social work education integrates many sensitive topics such as trauma, abuse, substance use, death, and more, so it would be sensible to expect that spirituality and faith would also fit into these categories. Like these other topics, spirituality and faith are potentially very personal topics that each person experiences in their own way. Both NASW and CSWE identify spirituality and religion within the definition of culture and diversity (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2008). It is reasonable then, to expect that schools of social work have included matters of faith and spirituality into the curriculum. Thus, the following study describes an exploratory inquiry of a) Bachelor of Social Work programs curricula to identify if spirituality (defined as belief in a power beyond oneself) and religion (defined as a formalized institution with specific rituals related to faith and a deity) are included in the curriculum, and b) if they are, at what depth they are discussed.

Figure 2. The introduction for the poster presentation discusses the reason why the research was completed and provides insight into what the viewer can expect.
Figure 3 Literature Review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LITERATURE REVIEW SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION</th>
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| Spirituality is defined as "those aspects of individual feelings, aspirations, and needs which are concerned with man's [humankind's] effort to find a purpose and meaning in life experiences (Spencer, 1961, p. 162)." In turn, Spencer (1961) defines religion as "a systematic body of beliefs or practices or an organized group of people who believe in certain doctrines concerning the nature of the universe and of man in relation to the universe (p. 162)."

In a recent survey, more Americans are identifying as spiritual, and there is a decrease in those considered following a formal religion (Masci & Lipka, 2016). An article in Time Magazine by David Johnson (2016) discussed a Gallup poll from 2014 that shows 85% of American's consider themselves to be religious or spiritual. This speaks to the importance of having a cultural sensitivity related to faith, spirituality and religion.

It is important to have social work practitioners who understand the importance spirituality and religion have on clients, through a lens of cultural sensitivity and diversity. Sermabelkian (1994) posits the harm that can be done by social workers who do not understand the spiritual development and dimensions of people served. Oxhandler and Giardina (2017) identified that when surveyed, Licensed Clinical Social Workers nationally noted that a barrier to incorporating spirituality into their practice is the lack of training and education on the topic.

The topics of spirituality and faith are often missed in the social work curriculum because of potential biases (Williams & Smolak, 2007). The implicit curriculum of schools of social work needs to ensure a non-judgmental space in order to encourage students to share their experiences, but also be able to hear what other students have to say.

Figure 3. The literature review provides a brief explanation of previous research and information found in academic peer-reviewed journals and books related to religion and spirituality.
Table 4 Methodology

<table>
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<th>METHODOLOGY</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sample:</strong> This study used a purposive sample of the CSWE accredited Bachelor of Social Work programs in New England (N=27). The area was chosen because this author lives in the area and has contact with several of the schools of social work. New England consists of 6 states, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. Bachelor of social work programs were chosen because of total number of schools offering a BSW, in contrast to the large number of schools who have Master of Social Work (MSW) programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Collection:</strong> The design of the research is a content analysis to review the syllabi of the above-mentioned sample. The syllabi collected were from nine of the twenty-seven schools, with the final number of syllabi totaling 53 to be analyzed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Analysis:</strong> The data collected for the research were analyzed using Nvivo software. Each syllabus was coded based on where (if at all) mention of faith, spirituality and/or religion took place. The categories created were assignments and reading, course description, course and learning objectives, and class content based on the course calendar. Once coded, a matrix coding query was completed in Nvivo.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using this matrix coding query, the data were then composed according to how many domains spirituality, religion or faith are mentioned, to show the depth to which the topic is discussed. Where zero to 1 domains were mentioned, the syllabus had minimal depth, two to three domains showed moderate depth and all four domains showed significant depth.

*Table 4.* This section of the poster presentation explained the methodology of the research conducted. It shows the sample, how the data was collected, and analyzed.
Table 5 Results of Research Regarding Integration

The question regarding whether faith and spirituality are integrated into the social work curriculum is an important one. The data showed that the number of syllabi (N= 53) mentioning these topics is 58.49% (N=31). A total of 169 references across syllabi were noted, with the most appearing in assignments and readings in the courses. Twenty of the syllabi recorded a total of 48.52% (N=82) of the references. Course and learning objectives had 20.12% (N=34) of the references, followed by class content/course calendar with 17.75% (N=30). Finally, the course description had the least amount of references to the topics with 13.61% (N=23).

Table 5. This section of the poster presentation showed the results of the research. Specifically, it speaks to the integration of faith and spirituality into the curriculum. The chart is the visual representation of the results, that are previously shown in Figure 1.
Table 6 Results of Research Regarding the Amount of Depth in the Syllabi

The data show there is little depth in the curriculum as reflected in the syllabi collected. Three syllabi showed a significant depth where there is mention in all four domains of faith and spirituality, which is 5% of the total syllabi. Eleven or 21% had moderate depth, having mention across two-three areas of the syllabi. A large majority, or 74% had no depth in the incorporation of faith and spirituality into the curriculum.

Table 6. This section of the poster presented the results of the research that addressed to what depth the syllabi integrated faith and spirituality into their syllabi. The chart in this section is the same visual representation used previously in Figure 2.
Table 7 Discussion

<table>
<thead>
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<th>DISCUSSION</th>
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<tr>
<td>The data show that at least nine of the twenty-seven schools in New England are at least mentioning these topics into their curriculum in at least one section of one of their syllabi. This in an indication that to some extent students are at least exposed to the terms of spirituality and faith.</td>
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<td>The data also show that including faith and spirituality in the curriculum is an important part of social work education, and BSW programs realize this as reflected in the syllabi analyzed.</td>
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<td>Lack of sufficient depth was expected in integrating faith and spirituality into the curriculum. Only three of the syllabi had depth, and it shows that even though the BSW programs have mention of the topics, there is not a full inclusion into the curriculum.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7.* The discussion section of the poster is a summary of the discussion from the research. It is not an in-depth discussion, but highlights the main areas to consider.
Table 8 Implications for Future Research

Further research can include more schools and more syllabi across other regions of the country. In addition, having an increase in response rate would also provide a better view of the depth of inclusion for faith and spirituality in the social work curriculum. Similarly, future studies could and should consider surveying the treatment of this topic area in a master level syllabi from Master of Social Work programs.

It is possible that some programs surveyed have intentionally introduced faith and spirituality in a graduate program, but not in an undergraduate program. Lastly, future research could build on this research to create a social work curriculum that is inclusive of faith and spirituality as an element of cultural competence and diversity.

*Table 8.* The implications for future research section of the poster examined, generally, how the results of the research can inform future research. While it is by no means comprehensive, this section provides some insight into the next steps for further research.
Table 9 Implications for Social Work Education

<table>
<thead>
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<th>IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION</th>
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<td>An introduction to social work course could provide a foundation for the topic because of Social Work’s humble beginnings that were also ingrained in spirituality. Human Behavior and the Social Environment, at a micro level, could provide a more in-depth discussion in relation to theory, human development and marginalized populations. From a macro social work practice perspective, Human Behavior and the Social Environment can provide areas for collaborative efforts made with spiritual and faith-based organizations. Practice courses are a natural fit because students are learning how to be social work practitioners and this is often paired with field education where students are interning at agencies and working with the people served.</td>
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<td>It is important to include in the implicit curriculum as well. Students should be encouraged to become more self-aware in their own spiritual journey and one way to do that is to be able to have open discussion in the classroom that is invited by others. The culture of social work is one of openness and acceptance in relation to diversity, so it is logical that faith and spirituality are included in this.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Table 9.* This section of the poster provides a general overview of how the research can be used in social work education. It makes suggestions for further integrating faith and spirituality into the social work curriculum.
Table 10 References and Contact Information

<table>
<thead>
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<th>References</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact Information</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shannon Cousineau, MSW, LICSW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 10.* The last part of the poster presentation displayed the references used in other areas of the poster. It also listed the presenters contact information including email and phone number (not displayed).
References


