

# The Promise and Perils of Anti-Oppressive Practice For Christians in Social Work Education

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*Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) has emerged, particularly within the British Commonwealth countries, as one of the primary approaches to realizing social work's historic commitment to social justice. Despite the promise of AOP to advance the profession's capacity to advocate on behalf of societies' most vulnerable groups, it poses a serious challenge to social workers who hold orthodox religious beliefs, including Christians. This paper describes the key principles of AOP, assesses its strengths and weaknesses, and shows what aspects of AOP are incompatible with a Christian worldview and what aspects are compatible with and can be embraced by Christian social work educators.*

**A**NTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE (AOP) HAS EMERGED, PARTICULARLY within the British Commonwealth countries, as one of the primary approaches to realizing social work's historic commitment to social justice (Baines, 2011a; Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). The link between challenging oppression and the profession's commitment to social justice is confirmed in the profession's educational policy statements, codes of ethics, and professional policy standards in the USA, Canada, Great Britain, and internationally (Austin, 2014; Hodge, 2010; Robbins, 2011; Todd & Coholic, 2007).

Despite the promise of AOP to advance the profession's capacity to advocate on behalf of societies' most vulnerable groups, an analysis of AOP's underlying principles exposes differences between "orthodox" and "progressive" worldviews among social workers. As described by Hodge

(2005), drawing on the work of Hunter (1991), persons holding an orthodox worldview tend to derive their values from an external and transcendent source often rooted in a theistic religious belief system (Hodge, Wolfer, Limb, & Nadir, 2009), whereas persons holding a progressive worldview understand truth as being more subjective and as constructed by humans themselves rather than an external source.

As will be shown below, since AOP is situated within a progressive worldview, it can pose a serious challenge to social workers who hold orthodox beliefs, including Christians (Pon, 2007; Todd & Coholic, 2007; Vanderwoerd, 2010). AOP proponents have been critical of the worldviews of orthodox persons and have even questioned whether such persons should be excluded from the social work profession (Buila, 2010; Dessel, Bolen, & Shephardson, 2011; Hodge, 2011; Melcher, 2008; Pon, 2007). Further, some authors have argued that the social work profession should solidify its commitment to specific progressive causes, such as abortion and diverse sexual and gender identities and expressions, by requiring acceptance of these causes by social work students (Ely, Flaherty, Akers, & Noland, 2012; Melendez & LaSala, 2006; Spano & Koenig, 2007).

Anti-oppressive practice can be described as a comprehensive approach that explicitly links critical analysis with action. Although, as noted above, the term *anti-oppressive practice* is used more commonly in the British Commonwealth countries, it is closely linked to similar approaches in social work such as radical (Galper, 1975; Reisch & Andrews, 2001), progressive (Miller-Cribbs, Cagle, Natale, & Cummings, 2010; Mullaly, 2001; Murdach, 2010; Wright, 2014), and critical (Hick, Fook, & Pozzuto, 2005) social work, and has particularly emerged as part of the profession's refocusing on social justice (Austin, 2014; Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Hodge, 2010; Lundy, 2004; Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015; Ritter, 2013). The *anti-oppressive* aspect focuses on identifying and exposing unequal and unjust social arrangements that result in oppression; the *practice* aspect moves this analysis from simply an intellectual exercise into concrete ways of working that seek to transform social structures and practices to become more inclusive and equal.

AOP has its roots in a variety of more progressive, even radical, streams both within (Dominelli, 2010; Robbins, 2011; Wagner & Yee, 2011) and beyond social work (Bishop, 2005; Dalrymple & Burke, 2006; Grabb, 2007). Advocates for feminist practice, anti-racism, post-colonialist, queer theory, and others (Baines, 2011b; Mullaly, 2010) began to recognize their overlapping issues and common ground and began to build coalitions that brought together their unique perspectives to build a more robust and overarching critical approach that exposed the multiple and intersecting dynamics of oppression (Hick, 2002; Hick, et al, 2005). Focusing on the common theme of oppression that was present in other forms of progressive resistance, AOP emerged as an umbrella term in the 1990s to unite these disparate critical approaches into a coherent and comprehensive focus on oppression as the

common denominator (Baines, 2011b; Dalrymple & Burke, 2006; Hick, 2002; Robbins, 2011; Shera, 2003; Wagner & Yee, 2011).

What principles of AOP can be affirmed and taught, and what principles should be rejected? How can Christian social work educators sort out the contradictory claims of AOP with a Christian worldview? This article provides an overview of AOP's ideological and theoretical foundations, its key principles, and how AOP contributes to social work's pursuit of social justice. The article then assesses AOP from a Christian worldview, highlighting areas of common ground, but also exposing areas where AOP and a Christian perspective are at odds. Finally, the article concludes with some initial suggestions for how AOP can be incorporated into the curriculum of Christian social work education as a way to prepare social work graduates for practice that challenges oppression.

### **The Promise of Anti-Oppressive Practice**

AOP is a comprehensive perspective that holds great promise for illuminating the realities of social injustice and inequality. AOP can be a powerful tool that Christians in social work can use to uncover these realities not only in the lives of their clients, but also in social workers' own workplaces, churches, and communities. Further, AOP provides a coherent set of guidelines that social workers can incorporate into their professional practice to aid them in becoming agents of change for justice, rather than inadvertently reproducing systems of oppression.

Three core themes of AOP are 1) a focus on multiple and intersecting aspects of identity beyond simply race, class, or gender; 2) an explicit analysis of structural and political contexts that produce and reproduce oppression and privilege; and 3) an explicit call to action in which social workers are enjoined not to remain neutral, but rather to intentionally work to challenge oppression in their everyday interactions both personally and professionally (Dominelli, 2002; Lee, Sammon & Dumbrill, 2014; Mullaly, 2010). An elaboration of each of these themes illustrates the promise of AOP to contribute to the capacity of Christians in social work education to facilitate their students' learning to understand and address the dynamics of oppression.

### **Multiple Identities as Both Privileged and Oppressed**

A critical analysis of the multiple dynamics of identity is one of the key contributions of AOP. According to this analysis, each person's identity consists of multiple aspects that interact in dynamic ways to position a person as both privileged and oppressed, depending, of course, on the social context. A multiple analysis of identity goes beyond the oft-identified dynamics of race, gender, and class, pushing further to reveal many other aspects of identity including sexuality, ability, religion, age, education, occupation, and

so on. As described by Mullaly (2010), the theoretical analysis of identity and oppression has progressed from a simplistic recognition of the multiple intersections of identity to a more complex consideration of how multiple aspects of identity exist within a dynamic “web of oppression” (p. 198).

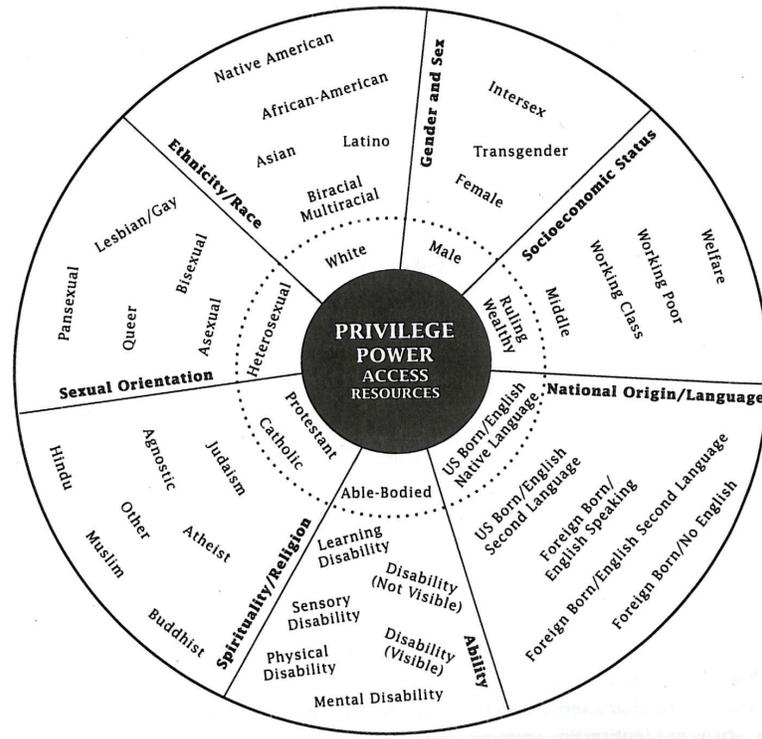
In a simpler intersectional analysis, an oft-cited example is an African American woman who experiences oppression not in two ways (i.e., as an African American *and* as a woman), but also in a third way as an African American woman. The web of oppression goes beyond this simple additive approach to posit identity as a complex and shifting set of characteristics in which each person experiences a blend of both oppression and privilege that depends on interactions with other persons in a given social context (Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner & Schmitz, 2008).

Figure 1 shows a “generic” web of oppression that displays how some of the more common identity aspects contribute to oppression and privilege in North American society (Sisneros et al., 2008, p. 87; see also Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015, p. 21; Mullaly, 2010, p. 198). At first glance, this web seems to reveal patterns of oppression and privilege that are already well understood. Within each identity segment on the web, a person can be labelled as having either greater or less privilege and power. Within ethnicity and race, for example, it is no surprise that persons who are white have the greatest privilege, while other groups have less. The web of oppression reveals the hierarchies of unequal access to privilege within each aspect of identity; generally, the farther one’s identity characteristics are to the periphery of the web, the less privilege one has.

Two critical insights flow from this approach to understanding the multiplicity of identities and how these contribute to patterns of oppression and privilege. First, when one attempts to locate oneself on the web, it becomes apparent that a person can experience both oppression and privilege simultaneously. Imagine, for example, Sofia, a 31-year old Mexican American woman who has graduated with her BSW, has a visa enabling her to work in the USA, and has just landed her first social work job as a community outreach worker for a Catholic social services organization. An examination of the web of oppression would show that she is privileged as an educated, middle class professional who is able-bodied, affiliated with Catholic Christianity, and (presumably) heterosexual. At the same time, however, she also experiences oppression as a woman, as Latina, and as a foreign-born (but English speaking) immigrant.

But is this analysis of privilege and oppression static? No, because the web is not intended to portray a generic arrangement of privileges and oppression. Rather, the web constantly changes as it is applied to particular social contexts. So, if Sofia were to quit her job with the Catholic agency to work as a Spanish speaking caseworker for an AIDS advocacy organization, she might expect to see that her identity as heterosexual and Catholic might shift more to the periphery of the web within the identity aspects

Figure 1: The Web of Oppression\*

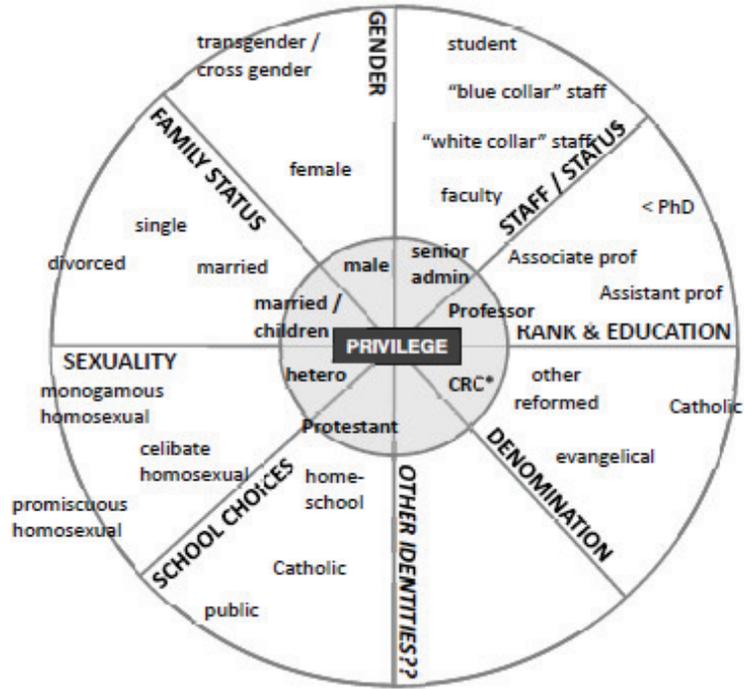


\*(Sisneros et al., 2008, p. 87).

of sexual orientation and spirituality/religion. On the other hand, if Sofia moved back to her home village in rural Mexico to provide reproductive and health programs for women and girls, she might find that her status as a U.S.-educated and English-speaking professional marginalizes her within the social context of her village and extended family, where traditional roles for women are prized and where professional American education and influence might be regarded with suspicion and even hostility.

The web of oppression, then, reveals the complexity of oppression and privilege in two ways. First, each person can be both privileged and oppressed. Second, the specific interplay of oppression and privilege is always changing as one's social context changes. This understanding of oppression is a powerful tool that can be used to detect the subtle and shifting dynamics of oppression that exist in virtually every social context. Not only do changing social contexts reveal shifts in the hierarchical arrangements of different aspects of identity, but also different social contexts reveal distinct aspects of identity that have greater salience in some contexts and are, perhaps, non-existent or irrelevant in other contexts.

Figure 2: An Example of a Web of Oppression in the Context of a Denominationally Affiliated Christian University\*\*



\*\*Note that this is not intended to depict the actual state of affairs at any specific university. Rather, the intent is to show how the web of oppression can be used to reveal and map the dynamics of oppression and privilege in a specific social context (see Sisneros et al., 2008, ch. 6; Mullaly, 2010, ch. 7).

\*CRC = Christian Reformed Church

This can be illustrated further in the example in Figure 2, where a web of oppression is used to analyze and map the arrangements of privilege and oppression in a Christian institution of higher learning affiliated with the Reformed tradition. Note that this analysis is unavoidably limited since it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full analysis of the complex dynamics of oppression and privilege in institutions of higher learning. Nevertheless, this example shows how the web of oppression might be applied to a particular social context.

In this particular setting in higher education, certain identity aspects emerge as more important. In academic contexts, status and rank are related to one's position as faculty, staff, or student, as well as the level of education one has attained. In a Christian, denominationally-affiliated institution of higher education, identity characteristics such as family status, where one's children attend school, and denominational membership all are important

markers of status and privilege. Using a web of oppression analysis reveals that the determination of privilege and oppression is not universal or absolute, but rather is a complex process in which the dominant group (which is itself determined by the context) subtly shapes the discourse regarding which aspects of identity are marked as important and what characteristics of each identity aspect are considered to be more or less favorable.

Christians both within social work (Hogewoning, 2012) and beyond (Volf, 2002; 1996) have explored the importance of identity and its connection to power imbalances and injustice in relationships between persons. As humans, we seem to find it difficult to escape our tribal tendencies to divide the world between “us” and “them”. The web of oppression can be profitably incorporated into a Christian social work education curriculum as a tool to equip social work students to improve their capacity to analyze the way multiple aspects of identity are implicated in relationships of dominance and oppression. Using the web in this way could be helpful in highlighting how identities of both privilege and oppression shape and constrain persons by imposing particular roles and expectations.

### **Structural and Systemic Analysis of Oppression**

From this analysis of the multiplicity of identity, it becomes clear that a second major theme of AOP is the explicit focus on a structural and systemic analysis. In fact, it is no surprise that AOP is closely related to and has emerged from structural social work, which explicitly focuses its attention on the structures of social contexts rather than the individual in order to understand and address injustice and inequality (Carniol, 2005; Hick et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2014; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2007). A structural approach to injustice and oppression has its historic roots in the radical and progressive threads that have always been intertwined in the social work tapestry (Reisch & Andrews, 2001; Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Rooted in and drawing on conflict theory and Marxism (Galper, 1975; Lundy, 2004; Robbins, 2011), a structural approach zeroes in on how the political and economic structures are systematically arranged to protect and extend the privileges of dominant groups (usually white, middle class, heterosexual, educated, Protestant men) at the expense of various marginalized groups. Structural social work views social problems as being caused by unjust arrangements rather than individual abilities. A structural social work approach rejects a meritocratic system in which it is assumed that a person's skills, efforts, and choices determine their access to resources and privilege. Instead, a structural approach shows how access to resources and power are not randomly distributed in a given population (which is what would be expected in a true meritocracy), but rather follow predictable patterns.

AOP's structural analysis of social problems provides a provocative lens that challenges North American society's individualistic ways of un-

derstanding injustice and inequality. For example, decades of research in the distribution of poverty in both the U.S. and Canada provide empirical evidence of the non-random distribution of wealth that a structural analysis predicts (Kushnick & Jennings, 1999; Lian & Matthews, 1998; O'Connor, 2001; Rank, 2004; Raphael, 2011). This research unequivocally shows that if you want to know who is more likely to be poor, you need only look at the outside of a person, not the inside. In other words, the visible markings of a person's race, ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or age can tell you more about that person's future prospects than what's on the inside—their motivations, effort, skills, intelligence, and strength. This, of course, flies in the face of the individualistic, meritocracy myth in which we fervently believe that we can determine our own future by the sheer force of our own will and determination. AOP's emphasis of structural and systemic dynamics shifts the analysis from a person's individual traits and characteristics to the political and economic systems in which that person is situated.

The structural perspective in AOP is unabashedly derived from a reformulation of conflict theory in which the goal is to transform the political and economic structures of society towards a collectivist and egalitarian arrangement. However, proponents of this view are quick to point out that an AOP approach seeks to implement this vision in a new, more progressive way that overcomes longstanding critiques in which Marxism is accused of being top-down, racist, sexist, and paternalistic (Mullaly, 2007). Nevertheless, Mullaly (2007) unequivocally summarizes the structural approach as follows:

Given this view of social problems, structural social workers seek to change the social system and not the individuals who receive, through no fault of their own, the results of defective social arrangements. Thus, the goal of structural social work is twofold: (1) to alleviate the negative effects on people of an exploitative and alienating social order, and (2) to transform the conditions and social structures that cause these negative effects.... The ultimate goal of structural social work is to contribute to the transformation of our current society to one that is more congruent with our reconstituted socialist principles. (p. 245, 247)

As this quote makes clear, the structural theme within AOP highlights the political and economic casualties of capitalism. AOP proponents are not shy about openly criticizing the way a capitalist political economy generates great wealth but distributes it unequally and, in their opinion, unfairly; or, to put it even more starkly: that capitalism is fundamentally oppressive (Dominelli, 2002; Ferguson & Lavolette, 2007; Lavolette, 2011; Mullaly, 2007).

Of course, there has always been a strand within social work that is critical of capitalism (Dolgoft & Feldstein, 2013; Dominelli, 2010;

Prigoff, 2000; Reisch & Andrews, 2001), but what is unique about AOP is not just attention to the unequal distribution of wealth in capitalist societies but to the infinite and subtle processes within such societies that regulate and reproduce relationships of privilege and oppression. Drawing on social reproduction theory (Macleod, 2009) among others, AOP's structural theme seeks to uncover how political and economic systems of inequality are taught, reinforced, communicated, and enforced in multiple institutional contexts throughout society such as families, schools, media, business, politics, and labour (Mullaly, 2010). This structural theme, then, goes deeper than the political and economic systems themselves, but also investigates the underlying cultural practices that undergird these systems. An anti-oppressive analysis of cultural practices includes an exploration of how language is used to rationalize and justify oppressive patterns while simultaneously minimizing attention to them (Dominelli, 2002; for more about cultural analysis, discourse analysis and related themes in AOP, see especially Mullaly, 2010, chapters 3–5).

Undoubtedly Christians disagree about the relative merits of capitalist versus socialist economic systems (Carlson-Thies & Skillen, 1996; Schlossberg, Samuel & Sider, 1994). Nevertheless, AOP's focus on structural systems of injustice is an important and necessary corrective to a North American Christianity that all too often focuses excessively on personal piety, accepts individualistic explanations of social problems, and remains blind to structural analyses of inequality (Labberton, 2007; Sider, 2005; Walsh & Keesmaat, 2004; Wolterstorff, 2013; 1983).

Using an AOP lens can enhance the capacity of Christians in social work to detect the underlying systems of injustice that shape the lives of vulnerable groups. Christian social work educators can draw on AOP's theoretical analyses to explore with students how structural factors operate to constrain opportunities for marginalized groups while providing subtle advantages for dominant groups. Further, AOP's focus on systemic injustice provides an additional and compelling rationale for the continued inclusion of macro practice within Christian social work education curricula (Vanderwoerd, 2008). AOP reminds Christians in social work that politics matter, that the society in which we live is not neutral or benign, that the "principalities and powers" (Ephesians 6) are real, and that we are called to expose and challenge them (Berry, 2010; Stackhouse, 1987; Wallis, 2011; Wolterstorff, 2006; Yoder, 1972).

### **Anti-Oppressive Processes and Practices**

It might seem from our discussion so far that the dynamics of oppression that AOP addresses are usually manifested in direct and visible ways. But, as already hinted at above, the third theme makes it clear that oppression is often subtly present in our everyday interactions. Capturing

the feminist aphorism that the “personal is political,” AOP is not just about an abstract and detached analysis of the dynamics of oppression and privilege. Rather, it is about *practice*. How do social workers actually carry out their day-to-day relationships with clients, co-workers, supervisors, other professionals, friends, family members, and neighbours in a way that does not inadvertently mimic the patterns of oppression and privilege revealed in our multiple identities and societal structures?

Many social work authors note the dual focus—and tension—inherent in AOP in seeking to alleviate the immediate consequences of oppression in the lives of their clients while simultaneously addressing the broader structural systems and processes that create oppression (Baines, 2011a; Dominelli, 2002; Morgain & Capous-Desyllas, 2015; Mullaly, 2007, 2010; Robbins, 2011; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). As Dominelli (2002) explains, “Although a particular social worker may focus on a one-to-one relationship with a client, their interaction occurs within a broader societal and organizational context which cannot be ignored” (p. 88). In other words, AOP is as much about processes as outcomes; it is not just *what* we do but *how* we do it that matters. As Baines (2011a) emphasizes, “Basically, AOP comes down to social workers having to deal with class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and other forms of oppression in everyday life, using a unique lens or framework through which to understand, question, and improve practice” (p. 50). AOP is not just a perspective that helps us see injustices “out there” and seek to reduce them, but also a way of working that reflexively focuses on how each of us is directly implicated in oppressive ways of working.

AOP proponents and educators readily acknowledge that translating theoretical analyses of oppression into concrete and practical ways of working is complex, difficult, and at times frustrating (Baines, 2011c; Collins & Wilkie, 2010; Dudziak, 2002; Hughes, Chau, James, & Sherman, 2003; Poole, 2010; Sinclair & Albert, 2008; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). Despite these challenges, however, AOP advocates remain steadfast in their commitment to action. Drawing on the theoretical insights regarding multiple identities described above, this action begins with social workers acknowledging how their own aspects of identity position them as both privileged and oppressed. An AOP social worker comes to understand that the dynamics of oppression impact not only her clients, but also herself.

Thus, incorporating AOP into the social work curriculum means more than teaching “us” about “them,” which AOP critics have argued can be a limitation of the cultural competence approach to diversity (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010; Parrott, 2009; Williams, 2003). Rather, an AOP approach highlights the importance of raising one’s own consciousness about the realities of privilege and exposing the dynamics of oppression in one’s own life (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010, ch. 10; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). In social work education, instructors can use an AOP approach to

facilitate safe spaces where students can work individually and together to identify various aspects of their identities and reflect on how these identities emerge in different contexts to create relationships of privilege and oppression (Jeffrey, 2007; Todd & Coholic, 2007; Tremblay, 2003; Wehbi, 2003). AOP social workers have developed a growing repertoire of approaches with various populations and in areas of practice including addictions, child welfare, children's mental health, community organizing, domestic violence, public social services, older adults, organizational change, street youth, persons with disabilities, psychotherapy, and welfare (Baines, 2011a; Hick et al., 2005; Larson, 2008; Shera, 2003; Strier & Binyamin, 2014).

An AOP lens can be helpful in recognizing the realities of power in relationships between social workers and their clients. Social workers must become aware of the identity dynamics that shape their own interactions with clients and in particular, to understand what forms of power each holds. Failure to do so leaves open the possibility that a social worker might inadvertently perpetuate oppression even as he attempts to build a relationship with a client. To be sure, this is not easy. Nevertheless, AOP advocates suggest that negotiating relationships of shared power begins with the social worker taking the responsibility to name the powers and "put them on the table."

For example, imagine John, a 23-year old newly-minted MSW graduate. John thrives in an academic environment and graduated at the top of his class. He is strong on book knowledge, but with little practical experience beyond his field placements. Nevertheless, he is eager to put his skills into practice in his first job as a counselor in student services at a large university. His first client is Nora, a 37-year-old single mother of four children aged 11 to 21. After almost twenty years of living on welfare, she has finally managed to go to school to pursue a degree. However, she has struggled with depression for most of her adult life, and when the stress piles up in her first semester, she goes to student services for help. What dynamics of oppression and privilege are at play when Nora sits down in John's office for the first time? Without AOP, John might plunge right in and invite Nora to talk about her concerns. However, using an AOP approach, John knows that as the person with more power in this relationship, it is his responsibility to intentionally address some of the more visible aspects of identity that create a power imbalance.

As shown in Figure 3, we can think of this as a process in which John learns to identify and name the "elephants in the room." The "elephants" are those aspects of identity of both the social worker (John) and the client (Nora) that operate together to create a complex dynamic of both oppression and privilege. We think of them as "elephants in the room" because although they have an unmistakable influence on the relationship, we often ignore them or pretend they're not there.

Figure 3: The “Elephants in the Room”



To avoid missing the elephants in the room, an AOP approach incorporates the following five areas (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010; Shera, 2003) that a social worker could employ in working with a client to build a relationship based on shared power (see Appendix 1 for “starters” that can be used for each of these five areas):

1. **Identity formation:** The social worker can facilitate an understanding of the various identities of both the social worker and the client that are at play in the relationship; this could begin with the social worker acknowledging her or his own identity and how it interacts with the client’s identity in this specific relationship context.
2. **Client voice/agency:** The social worker opens up the client’s right to be a decision-maker in the relationship, rather than assuming that as the one with professional power, the social worker would set the agenda and retain the right to decision-making. This would include that the client has the right to disclose what aspects of identity are relevant and to describe and interpret what these mean (rather than the social worker assuming he understands the client’s reality).
3. **Power:** The social worker and client can identify and negotiate the amount and types of power that each of them has in the relationship and how this power will be used in a way that contributes to a mutual relationship that meets the needs of the client.

4. **Encouraging client narratives:** The social worker can create a safe space where she can invite clients to tell their story in their own words and in which they can interpret the story in a way that fits their own experience and perspective.
5. **Shared histories:** The social worker can connect the client's story and experiences with other marginalized groups, thus showing how the client's problem is not simply a function of his or her own individual choices and behaviours, but also substantially shaped by structural dynamics that limit and constrain the opportunities for persons from oppressed groups. This can also involve linking the client with members of these groups and helping them to develop solidarity and connections with those who are experiencing similar challenges.

These five areas are not intended to be a rigid set of points that a social worker checks off a list. Rather, they can be incorporated into how the social worker builds relationships in a way that renders visible to both social worker and client the dynamics of oppression and privilege that shape the social work relationship and intentionally seeks to build a reciprocal relationship of mutual trust and shared power. As summarized by Mullaly (2010), employing an AOP approach in social work “involves building relationships with others on a one-to-one or group basis to analyze oppressive conditions, to reclaim group identity, and to change social and psychological patterns associated with oppression” (p. 223).

An AOP approach highlights not only the existence of oppression and privilege as a general reality of our society, but also makes this reality more explicit in each of our own particular relationships. AOP encourages us to ask: How does my identity give me privileges over my client, and how can I develop a relationship that does not merely draw on the advantages this gives me and ignore the disadvantages that limit my client? Richard Mouw (2010), in his book *Uncommon Decency*, challenges Christians to develop attitudes of civility marked by empathy, curiosity, and teachability. Mouw's suggestions for curiosity and teachability, in particular, accord well with AOP's focus on taking seriously the unique identities of others who are different from us. For example, Mouw (2010) urges Christians “to become familiar with the experiences of people who are different from us simply out of a desire to understand the length and breadth of what it means to become human” (p. 59). Similar to AOP's hesitation about cultural competence, Mouw's plea for increasing teachability means that when we encounter others, we must “emphasize ... not learning *about* them, but learning *from* them” (p. 61; emphasis original). As we have seen, however, AOP goes further than simply seeking to understand and learn from others, but also requires that we learn something about ourselves: namely, that we understand our own and others' power. As Crouch (2013) has recently explored, this can be especially hard

for those from dominant groups because, “[t]he powerful have a hard time seeing their own power and its effects” (p. 123). AOP, therefore, gives social workers a tool for understanding the way power shapes all of our interactions.

In summary, then, AOP holds great promise for enhancing the ability of Christians in social work not only to notice the often-subtle patterns of privilege and oppression that are part of virtually every social encounter, but also to equip us to do something about them. First, the analysis of the multiple and shifting dynamics of identity alerts us to the subtle ways in which privilege and oppression are bubbling below the surface of virtually every social encounter. The web of oppression can be used to map the ways in which people can experience both privilege and oppression, often simultaneously, in particular social settings. Second, AOP lifts our gaze from the individual to the broader social structures and systems when we seek to understand and explain the miseries of injustice and inequality in the lives of our clients. This structural approach provides a compelling justification for the continued place of macro practice within social work and helps us to correct the individualism that we so often take for granted in affluent western societies. Finally, AOP is not just a tool that social workers can use to analyze and expose the realities of oppression and injustice, but is a set of practices that equips social workers for addressing oppression across the spectrum from micro to macro approaches. AOP is about practice and action; it is a way of working with people—whether clients, colleagues, or others—that names the privileges and oppression that each person brings to a social interaction and seeks intentionally to renegotiate the often hidden aspects of power so that it is shared and used reciprocally to contribute to flourishing. It expands McIntosh’s (2002) metaphor of the “knapsack of white privilege” to an explicit analysis of multiple aspects of privilege and encourages social workers to “unpack” their knapsacks of privilege and renegotiate them (Mullaly, 2010, ch. 10).

However, as powerful and helpful as AOP is for exposing and challenging oppression, astute observers will readily detect that no approach is neutral, and that AOP, like any other humanly constructed approach, is rooted within a complex, often hidden, set of assumptions that are often referred to as a worldview (Mullaly, 2010; Sherwood, 2012; Van Wormer, 1997; Wolters, 2005). Put another way, individuals live their lives according to some story, or narrative, which helps them make sense of their world. As sociologist Christian Smith (2003a) makes so clear, telling stories and using them as a way of understanding who one is and how one ought to live is a fundamental characteristic of virtually every human community. According to Smith (2003a),

...we not only are animals who make and tell narratives but also animals who are told and made by our narratives. The stories we tell are not mere entertainment. Nor do they sim-

ply suggest for us some general sense of our heritage. Our stories fully encompass and define our lives. They situate us in reality itself, by elaborating the contours of fundamental moral order... Our individual and collective lives come to have meaning and purpose insofar as they join the larger cast of characters enacting, re-enacting, and perpetuating the larger narrative. It is by finding ourselves placed within a particular drama that we come to know our role, our part, our lines in life – how we are to act, why, and what meaning that has in the larger scheme of reality (p. 78).

In addition to the Christian narrative, Smith also identifies several other narratives that shape current Western civilizations (for example, the American Experiment, Capitalist Prosperity, Progressive Socialist, Scientific Enlightenment) as well as others from non-western cultures (for example, Militant Islamic Resurgence, or Divine Life and Afterlife associated with eastern religions and cultures).

For Christians in social work (and arguably for others as well), therefore, it is important to understand the underlying worldview, or narrative, of AOP and to assess the extent to which it complements or conflicts with a Christian worldview. A worldview assessment, then, can be used to identify the perils of an AOP approach that could be problematic for Christians in social work and social work education.

### **Perils of Anti-Oppressive Practice for Christians in Social Work Education**

Anti-oppressive practice ambitiously claims to unveil and dismantle oppression, but as post-modernism has shown all too clearly, one person's emancipation from oppression can quickly become another's oppression (Meinert, Pardeck, & Murphy, 1998; Middleton & Walsh, 1995; Mullaly, 2010, 2001). Freedom from oppression is, as they say, in the eye of the beholder. For example, a Christian foster parent's experience with a child welfare agency that implemented an organization-wide anti-oppressive policy reveals the fissures between an AOP and a Christian worldview. In this case, the agency identified heterosexism as one form of oppression that it sought to eliminate and therefore mandated that all foster parents must sign a document pledging to erase all forms of heterosexism from their homes. When some Christian foster parents resisted this on the grounds that their religious views on human sexuality would be defined by the agency's AOP policy as inherently heterosexist, the agency threatened to expel them as foster parents. These foster parents' response in a letter to the agency exposes how a difference in worldviews can lead to an AOP approach being used in a way that is itself oppressive:

Oppression does occur, and a person crosses the line, if they begin to denigrate, label, and marginalize another person for a different moral view. This is not only unacceptable in Christianity, but in our society as a whole. However, this is exactly what the document does when it uses hurtful and denigratory terms like 'heterosexist' and 'homophobic' to describe and attack people with a traditional view of marriage. As human beings, we may have different views on all kinds of issues, but to attack, oppress, misrepresent, label, and marginalize people, as the writers of this document have done, is not acceptable in Canadian society. I am shocked at the level of intolerance and bigotry against Christians that I see in this very oppressive document (personal communication, July 6, 2009).

As this situation makes painfully clear, an AOP approach is experienced as the *source* of oppression, rather than its elimination. Why this is so can be traced to differences in the underlying worldviews of those espousing AOP compared to others, especially those identified as religiously orthodox or conservative (or, more pejoratively, as fundamentalist) (Vanderwoerd, 2010).

All too often it is religion and spirituality that expose the fault lines between worldviews. One reason for this is the dominance of a secular perspective not just in the social sciences but also in the ubiquity of the prevailing modernist perspective in industrialized societies (Baker, 2009; Smith, 2003b; Middleton & Walsh, 1995; Smith, 2014a; Taylor, 2007). The resurgence of spirituality and religion in social work in the past two decades has illuminated the extent to which the social work profession is firmly rooted in a modernist and secularist worldview that marginalizes and often misrepresents religious beliefs and the people who hold them (Crabtree, Husain & Spalek, 2008; Dominelli, 2010; Hodge, 2009; Swartzentruber, 2007; Vanderwoerd, 2011). A clear peril for Christians, then, is that AOP—situated as it is within the secularist profession of social work—fails to do justice to Christian (or other religions, especially those identified as more orthodox, conservative, or traditional (Melcher, 2008) perspectives or persons. Further, as noted above in the example of Christian foster parents in an AOP agency, AOP may be used to silence and marginalize others. This peril is perceptively identified by Pon (2007), who, in discussing his own difficulty of reconciling his Christianity with an AOP approach, observed:

To admit to being a Christian might lead to being ostracized within anti-oppression circles.... [A]nti-oppression could become a new form of domination or dogma, which is unable to grapple with differences.... Dogmatic aspects of anti-oppression may be linked to a secular/sacred binary....

[which] constitute and regulate the anti-oppressive practitioner as secular. . . . I contend that this regulatory framework may render anti-oppression to be a new form of dogma or domination. (para 13, 14, 15)

The apprehension that Pon experiences is echoed by Todd and Coholic (2007), social work educators who self-identify as working within an AOP approach, yet nevertheless observe that an “anti-oppressive pedagogy can have the effect of marginalizing and even excluding those whose values and beliefs do not fit with the secular” (p. 9). Increasingly confronted in their classrooms with students from orthodox religious backgrounds, Todd and Coholic (2007) bravely question, “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), and therefore suggest that there is a need for “a rethinking of social work anti-oppressive values and ethics, and a consideration of our role as educators within the academy” (p. 20).

It seems clear that both Christians and non-Christian AOP proponents recognize that a danger of AOP is its tendency to, “perpetrate oppression in the pursuit of eliminating oppression” (Vanderwoerd, 2010, p. 82). It is apt, then, to take up Todd and Coholic’s challenge to rethink AOP within social work education by considering more specifically some of the ways in which an AOP worldview differs with a Christian worldview.

Of course, there are multiple Christian worldviews. Like any other group, Christians are not a homogenous group in which all members hold the same views. The following discussion is based primarily on a Christian worldview rooted in the neo-Calvinist tradition of Reformed Christianity (see Vanderwoerd, 2015; Walsh & Middleton, 1984; Wolters, 2005), and also draws on Keith-Lucas’ (1994, ch. 9; 1989, ch. 6) descriptions of Judea-Christian values.

### **Key Differences between AOP and a Christian Worldview**

Although it is true that there are important points of convergence between AOP and a Christian worldview (as described above; see also Hoguewoning, 2012), a clear-headed comparison of some of the fundamental differences between them both illuminates the ways in which AOP challenges a Christian worldview and also provides greater ability to adapt an AOP approach within Christian social work education and practice. Table 1 summarizes these differences in six areas: 1) view of humans; 2) vision; 3) source of hope for the future; 4) view of social change; 5) view of power and equality; and 6) epistemology. These six areas are an amalgamation of Walsh and Middleton’s (1984) four worldview questions (see also Middleton & Walsh, 1995; Sherwood, 2012) and Mullaly’s (2007, 2010) comparative frameworks for assessing political and ideological perspectives.

**Table 1: Key Points of Difference between Anti-Oppressive Practice and a Christian\* Worldview**

	<b>Anti-oppressive practice</b>	<b>A Christian worldview*</b>
<b>View of humans</b>	Humans are inherently good	Humans are sinful but capable of good through God's grace
<b>Vision</b>	Vision focused on liberation / emancipation from oppression	Vision focused on shalom, i.e., flourishing in all relationships
<b>Source of hope for the future</b>	Depends on human capacity – specifically social workers – and the will to implement AOP	Depends on God; humans are used by God as “co-workers” and “ambassadors”
<b>View of social change</b>	Social change is best accomplished through revolutionary and radical transformation of society	Social change is best accomplished through incremental means
<b>View of power and equality</b>	Power is mostly negative unless it is distributed equally	Power can be distributed differentially as God's legitimate gift for doing good
<b>Epistemology</b>	Knowledge is socially constructed; truth is relative	God and His word are the ultimate and authoritative source of knowledge

\*As acknowledged above, there are many differences among Christians and their worldviews. This description is rooted primarily in a neo-Calvinist, Reformed tradition (Vanderwoerd, 2015) and also draws on Keith-Lucas's (1994, ch. 9; 1989, ch. 6) descriptions of Judeo-Christian values.

### ***What Does It Mean to be Human?***

How one understands the essential nature of what it means to be human has far-reaching consequences for virtually every other question one might have about social relationships and social problems (Sherwood, 2011; Smith, 2010). Although its proponents argue that AOP is theoretically distinct from conventional perspectives in the social sciences (Dominelli, 2002, Mullaly, 2010, 2007), its view of humans reveals that it cannot escape the pervasiveness of both modern (Reamer, 1993; Reid & Popple, 1992) and postmodern (Meinert et al., 1998) assumptions embedded in the social work profession. Insisting on structural explanations for virtually all social problems, AOP is consistent with what Keith-Lucas (1994) calls the Humanist-Positivist-Utopian view, which claims that humans are fundamentally good and that the source of social problems must be outside individual humans. Mullaly (2007) makes this abundantly clear in his identification of humanitarianism as one of the primary values of AOP; humanitarianism, says Mullaly, is preferred precisely because it rejects the idea that “the person has two natures, good and bad.... Humanitarianism rejects this dualism within the individual and claims that people are innately good” (p. 369, note 3).

In contrast to viewing humans as inherently good, the longstanding, and arguably the most compelling (Jacobs, 2008), tradition within Christianity acknowledges that humans, while possessing inherent worth as creatures made in the image of God, are also fundamentally flawed and have a tendency towards selfishness and other sorts of evils despite their best intentions (De Young, 2009; Plantinga, 1995). In short, humans are sinful, but have worth and are capable of good because of God's grace.

As Mullaly (2010, p. 10) makes clear, AOP is rooted in a conflict/idealistic worldview that explicitly denies humans' sinfulness, but instead posits humans as inherently cooperative, social, and collective. However, this raises a contradiction: if a conflict perspective views humans as basically good, how then does it explain a society that it also claims is composed of "inherently opposing groups" (p. 14)? If people are naturally collective and cooperative, why would they inherently oppose one another? Mullaly's (2010) review of the anthropological literature argues that economic surplus introduces conflict into human groups, but he offers no adequate explanation for why humans who are inherently good would come into conflict just because they experience surplus.

A clear distinction, then, between a Christian worldview and AOP is that Christians, facing squarely the reality of human sin, are able to recognize and encourage individual responsibility (and build institutions to encourage and sustain that responsibility; see Crouch, 2013), whereas AOP sidesteps its own built-in contradictions and seeks solutions that are always focused outside the person. In that sense, AOP's idealistic view of humans as inherently good fails to take into account human responsibility for problems, and thus never quite reaches to the human heart.

### ***A Vision Against or a Vision For?***

One might expect that an optimistic view of humans would give rise to a positive vision. By vision I mean the overall purpose or *raison d'être* that animates and motivates its adherents. The AOP vision is essentially a vision *against*, compared to a Christian vision *for*. What is AOP against? At its roots, AOP is against anything that limits or constrains human freedom. So, even as it denounces the political and economic structures of our society, AOP's emphasis on inequality, combined with its assumption of human freedom, reveals that its vision stands firmly in the tradition of western liberal individualism. On that tradition, Wolterstorff (1983) makes the following astute observation:

For Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Marcuse, I think it is indeed accurate to say that the goal they envisage for liberation is simply *freedom*, for in their view the great evil from which we must be saved is that of being shaped by influences ex-

ternal to ourselves, whether those influences take the form of external formation or of internal inhibition; correspondingly, the goal is self-determination, autonomy, maturation.

It is my own view that this vision of our goal is deeply unsatisfactory. In the first place, it is psychologically untenable. We are all shaped in countless ways by the people who surround us, unavoidably so. Nobody is and nobody could be self-determining. Everybody is “dominated”. The relevant question is not how to eliminate influence on the self, but instead the normative question as to which forms of influence are desirable and which are not – and, in particular, which forms of influence constitute oppression” (p. 51-52; emphasis original).

Mullaly (2010) identifies critical social theory as AOP’s theoretical bedrock and argues that it is “concerned with moving from a society characterized by exploitation, inequality, and oppression to one that is emancipatory and free from domination” (p. 16). Similarly, Dominelli (2002) argues, “the ultimate goal of anti-oppressive initiatives is the creation of non-oppressive relations rooted in equality” (p. 13). To be fair, AOP does articulate a consistent vision *for* equality (or what it often refers to as egalitarianism), but I would argue that this is just another way of articulating a vision *against* inequality. In other words, AOP does not say *why* it is for equality, other than to say that this is the way to avoid inequality. Its very name—*anti-oppressive practice*—reveals a vision that focuses more on what it is *against* than what it is *for*.

By contrast, a Christian worldview draws on a rich and comprehensive biblical narrative that describes God’s vision for His creation to flourish (Crouch, 2013). The best word to capture this is *shalom*, which is a vision for humans to be in rightly ordered and harmonious relationships with God, with others, with ourselves, and even with the rest of creation (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012; Plantinga, 1995; Wolterstorff, 1983).

### ***Hope for the Future***

Whether against oppression or for flourishing, how will we get there? Here, too, we see critical differences between AOP and a Christian worldview. AOP puts its hope in humans to accomplish the goal of emancipation from oppression. Accordingly, it is up to humans, specifically those who support AOP, to take the lead in moving society from oppression to non-oppression. As seen in the following quotes, AOP proponents put great effort in enjoining others—including those in the social work profession—to take up the anti-oppressive cause:

As custodians of society's commitment to helping its vulnerable members, undertaking activities aimed at realizing the rights of disadvantaged people is an essential part of a social worker's remit . . . . The social work profession has to become centrally involved in international organizations aimed at redistributing social resources more equitably across the world and enforcing the realization of human rights, particularly for women and children who constitute the most oppressed groups. (Dominelli, 2002, p. 35)

As social justice-oriented social workers we can humanize ourselves, our work practices, and our communities, liberate and politicize our workplaces, and transform and dignify our experience through the creative, collective, and ongoing pursuit of peace, equity, and social justice. . . . [We] invite readers to reflect critically on ways to do transformative, politicized, anti-oppressive social work practice, and then armed with this critical thought, go out and build a better world (Baines, 2011a, p. 24, 46).

In sum, to be effective as structural social workers. . . we need a commitment to carry out the difficult task of social transformation. Structural social work is more than a theory or a technique or a practice modality. It is a way of life (Mullaly, 2007, p. 362).

If we do nothing about oppression, we lose our basic humanity. If in our personal lives and in our social work practice, we assist in making oppression acceptable. . . we fail ourselves and we become part of the problem. Social workers who are committed to social justice must join the struggle against oppression in all its forms at which it occurs. There is no choice (Mullaly, 2010, p. 284).

It doesn't take much of a stretch to suggest from these quotes that AOP proponents envision the social work profession as playing a central role in addressing the world's social problems.

While AOP puts its faith for change in the hands of humans (specifically AOP social workers), a Christian worldview is both more and less ambitious about the role of humans. Psalm 8 poetically captures the paradoxical nature of humanity: nothing more than a speck in the universe, yet crowned with glory as rulers. In the biblical drama, God is clearly the author of the story and drives the plot toward His ends. Yet, as His image-bearers, He chooses tiny, fragile, selfish, and bumbling humans and casts them in central roles (Middleton, 2005; Middleton & Walsh, 1995). Does our world depend on us? Thankfully not. But does our work matter? Definitely. God

describes us as his “co-workers” (I Corinthians 3:9; II Corinthians 6:1) and appoints us “ambassadors” (II Corinthians 5: 20). In short, in the AOP story, humans play the hero; in the Christian story, Jesus Christ is the hero and we are invited and equipped to help.

### ***How In the World Will We Change?***

With humans in the driver’s seat, it is perhaps not surprising that AOP is ambitious, radical, and occasionally (but not always; see Mullaly, 2010, p. 276) impatient for social transformation. AOP proponents are unapologetic, persistent, and unwavering in their appeal for a complete transformation of society in order to eradicate oppression and achieve equality. As described in the first section of this paper and captured in the quotes above, the emphasis on a structural analysis of social problems logically leads to the conclusion that the entire apparatus of our society must be stripped down and rebuilt. This, of course, draws heavily on the influential and enduring Marxist roots of conflict theory (Grabb, 2007; Koyzis, 2003). Although there are some disagreements about the exact nature of how this should be accomplished, the overall thrust is consistent: oppression can only be eliminated through a broad-based social movement in which various oppressed groups join in solidarity to dismantle the social, political, and economic infrastructure that supports inequality and replace it with a transformed egalitarian infrastructure, the sooner the better (Baines, 2011a; Dominelli, 2010, 2002; Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015; Mullaly, 2010, 2007).

A Christian worldview tends to be more guarded and more patient, although on this point the differences among Christians may be most obvious. Christians are spread across the political spectrum, and therefore are far from consensus about the best means to accomplish social change (see Hunter, 2010). It is no surprise, however, that the 19<sup>th</sup> century neo-Calvinist Abraham Kuyper founded a political party named the Anti-Revolutionary Party (Bratt, 2013). Kuyper articulated a principle that has become influential for many Christians pursuing justice in a modern, pluralistic society: namely, that if we want to become engaged in the public square with others, we must a) respect and support the existing institutions of our society, and b) be willing to work with others with whom we disagree, sometimes even to the point of compromise (McEntyre, 2014; Mouw, 2010; Smith, 2014b).

### ***Power and Equality: To Yield or Not to Yield***

To be willing to support oppressive institutions and to stomach compromising with opponents, one has to yield. And this brings us to power and equality: at the core of AOP is a reluctance, if not outright refusal, to yield, whereas Jesus calls us to “deny ourselves and take up our cross” (Luke 9:23). As articulated masterfully by Crouch (2013), every human

effort to address injustice will fail if it begins with a human understanding of power. Crouch demonstrates that western societies' prevailing view of power has been heavily influenced by Nietzsche and rooted in the humanist and liberal soil of the Enlightenment, particularly that form which gave rise to conflict theory (see also Koyzis, 2014). As shown above, AOP has its roots in the same soil and thus shares a deep suspicion of all forms of power that are not distributed equally. Further, power is viewed as a finite and limited resource; when I have more of it, you have less. In all human contexts, according to conflict theory, humans will fight for their share of power, and society evolves inevitably into a set of arrangements designed to control, regulate, and protect the interests of the powerful at the expense of the powerless (Mills, 1956; Mullaly, 2010).

In such a world, why would oppressed, marginalized, and excluded victims of injustice agree to yield their power to anyone or anything? If liberation from oppression is the ultimate goal, then wouldn't one want to seize power? If emancipation from inequality is the vision, wouldn't the best strategy be to confront the powerful, strip away their resources, and re-distribute them equally? If power is scarce and humans are autonomous, then AOP makes sense.

The only viable response to unequal arrangements of power, according to AOP, is to eliminate all hierarchies and distribute power equally. From this vantage point, power is only safe if everyone has equal access to it. Any hierarchy which involves individuals or groups holding disproportionate power, even when it is based on legitimate authority, is seen as inevitably oppressive simply because it is unequal. In response, the liberal impulse is to create a society based on equality, which has come to mean a radical redistribution of many types of resources. The only escape from oppression, it seems, is that the truly free person should have to answer to no one but him or herself. As Koyzis (2014) observes, power and authority are viewed as being a threat to freedom: "Those working from within this perspective tend to view freedom or liberty in a positive light while viewing authority negatively" (p. 62).

But the radical claim of Christianity is that, in Koyzis' words, "we answer to another" (2014, p.2). In other words, we yield. Our approach to inequality should follow Jesus' example, "Who, being in very nature God, *did not consider equality with God something to be grasped*" (Philippians 2: 6; emphasis added). When faced with the constraining reality of inequality, Jesus did not try to seize power and grasp for equality. Instead, He gave up His power, even as He exercised His rightful authority. The counter-cultural and counter-intuitive Christian approach to power stands in marked contrast to AOP: ultimately, the only sure way to confront the imbalance of power is by giving up one's power. Or, to put it another way: we use our God-given authority to exercise power for others' benefit, rather than to promote or defend our own interests.

A paradox of a Christian worldview is that properly ordered authority is the means for human flourishing, rather than a threat to freedom. A biblical perspective reveals authority as part of God's design for His creation. Humans, created in God's image, are granted authority over the rest of creation (see Genesis 1:26-28 and Psalm 8) and are expected to use their authority to promote others' flourishing. Further, although all humans have God-given authority by virtue of being God's image bearers, distinct types of authority are distributed differently. Kings and governments, parents, teachers, and many others, are each given particular kinds of authority, each of which is limited by specific roles and contexts. Thus, authority is not an open license to dominate others, but rather must be exercised in ways that are appropriate to one's role and setting. As Koyzis (2014) argues, "Authority is a lofty office given to all human beings, who exercise it in diverse ways according to their respective callings" (p. 226). AOP, rooted in a humanist, liberal worldview, perceives human freedom as only being possible when each individual only answers to him- or herself, and is not subject to any authority. A Christian worldview, by contrast, acknowledges God as the ultimate authority, who grants humans authority and calls them to use that authority according to His purposes. Paradoxically, true freedom only comes when we recognize God's authority, but also recognize various forms of human authority, and are willing to yield to them in appropriate contexts. Of course, that doesn't eliminate the possibility for exploitive abuse of authority, but such abuse is viewed as a sinful distortion of proper authority, rather than viewing the authority itself as inherently oppressive.

***Epistemology: How Can We Be Sure?***

Yielding to another authority implies that we might not know best. But, how, in fact, do we know best? By what means do we come to have certainty about all this? How can we understand the dynamics of power and oppression, and how can we figure out what we should do about them? This brings us to a final point of difference between AOP and a Christian worldview. Whereas AOP views knowledge as socially constructed and contested, orthodox Christians claim that their ultimate source of knowledge comes from the Bible. Although this might appear to be a simplistic claim that Christians only need to look to scripture to find truths about the world, it is instead a more complex approach to knowledge in which God's word provides the framework for interpreting for empirical reality (Wolterstorff, 2014).

For example, the traditional Calvinist claim is that God's revelation comes through both His Word *and* His world; in other words, we can learn about God and His ways through the written Word of God contained in the Bible and incarnated in the life of Jesus Christ, but also through God's creation. This second source of revelation is what gives legitimacy for Christians to be engaged in the pursuit of scientific knowledge and discovery;

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that is, to discover God's revelation in the world. This is made explicit in Article 2 of the Reformation creedal document The Belgic Confession which distinguishes between *general revelation* found in God's created order and *special revelation* found in God's word (see <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession>). Similarly, the Wesleyan quadrilateral refers to the approach that theologian Albert Outler named to describe John Wesley's four-point interpretive framework: scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. As Outler stressed however, Wesley's approach prioritized scripture as the focal point through which the other means of knowledge were to be utilized (Outler, 1985).

Wading into epistemological waters is fraught with complexity and extensive debates rage within both Christian and AOP camps regarding hermeneutical principles, discourse, interpretation, and the like, none of which will be plumbed sufficiently here. However, it is important to note some of the key differences that have important implications and help to explain some of the differences we have already discussed above.

Two broad approaches to epistemology dominate the social sciences and have also significantly shaped AOP: the first is the naturalistic materialist approach within modernism, and the second is a subjective interpretive approach within postmodernism (Hodge, Wolfer, Limb, & Nadir, 2009; Mullaly, 2010; Wolfer & Hodge, 2007). What both of these share is an epistemology centred in human capacity; that is, that humans are the ultimate source of and authority for knowledge. Thus, the key difference between AOP and a Christian worldview turns on the question of whether there is a source outside of humans from which ultimate knowledge derives.

A Christian worldview (as with some other orthodox religions such as Islam and Judaism) has a theistic epistemological framework whereas AOP has a humanistic one. Knowledge and truth within a Christian worldview derive from God and all other truth claims must be subjected to that standard. In that sense, its epistemology can be described as an authoritative one, compared to an AOP epistemology that is relativistic; that is, that knowledge has no ultimate standard against which it can be measured for veracity, but constantly changes. As Christians have noted, in the academic world (if not also society at large) the relativistic view is so widely held in our society that it is axiomatic and taken for granted (Clouser, 1991; Marsden, 1997).

It is when confronting thorny questions, such as abortion or homosexuality, that pit various groups against one another that epistemological questions surface, as groups divide based on opposing authoritative truth claims (Hodge, 2011). Contrary to the criticism levelled by non-theists who espouse a naturalistic materialist epistemology, this is not to say that a Christian worldview simplistically turns to the Bible as the sole source of answers to complex social problems. Rather, as demonstrated by world-class Christian philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff

(Bartholomew & Goheen, 2013), a Christian worldview acknowledges that whether theistic or naturalistic, all of us approach reality with certain “control beliefs” that are not empirically verifiable. Thus, the question is not *whether* social workers have control beliefs, but *what* control beliefs they bring to their knowledge-seeking (Chamiec-Case, 2007).

### **Conclusion: Towards a Re-Ordered AOP**

As noted above in the discussion of the promise of AOP, this critique from a Christian worldview is not meant to suggest that AOP has no value for Christians in social work. It clearly does. However, assessing some of the key points of difference, as we have just done, demonstrates that Christians must exercise discernment in appropriating AOP (or any other theory or approach, for that matter) in a way that is more compatible with a Christian worldview. We conclude, therefore, with a number of initial suggestions for how Christian insights can be used to modify and enhance AOP. These insights can be incorporated into Christian social work education to provide a more nuanced and well-rounded approach to incorporating AOP within Christian social work education curricula.

Can AOP come to peace with authority? Pursuing egalitarian arrangements appears to back AOP into a corner where it cannot conceive of hierarchical social arrangements as anything but oppressive. But a Christian view of power and authority makes possible the co-existence of authority—rightly ordered and rightly used, of course—with non-oppression. Actually, it is more than that; authority is necessary for flourishing. When power is viewed as a force for flourishing and authority is a gift of God to be used to enhance that flourishing, then it becomes possible to establish and support relationships of authority that are not inherently oppressive.

Similarly, can there be justice and fairness when there is inequality? Can unequal access to resources and power contribute to or even enhance flourishing? Perhaps the proper question is not whether one has more or less resources and power, but how one uses them. Koyzis' (2014) notion of “office” captures the possibility that flourishing depends on authority, rather than eliminating it. As Koyzis explains, office is “a commission, an assignment, or calling given by God to specific persons for the fulfillment of specific tasks. Office is not *self-serving* but is *other-serving*” (p. 137).

One limitation of the web of oppression, described in the first section above, is the assumption that the center of the web is necessarily privilege and the periphery is oppression. Could it be that within different aspects of identity tied to one's office there is differential access to power and resources that is not inherently oppressive? One way a Christian social work education could incorporate AOP would be to re-imagine the web of oppression to take into account the necessity of authority and office and differentiate between proper use of power and its abuse.

A Christian world view also provides a more robust picture of society in which flourishing arises out of differentiation, which can be understood as a rich diversity of societal forms, each with its own distinct role and authority. In contrast, an AOP approach that posits human freedom as the highest good cannot seem to make room for a genuine pluralism. Crouch (2013) singles out the words “teem” and “swarm” from the Bible’s creation narrative (Genesis 1:20 NASB) to describe the way in which diversity contributes to the flourishing that God intended for creation.

This notion of differentiation in society has been developed extensively by both Protestant and Catholic Christian political theorists (Chaplin, 2011; Koyzis, 2003; Novak & Adams, 2015) who have applied the concept to account for multiple social entities such as marriages, families, schools, businesses, and many more. Differentiation, or “pluriformity” as Koyzis (2003) calls it, has great potential for the development of a political framework that goes beyond the stilted assumptions of church/state separation (Monsma, 2012).

A genuine pluralism recognizes the freedom that people have to live out their different beliefs, not only in their private individual choices, but also in their public and communal choices. Freedom of space for living out one’s beliefs publicly requires what has been called “structural pluralism,” in which the diversity of forms of association (such as families, schools, businesses, labour unions, churches, and so on) are each accorded their own unique but limited authority to govern themselves according to their beliefs (Skillen, 1994).

Despite its criticism of government, AOP, by contrast, often seems to resort to a vision in which the state (or some other entity), frequently in the pursuit of eliminating oppression, extends its authority at the expense of all other societal forms. This is what happened when, in the example described earlier, the child welfare agency over-reached its authority by coercing a foster family to accept its definition of anti-oppressive practice (Vanderwoerd, 2010). A Christian worldview that makes space for diversity of both belief and its public expression can reveal the ways in which AOP can itself be oppressive in imposing its own belief system in the name of resisting oppression. Moving toward “epistemic pluralism” (Hodge, 2010, p. 202), in which different beliefs are granted space, could help AOP avoid intolerance in the name of tolerance (Carson, 2012) by encouraging and facilitating the recognition of a variety of belief systems within social work education and the profession of social work.

Overall, then, anti-oppressive practice holds a great deal of promise for Christian social work education, but in its current form, this promise comes with a cost. Discerning Christians have detected that underneath AOP’s gilded promise lurks grave perils to the integrity and authenticity of a Christian worldview. AOP’s promise lies in its capacity to open the eyes of Christians who remain blind to the realities of privilege and oppression. AOP helps us to gain greater awareness of the complex and multiple aspects of our identity that shift the balance of privilege and power as our social

contexts change. Further, AOP adjusts our analytic attention to the bigger picture. Without AOP, we tend to understand social problems as primarily due to individual's own choices and actions. AOP, however, helps to reveal the deep-seated and often invisible patterns that are embedded into the structures and systems of our society and all too often protect and extend the advantages of the privileged at the expense of the oppressed.

Finally, AOP moves us from complacency to action. AOP is not, in the end, just a tool for analysis, but a way of practicing that intentionally seeks to reduce oppression in our own relationships. AOP is not just about what's happening "out there" to "them." It requires that we examine our own identities and roles and develop ways of working with clients in which we are upfront about the privileges that we carry into practice and don't just ride their coattails for our own benefit.

For all its value, however, AOP proponents would be disingenuous if they do not grasp how AOP's power can be used to silence, disparage, and marginalize voices with which it disagrees, including Christians. AOP's own analysis of discourse shows how powerfully certain viewpoints can be taken as normative and neutral while others are deemed deviant and inferior. Situated as it is within the modernist progress narrative, AOP has inadvertently accepted secularization as a given, and consequently seems unable to take seriously religious viewpoints that challenge some of its own conclusions. A careful comparison of some of the key principles of an AOP worldview with a Christian worldview has revealed how deep the differences are, and should alert Christians in social work education that incorporating AOP (as well as other theoretical perspectives or approaches) within the curriculum should be done carefully.

Christians should be wary of an approach that elevates humans above God. AOP stands in the modernist, Enlightenment tradition in which humans are autonomous, hold ultimate authority, are capable of infinite understanding, and possess unlimited powers to change the world for the better. Christians are under no such illusions. Instead, we are all too aware of not just our human limits, but the reality of sin that turns our best intentions to destructive purposes. Even though our hope is in God rather than ourselves, a Christian worldview is not an other-worldly hope for a pie-in-the-sky heavenly future, but rather a "world-formative" (Wolterstorff, 1983, ch. 1) perspective that rolls up its sleeves and gets to work in the world to address social problems right here in our time and place, rather than just passively waiting for eternity (Middleton, 2014).

Armed with a realistic view of humans as God's co-workers and ambassadors, Christians in social work education can appropriate the insights of AOP into their curriculum to equip students with the capacity to mobilize with others (including AOP proponents), not to pursue revolutionary change, but instead to engage in a "long obedience in the same direction" (Peterson, 2000). This suggests that Christian social work educators shift

from teaching competencies only to developing the habits (or virtues; Chamiec-Case, 2013; Wolfer & Brandsen, 2015) that can sustain a lifetime of commitment to the long, slow, sometimes tedious task of giving witness to God's plan to silence the cries of the oppressed and end all death, mourning, crying, and pain (Revelation 21: 4). ❖

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### **Appendix 1: Anti-Oppressive Practice with Individuals**

How can social workers develop relationship practices that are based on mutually created respect for other's differences, rather than inadvertently re-enacting the patterns and dynamics of oppression? One way to do that is to train oneself to notice identity characteristics (instead of letting them dictate the relationship as "elephants in the room") and then get those identity characteristics "on the table."

Below are some questions that can be used in interactions with others that might be helpful. While they may feel awkward at first, the idea is to use them as conversation tools that can be adapted in a way that feels more natural in real-life interactions.

**Some exploration “starters” on identity:**

- What is it like for you to do this work with me?
- What concerns do you have about what I will [or can] do about this [or for you]?
- What questions [or concerns] do you have for [or about] me?
- What do you expect [or want] from me?
- What strengths do you have for this problem?
- What unique things about yourself will help you?
- What unique things about yourself could be a problem?
- How do you think we are similar [or different]? Does that matter to you? How?
- Can you think about how you and I are different [or similar] in this situation? Do you have any concerns [or questions] about this?

**Some exploration “starters” on client voice or agency:**

- Can we explore together *your* feelings [or experience or concerns]?
- What would you like for us to do together now [or in the time we have]?
- What choices do you feel you have about doing this?
- What could [or would] you do if you don't like how it's going [or what's happening or what I'm saying to you]?
- What possible ways can [or will] you respond to what I say [or tell] you?

**Some exploration “starters” on power:**

- What does it feel like for me to be asking you all the questions?
- Why should I be the one to ask you questions?
- What else would you like me to do besides asking you questions?

**Some exploration “starters” on narratives and shared histories**

- Can you tell me more about your experiences with \_\_\_\_\_?
- Tell me your story of how you've come to be here today.
- What is the journey that you've been on that has brought to where you are now?
- Who are the people in your life that have influenced you?
- What are some of the most important moments that have shaped you?
- As you look back on your life, what things stand out for you?

(Adapted from Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010; Shera, 2003)

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