

# The Challenge of Fundamentalism for Social Work Ethics:

Can Anti-Oppressive Social Work Include Orthodox Religion?

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## RÉSUMÉ

**L**e *Code de déontologie* nouvellement adopté par l'Association canadienne des travailleurs sociaux (ACTS) (2005a) inclut, dans son préambule, ce qui suit :

« Le *Code de déontologie* de l'ACTS ne constitue pas un ensemble de règles prescrivant la manière dont les travailleurs sociaux doivent agir en toutes circonstances. Par ailleurs, il ne précise pas non plus quels sont les valeurs et les principes les plus importants ni lesquels l'emportent sur les autres en cas de conflit ou dans des situations particulières. En fait, il existe des divergences d'opinion raisonnables parmi les travailleurs sociaux à cet égard. » (p.2).

Cet article explore les conséquences de l'ouverture du *Code de déontologie* à la clause des « divergences d'opinion raisonnables », en portant une attention particulière aux groupes de gens qui pourraient être identifiés comme « fondamentalistes ». L'auteur soutient que les récentes tendances en matière d'immigration et de religion exigeront que les professionnels du travail social réfléchissent sur la façon dont ils peuvent rester engagés envers la pratique anti-oppressive tout en faisant de la place aux perspectives de ceux qui appartiennent à des groupes orthodoxes sur le plan religieux. Une approche pluraliste qui reconnaît la propension des êtres humains à raconter leur histoire est suggérée en tant que façon de résoudre les conflits potentiels.

The newly-adopted *Code of Ethics* of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 2005a) includes this statement in its preamble:

The *Code of Ethics* does not specify which values and principles are most important and which outweigh others in instances of conflict. Reasonable differences of opinion exist among social workers with respect to which values and principles should be given priority in a particular situation (p. 2).

**THIS QUESTION IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE ONE OF THE TENETS OF BOTH ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE AND A POSTMODERN OUTLOOK, IS THE IMPORTANCE OF ALLOWING VOICES FROM MINORITY GROUPS TO BE REPRESENTED AND TO GIVE VOICE TO THEIR UNIQUE EXPERIENCES AS A CHALLENGE AND AN ALTERNATIVE TO DOMINANT GROUPS.**

In this article I want to explore the implications of the *Code's* openness to the "reasonable differences of opinion" clause with particular attention to groups of people who might be identified as "fundamentalist," and thus, fit most clearly under the category "religion" identified in the *Code*. For example, representatives of orthodox Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs and Hindus have all spoken out against the opening up of marriage for same-sex individuals (Campion, 1997; Canadian Islamic Congress, 2005; Marriage Law Project, 2002), while virtually every social worker is in favour. How as a profession should we handle this type of conflict based on the *Code of Ethics* statements that recognize the diversity of values and principles held by different groups? How do we resolve value conflicts between the claims of specific religious groups when they run counter to the claims of anti-oppressive practice in social work?

My exploration first addresses some of the general trends in Canadian culture with respect to religious minorities, and then discusses a number of examples more specific to the social work profession. The focus is primarily on how the positions of those who are members of religious groups labelled as fundamentalist pose challenges for an anti-oppressive perspective in social work and how as a profession we can resolve conflicts in our practice that arise from the clash of different values. This question is important because one of the tenets of both anti-oppressive practice and a postmodern outlook is the importance of allowing voices from minority groups to be represented and to give voice to their unique experiences as a challenge and an alternative to dominant groups (Mullaly, 2010; McKay, 2002).

I raise these issues with trepidation, since this takes us into territory that has been labelled as "taboo" (Coates, et al., 2007). Asking these questions may be viewed as out of bounds,

even for a profession that prides itself on being critical, reflexive and open. Schick, Jaffe and Watkinson (2004) suggest that, “[t]he stance of disinterested observer is always an impossibility and nowhere more so than in public and private expression on fundamentalism” (p. 4). My own cultural and religious background has led me to pursue this topic not as a disinterested observer but as an active participant both as a social worker and as a member of a religious community. Thus, I have a vested interest in finding ways to reconcile competing claims arising from different belief systems.

I grew up in, and for most of my life I have been connected with, a small homogenous religious community made up of Dutch Protestant Calvinists, many of whom immigrated

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to Canada after the Second World War. Most were not fleeing religious persecution, unlike so many earlier European immigrants. By the mid 1800s, after centuries of violence in Europe between Catholics and Protestants, the Dutch people had established some unique ways to accommodate differences (Lijphart, 1968). That legacy has resulted in a country that stands among the world leaders in progressive social policy—it was one of the very first countries in the world to recognize same-sex marriages—while also allowing widespread religious freedom. For example, in the Netherlands there is full recognition and public funding for all religious schools, hospitals, social agencies and media outlets, whether Catholic, Protestant, so-called “secular,” socialist, or more recently, Muslim (Monsma and Soper, 1997).

One part of my Dutch heritage is the simultaneous accommodation of deep religious differences and the

legal recognition of alternative, non-heterosexist and non-patriarchal family and marriage arrangements. Another aspect of my own heritage is a realization of the fine line between heroic resistance to oppression and active participation in it. Recounting war stories is a favourite activity in my family gatherings (see den Hartog and Kasaboski (2009) for an example), and one of the favourite topics was the Dutch resistance to the Nazi occupation. I swell with pride when I hear how my grandparents harboured a Jewish couple in their attic while being forced to feed German officers in their dining room. But, then I heard the story of how my grandfather, before settling on Canada as the destination to resettle his family, seriously considered instead South Africa. I shudder at the thought that I could have been born there instead, because the same Dutch Calvinism that inspired resistance to the Nazis, was also the primary theological rationale for apartheid.

## **“FUNDAMENTALIST” AS A WEAPON OF DISCOURSE**

When I read about social workers and others who are committed to resisting oppression (for example, Todd and Coholic, 2007; Watkinson, 2004), and when I read their accounts about “fundamentalists,” I wonder “Is that me and my community they’re talking about?” The term “fundamentalist” is a very tricky word to define (Dinerman, 2003). One thing that seems clear though, is that nobody wants to be one; few people use the term “fundamentalist” to describe themselves. In other words, the term “fundamentalist” is often used as a weapon of discourse to discredit and disparage others with whom one disagrees (Schick, Jaffe and Watkinson, 2004). For example, Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga commented that fundamentalist, “. . . is a term of abuse or disapprobation, rather like “son of a bitch” (Plantinga, 2000, p. 245).

But beyond the rhetoric, fundamentalism does imply more than just those negative labels. When people attempt to define fundamentalism the following four characteristics are usually included:

1. a system of beliefs and values that are taken to be absolute and beyond critique or challenge;
2. these beliefs are derived directly from a historical and sacred text (or texts) that is considered to be inerrant and authoritative;
3. a perception that these beliefs (and the believers) have been or are under attack—usually from forces identified as secular or modernist—and that therefore must be revived or renewed;
4. these communities of believers are often embedded within patriarchal systems.

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The term “fundamentalist” originated in the early 20th century as a way to identify specific evangelical Christians, but it is clear from these four characteristics that many groups—Christian or otherwise—could be labelled as “fundamentalist,” and the term is indeed used widely to describe all sorts of variations (Schick, Jaffe and Watkinson, 2004; Todd and Coholic, 2007, p. 8). For the purposes of this discussion, I restrict the term “fundamentalist” to religious groups. However, since the term is so clearly pejorative, I prefer to use the

following variants interchangeably: “religiously orthodox” or “religiously traditional” or “religiously conservative.”

## THE *CODE OF ETHICS* AND SOCIAL WORK'S TREATMENT OF ORTHODOX RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Consider the following excerpts from our new *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a) focusing specifically on issues related to religion and beliefs. Imagine how these might sound—especially the italicized sections—to someone who is an adherent of an orthodox or conservative religious group that might be labelled as fundamentalist.

Social workers are committed to human rights as enshrined in Canadian law, as well as in international conventions on human rights created or supported by the United Nations. As professionals in a country that upholds respect for diversity, and in keeping with democratic rights and freedoms, *social workers respect the distinct systems of beliefs* and lifestyles of individuals, families, groups, communities and nations without prejudice (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, 1992). Specifically, social workers do not tolerate discrimination based on ... religion (CASW, 2005a, p. 3, emphasis added)

1.2.1 *Social workers strive to understand culture* and its function in human behaviour and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures (CASW, 2005b, p. 4, emphasis added).

1.2.3 Social workers acknowledge and respect the impact that *their own heritage, values, beliefs and preferences can have on their practice and on clients whose background and values may be different from their own* (CASW, 2005b, p.4, emphasis added).

1.2.4 Social workers *seek a working knowledge and understanding* of clients' racial and cultural affiliations, identities, values, beliefs and customs (CASW, 2005b, p. 4, emphasis added).

8.2.1 Social workers *strive to identify, document and advocate* for the prevention and elimination of domination or exploitation of, and discrimination against, any person, group, or class on the basis of...religion.... (CASW, 2005b, p.24, emphasis added).

8.2.5 Social workers strive to promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within Canada and globally. *Social workers promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference* (CASW, 2005b, p 25, emphasis added).

From these excerpts from our *Code of Ethics*, how do we as a profession measure up? That is, how have we done as a profession in respecting the distinct beliefs and recognizing the strengths of orthodox religious clients and groups? How have we acknowledged and respected those with orthodox religious beliefs when they clearly differ from our own? How have we acknowledged how our own heritage, values and beliefs have influenced our practice and have coloured how we interpret the practices of those with whom we disagree? How far have we gone to seek working knowledge and understanding of orthodox values and beliefs? How have we strived to identify, document and advocate for the prevention and elimination of discrimination against persons or groups on the basis of their religious fundamentalism?

**RAM CNAAN, A SECULAR JEW AND A LONG-STANDING AND RESPECTED SOCIAL WORK RESEARCHER AND EDUCATOR, HAS DOCUMENTED A CLEAR BIAS IN SOCIAL WORK LITERATURE AGAINST RELIGION, ESPECIALLY, CHRISTIANITY....**

Unfortunately, there is little available evidence in Canadian social work literature to answer these questions. However, there are some emerging trends in literature from the United States (US) that provide some clues. Ram Cnaan, a secular Jew and a long-standing and respected social work researcher and educator, has documented a clear bias in social work literature against religion, especially, Christianity (Cnaan, 1999, Chapter 3). David Hodge and his colleagues (Hodge, Baughman and Cummings, 2006) did a more extensive content analysis of over 70 of the most recommended diversity textbooks used by the top 10 social work schools in the US. He compared references to several oft-included vulnerable groups—African Americans, Latinos, persons who are gay and lesbian, feminists—with two specific religious groups often identified as fundamentalist: evangelical Christians

and Muslims. He found first, an “invisibility” bias, in that the number of references to the two religious groups, especially evangelical Christians, was much less than their proportion in the general population. Even worse, he found that compared to the other groups, the references to evangelical Christians were overwhelmingly negative.

Perhaps that finding doesn’t surprise a social worker, because one could immediately counter, “of course the references are negative, that’s because everything those fundamentalists stand for we’re against!” Perhaps it’s easier to justify this reaction when it’s the traditional fundamentalist groups—that is, Christian varieties—who are the largest and most vocal and therefore seem easy for social workers to criticize. But is that reaction sufficient to meet the standards of our own ethics? Is it possible that we have been privileging a particular way of looking at the world and its social problems in such a way that we have inadvertently ruled out-of-bounds the belief systems of particular groups with whom we disagree?

Sara Todd and Diana Coholic (2007) have been willing to tackle some of these troubling questions in their own teaching. As they put it:

Anti-oppressive pedagogy can have the effect of marginalizing and even excluding those whose values and beliefs do not fit within the secular, resulting in a lack of dialogue and a lost potential for mutual transformation. We wonder whether this is a reasonable limit on inclusivity given the need to respond ethically and proactively to the needs of diverse students in our classrooms and/or whether there is a need to develop pedagogical practices that expand our notion of inclusivity to include those with competing and exclusionary worldviews (p. 9).

If we move beyond Christian variations of fundamentalism and orthodoxy, then I think the questions become even more pointed (and again, this is partly because the Christian worldview has held a dominant place in Western civilizations for so long, it is now widely seen as important to give a voice to other views). It seems to me that it's the intersection of racialized minority groups—especially recent immigrants—and religious/cultural fundamentalism where it gets tricky. As we've already seen, fundamentalism no longer means only Christian, but includes many other religions as well.

### **TRENDS IN CANADIAN RELIGION AND IMMIGRATION**

**SOME OF THESE RECENT IMMIGRANT GROUPS HAVE CHALLENGED THE ASSUMPTION THAT ASSIMILATING INTO CANADIAN SOCIETY REQUIRES THEM TO GIVE UP IN SOME WAY THEIR RELIGIOUSLY-BASED VALUES....**

Scholars of religion note several trends in Canada that are pertinent to this issue. First, while it is true that the number of persons who identify as Christian is declining and the number of persons who do not adhere to any specific religion is increasing (Clark and Schellenberg, 2006), it would be premature and misleading to conclude that religion is becoming less important. As it turns out, the decline in Christians comes mostly from mainline Protestant denominations, but it is evangelical Christians—the ones often labelled as fundamentalist—where the greatest gains are (Bibby, 2004; Hiemstra, 2008; Van Ginkel, 2003). Second, continued high levels of immigration in Canada have spurred the fastest growth in other religions, most notably, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims (Biles and Ibrahim, 2006). Some of these recent immigrant groups have challenged the assumption that assimilating into Canadian society

requires them to give up in some way their religiously-based values (Beyer, 2005). Many of these immigrants are fleeing persecution, including religious persecution, and some take positions on social issues that as a profession we might disagree with. Third, as a profession—at least according to research in the US, but it can be reasonably concluded

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that it would be at least as true in Canada, if not more so (Lyon and Van Die, 2000)—fewer of us are religious adherents compared to our clients (Hodge, 2003, 2002). That is, as a group, social workers tend to be less religious and hold positions on social issues that are more liberal than the types of people who tend to be our clients. This suggests that we might need to make more pointed efforts to understand the particular religious belief systems of our clients, especially if they hold views that we might be critical of, and therefore more likely to stereotype and less likely to understand. Finally, although religious freedom is one of the first and most fundamental rights granted by [small “l”] liberal nation states in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, it turns out that such freedom cannot be taken for granted, and in

fact, may not be as free as we thought. Peter Beyer (2003) makes this sobering observation:

While most countries in the world today officially declare that their citizens enjoy freedom of religion, none of them actually allows the unfettered exercise of that freedom. In fact, all of them seek overtly to control and to restrict that freedom, reinforcing in the process the local hegemony of one religion, a small set of religions, or even a formally atheistic or other national ideology (p. 333).

Similarly, attention to religious freedom has been identified recently as the “forgotten human right:”

Human rights-friendly states, non-governmental organizations, academic researchers, media outlets, international supervisory organizations and other organizations have devoted little attention to religious freedom. This lack of attention is particularly troubling in light of the increasing global prevalence of religious persecution (Hodge, 2006, p. 432).

To summarize, fundamentalist or orthodox groups—both Christian and others—are the fastest growing religious groups in Canada, but as a profession, we are less and less likely to be like them or to understand them. Further, world-wide religious freedom is declining and religious persecution is increasing, setting up a situation in which we are likely to see more and more people coming to this country fleeing religious persecution and seeking to take advantage of our country’s guarantee of religious freedom to establish and advance their own religious communities.



## **RESOLVING RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN LAW**

Two insights derived from legal perspectives might be helpful as we attempt to wrestle with how to make space for substantive differences while still hanging on to values we hold dearly. Chaplin (2000) defends the use of religiously-based arguments in law and public policy by classifying both religious and secular arguments as what he calls “comprehensive doctrines,” by which he means a system of belief that “seeks to give a complete or near-complete account of the world, human nature, and morality” (p. 617). From this he distinguishes between two kinds of discourse: “confessional discourse,” that which explicitly appeals to and draws on comprehensive doctrines, whether religious or secular,

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and “political discourse,” that which confines itself to specific matters of law or public policy that have to do with the “public interest” or the “common good.” When engaging with others with different comprehensive doctrines—let’s say a religious fundamentalist and a feminist social worker—the key would be to stick to “political discourse” about the specific legal or policy actions that have the greatest chance of furthering the public interest or the common good.

The Right Honourable Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin (2004) describes the conflict between the rule of law and religious claims as a “dialectic of normative commitments.” Similar to Chaplin’s concept of

comprehensive doctrines, Chief Justice McLachlin acknowledges that conflicts arise because both religion and the law claim total authority for all of human activity. She argues that both claims must be honoured, even though our system of law holds the authority for encoding and enforcing our common commitments. She argues,

I think we have come to recognize that a multiplicity of worldviews grounded in alternative sources of authority does not necessarily threaten the rule of law, but rather, strengthens and completes public life and discourse. Even more critically, we have come to a fuller appreciation of the intrinsic connection between respecting religious conscience and attending to the inherent dignity of all persons (p.33).

Is it possible that as a profession we have elevated our anti-oppressive social work framework as a “comprehensive doctrine” or “normative commitment” over other perspectives—especially ones that are religiously orthodox—and thus inadvertently privileged our perspective over others with whom we disagree, without understanding the specific cultural and intellectual context of our profession? Swartzentruber (2007) for example, warns,

... the re-emergence of spirituality has opened a Pandora's box of issues that will no longer be easily reconciled by our present notions of professional practice. Inevitably, social work, along with other professions, will be forced to struggle with limitations and consequences of having been conceived in a modern paradigm that is inadequate to address emergent issues (p. 343).

### THE POSTMODERN CRITIQUE AND CHALLENGE

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The postmodern paradigm has rightly criticized the modernist perspective for its universal claims of scientific knowledge and the way these totalize other ways of knowing, particularly of vulnerable groups such as women, Aboriginals, or others labelled as outsiders. But if this is so, then surely we must be open to the charge that we have turned our modernist certainties upon other viewpoints, such as those labelled as fundamentalists. For example, Dean Pierce, director of the Council on Social Work Education, the accreditation agency for social work education in the US, has warned that the social work profession must be careful not to use a communication style of conversion, rather than dialogue and persuasion, in order to sway others with whom it disagrees to the "liberal/progressive" viewpoint (Pierce, 2004).

To be sure, there are those in the profession who would take exception to this claim, and have argued that professional codes of ethics should provide the final authority in resolving conflicts, particularly if these

conflicts arise because an individual's personal convictions (whether religiously based or otherwise) contradict professional ethics. In that case, so it is argued, professional codes of ethics must take precedence over a professional social worker's personal convictions. For example, Spano and Koenig (2007) argue,

[Our] model diverges from what has been done in the current polemics addressing conflicts between personal and professional values. What many writers do is use their personal worldviews as a basis for interpreting the *Code of Ethics*. This approach leads to distortions in meaning that allow writers to impose their worldviews on the *Code of Ethics*. . . . [W]hen personal values conflict with professional values, the *Code of Ethics*, as understood within the knowledge base of the profession, should take precedence (Implications section, paras. 3, 9).

This argument seems to assume that our profession's codes of ethics are neutral, and are not themselves shaped by ultimate convictions, and further, that only religious social workers allow their personal convictions to shape their understanding of the codes, while non-religious persons, apparently, come to the code with a blank mind. But, as postmodern theorists have clearly shown, there are no neutral knowledge claims. Thus, rather than claiming that our profession's codes of ethics are neutral, the postmodern perspective recognizes that,

The social work profession is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its modernist frames of reference. The Enlightenment attitude advanced the idea that there was a single code for knowing: scientific inquiry and empirical investigation. The notions of science, knowledge and truth that flowed from the Enlightenment into modernity assumed an objective reality, the attainability of neutrality, and technical rationality which in combination have created the central paradigm of knowledge for social work: universal truth, foundations, essences (Irving and Young, 2002).

**KREITZER'S CONCLUSION IS CONSISTENT WITH THE OBSERVATIONS OF EMINENT CANADIAN PHILOSOPHER CHARLES TAYLOR (2007), WHO HAS ARGUED THAT THE ASSUMPTIONS OF MODERNITY ARE EMBEDDED SO DEEPLY IN OUR SOCIETY THAT WE SEE THEM AS NEUTRAL.**

Feminists and anti-oppressive writers (Dominelli, 2002; Donovan, 2000) have demonstrated extensively how the underlying assumptions of supposedly neutral knowledge systems are set within the parameters of white, male, middle-class, Eurocentric perspectives. Further, Kreitzer (2006), in her review of the research on the comparability of cross-cultural social work codes of ethics, concluded that the codes from Western, North American contexts, clearly favour Western, liberal democratic philosophical assumptions that do not necessarily match the underlying assumptions of other cultures. Kreitzer's conclusion is consistent with the observations of eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2007), who has argued that the assumptions of modernity are embedded so deeply in our society that we see them as neutral. Similarly, researchers in international relations have shown how modernist, Western assumptions have failed to "take religious and cultural pluralism seriously" (Thomas, 2003, pp. 21). If we are to be consistent in pursuing this analysis to its conclusion, we must be open to the critique

that a) our codes are not neutral at all, but in fact arise from a particular set of convictions and knowledge assumptions that privilege some points of view (especially secular ones) at the expense of others (especially religious ones; see for example, Banks, et al., 2008; Hodge, 2009; National Academy of Scholars, 2007) and b) that each one of us is shaped by

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particular convictions through which we interpret professional codes.

As the American sociologist Christian Smith (2003) has pointed out, humans do not so much hold these convictions as formal, theoretical frameworks, but rather live out of stories, or narratives, by which we make sense of the world. The postmodern viewpoint that all narratives are valid and that none can claim absolute truth or hold authority over other narratives could lead to a relativism in which no claims—including those that social workers make in defence of an anti-oppressive approach—need be taken seriously, and thus leave us with no resources for resolving disagreements. However, Smith (2003) argues that

[t]he challenge is finally not how to work out which among ours is the one true story but rather and more immediately figuring out how to talk and live together, given the fact of our different stories. This is the challenge of civil pluralism.... This can only

be possible not because a universally shared Reason underlies all of our narratives but rather because many particularistic narratives contain within themselves the resources for living civilly with difference. (p. 92).

Rather than avoiding the difficult question of how to resolve conflicts between specific religious groups, Smith pointedly includes both Christians and Muslims—two groups most often accused of being fundamentalist—as examples:

Both Christianity and Islam, for example, are narratives that do make absolute and universal claims and have well-known histories—as do many other traditions—of persecuting difference. But Christianity and Islam also equally possess their own internal theological resources with which to live civilly with real difference. All of the same might be said of many other religious and secular narratives (p. 93).

What remains then, is further work from within specific religious (and non-religious) narratives to articulate how and what resources could be utilized toward resolving conflicts and building a peaceable common co-existence while recognizing and respecting difference.

## **MULTIPLE PLURALITIES**

I would like to take up that challenge and expand on Smith's suggestion for civil pluralism by drawing on theoretical work originating among neo-Calvinists in the 19th and 20th century in the Netherlands as one way to sort out conflicting ethical principles that derive from different religious or philosophical assumptions or narratives. Several authors have attempted to adapt the ideas about pluralism from Dutch political theorists to Canadian and American contexts (Koyzis, 2003, Chapter 7; Skillen, 1994; Stackhouse, 2000, p. 119). Drawing from these adaptations, three types of pluralism can be identified: 1. confessional/directional; 2. structural/associational; and 3. cultural/contextual. The first, variously labelled as "confessional pluralism" (Skillen, 1994) or "spiritual or directional diversity" (Mouw and Griffioen, 1993), addresses diversity based on spiritual beliefs, religion, or confessions. This

**THIS TYPE OF PLURALISM RECOGNIZES THAT INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS WITHIN SOCIETY MAY LEGITIMATELY HOLD VARYING BELIEFS, AND WITHIN THE RULES OF LAW, ACT ON THESE BELIEFS.**

type of pluralism recognizes that individuals and groups within society may legitimately hold varying beliefs, and within the rules of law, act on these beliefs. It is this type of pluralism that makes space for differences in spirituality and religion, and provides guidance for how persons from different religious and confessional belief systems (including belief systems that are not explicitly religious, such as an anti-oppressive practice approach) treat one another. A second type of pluralism, referred to as "structural pluralism" or "associational diversity," recognizes that society consists of a wide variety of types of organizations, and that individuals are free to join and associate together according to their own voluntary choices. A third type of plurality is labelled as "cultural" or "contextual." This type of plurality refers to the differences associated with ethnicity, culture and language. While these

may overlap with confessional/directional pluralism, distinguishing between these is important in that it prevents us from making erroneous assumptions that conflate beliefs and culture, for example, that all Muslims are Arab, or that all Indians are Sikhs. A person could belong to particular societal structures (for example a school or a labour union) that specifically operate from within a particular confessional or directional context. Such confessional contexts could be explicitly religious (such as a Christian university, or an Islamic school, or a Jewish social service agency) but could also not be specifically religious. For example, an agency serving women and children who are victims of male violence could be explicitly situated within a secular feminist perspective, or a labour union could be organized explicitly according to a Marxist-socialist perspective, or a child welfare agency could operate from an explicitly anti-oppressive perspective.

Together, these three types of pluralisms capture the idea that people organize and live their lives in terms of their fundamental beliefs about the world (i.e, confessional/directional),

in terms of the purpose or function of the grouping (i.e., structural/associational), and in terms of their belonging to various ethnic and cultural groups. Further, this understanding of multiple pluralities allows for the recognition of how fundamental beliefs operate in different social contexts. While we may disagree with other individuals and their choices, we recognize that in a diverse society, imposing our own particular perspectives on others is not a legitimate response when we encounter individuals who make choices different from our own, unless such choices violate established rules of law, as noted above by Chief Justice McLachlin.

### **APPLYING MULTIPLE PLURALITIES TO TWO EXAMPLES**

We can now reconsider the questions raised at the beginning. Does our *Code of Ethics* genuinely allow for the expression of “reasonable differences of opinion” (CASW, 2005a, p. 2)? Or, does social work’s anti-oppressive perspective impose its view on certain groups, such as those who are members of orthodox religions, and thus apparently contradict the

*Code* when it says that it “does not specify which values and principles are most important and which outweigh others in instances of conflict” (CASW, 2005a, p. 2)? If so, how might the recognition of multiple pluralities serve as a potential way to resolve this conflict? Does the multiple-pluralities approach suggested above have the resources to resolve, for example, the clash of values between orthodox religious persons and anti-oppressive social workers regarding the hot-button topic of sexual orientation?

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Two scenarios from anti-oppressive practice in child welfare serve as illustrations of how the multiple-pluralities approach could resolve the conflict between opposing claims regarding sexual orientation. In the first example, a child welfare agency adopts an anti-oppressive practice as an organizational change strategy, and thus requires orthodox Christian foster parents to adhere to its principles condemning heterosexism. The parents refuse, and the agency requests that they resign as foster parents (this case is based on personal

communication for which names are withheld to protect the identities of the parents and the agency). In a second example, orthodox groups representing various religions, especially Muslims and Christians, condemn the practice in which child welfare agencies place foster or adoptive children with same-sex parents, and thus demand that the province and/or the agencies halt all such placements.

The multiple-pluralities approach would suggest that in the first example, the child welfare agency's desire to implement an anti-oppressive organizational change strategy is an instance in which there is a conflict between two confessional/directional pluralities: an anti-oppressive approach and an orthodox Christian perspective with regard to sexual orientation. The conflict arises because of the way in which these conflicting value systems

**[I]T IS NOT HARD TO FORESEE THAT AN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PERSPECTIVE WOULD RESIST THE MULTIPLE-PLURALITIES APPROACH PRECISELY BECAUSE ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE INTENTIONALLY SEEKS TO CHALLENGE SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION IN ALL STRUCTURES IN SOCIETY.**

collide in two distinct structural pluralities: a child welfare agency, and a family. The multiple-pluralities approach opens the way to allow for the child welfare agency to hold to its confessional/directional beliefs *within the context of the structure of the child welfare agency*, but that it do so in such a way to allow the orthodox Christian foster family to hold to its confessional/directional beliefs *within the context of the structure of the family*. Recognizing the expression of different confessional/directional belief systems within different appropriate social structures suggests that the agency ought not to impose its anti-oppressive perspective into the Christian foster family, but neither should the Christian foster family impose its perspective into the child welfare agency. Thus, this approach recognizes that underlying philosophical assumptions rooted in different belief systems operate differently within different social structures. Of course, it is not hard to foresee that an anti-oppressive perspective would resist the multiple-pluralities approach precisely because anti-oppressive practice intentionally seeks to challenge systems of oppression in all structures in society. The

multiple-pluralities approach appears to constrain that possibility; it does so because it recognizes that attempts to make wide-scale structural changes must be tempered by genuine recognition of different belief systems in order to avoid perpetrating oppression in the pursuit of eliminating oppression.

In the second example, orthodox religious adherents attempt to impose their views about sexual orientation beyond their own families or religious communities by demanding that the child welfare system deny same-sex parents the right to foster or adopt children. Here, as well, the multiple-pluralities approach would suggest that orthodox religious groups ought not to impose their views onto groups (such as child welfare agencies and the child welfare system) that represent a different societal structure. The confessional/directional belief systems of orthodox religious believers are limited to specific societal structures, for example, families, marriages, religious communities, or a specific confessional agency, such as a Christian adoption agency. As with the first example, it is not hard to predict that

some religious groups would see this as an unnecessary constraint on their freedom to influence society based on their beliefs. However, the multiple-pluralities approach recognizes that the freedom of religious expression does not give orthodox religious groups the right to remake society according to their own particular belief systems, and that religious groups also must recognize the belief systems of others with whom they disagree.

**THIS APPROACH ATTEMPTS TO MAKE SPACE FOR DIFFERENT BELIEF SYSTEMS BY CLARIFYING AND SPECIFYING HOW AND WHERE THOSE BELIEF SYSTEMS OPERATE IN DIFFERENT SOCIAL STRUCTURES.**

In summary, the multiple-pluralities approach attempts to specify the particular societal structures where value conflicts arise from different confessional/directional belief systems. This approach attempts to make space for different belief systems by clarifying and specifying how and where those belief systems operate in different social structures. Of course, this still involves compromise. Anti-oppressive social workers will have to make compromises on the all-encompassing changes that they seek in order to eradicate oppression; orthodox religious groups will have to make compromises on their demands that society adopt its views on social issues. But compromise is necessary if there is to be a genuine attempt to recognize the claims that arise from different confessional belief systems. Indeed, compromise

appears to be what our *Code of Ethics* suggests when it acknowledges that “reasonable differences of opinion exist among social workers with respect to which values and principles should be given priority in a particular situation” (CASW, 2005a, p. 2).

## **CONCLUSION**

If as a profession we are serious about respect for diversity as espoused in our *Code of Ethics* then we must be willing to allow the space and voice for alternative viewpoints and for conflict and dissent within the profession. Advancements in anti-oppressive practice have shown how discourse and labelling are used by dominant groups to create and perpetuate relationships of dominance against women; Aboriginals; racialized groups; and persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited, and queer/questioning (GLBTQ); among others (Shera, 2003; Dominelli, 2002). In a similar way, as a profession we must be aware of the way in which our use of terms such as “fundamentalist,” “radical Islam,” “the religious right” and “evangelical,” can have the effect of disparaging, silencing, or stereotyping groups or persons with whom we have disagreements. My argument is not that we must accept every (or any) of the beliefs of various religious groups, but rather, that we are careful to allow the voicing of dissenting opinions and the discussion and constructive critique of specific positions, in a way that is respectful and does not unfairly caricature or misrepresent any persons or groups.



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Recent trends in immigration and increasing instances of conflicts based on religious differences suggest that these questions will continue to be a challenge for Canadian society. The social work profession has a long history of being at the forefront of challenging oppression. Are we willing and able to be honestly self-reflective about how our principles and ethics could blind us to the oppression of religious minorities who hold orthodox or conservative positions? Are we willing and able to defend the freedoms and rights of religious minorities, as prescribed by the *Canadian Charter on Rights and*

*Freedoms*, human rights codes, and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, even when we disagree with the positions that some religious minorities take?

As Christian Smith concludes, “confronting the inescapably enstoried nature of our lives does not have to lead to violent and oppressive tribal power struggles of utter relativism. While fully living within our truly different narratives, we might still draw on our narratives to learn to live together in some measure of peace” (2003, p. 93). I would argue that social work’s anti-oppressive approach does possess the resources for resolving conflicts with those with whom we disagree, but that to do so, we need also to be open to the insights of others who draw on their own narrative resources. Our *Code of Ethics* opens the door to this possibility; the challenge now is to use this opening to invite a genuine voicing and dialogue of multiple narratives, both religious and non-religious.

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