Reconsidering Secularization and Recovering Christianity in Social Work History

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This article explores contemporary social work’s uneasy and ambivalent relationship with its Christian origins by use of the concept of narrative. The argument is organized in three parts: first, the concept of narratives is used to describe the dominant secularization story in social work and identify some of the emerging alternative narratives. Second, the article explores in greater detail particular themes from historians of religion in Canada that challenge the interpretations and assumptions contained in the dominant secularization narratives of social work. Third, the article discusses the implications of these alternative narratives in one particular area that is currently relevant to social work—human rights—and shows how it has become captive to the secular narrative. The paper concludes with implications and challenges both for Christians and non-Christians in social work.

It has been said that “Christianity has been like the family silver, an acknowledged but rarely examined major premise of the Anglo-American social work tradition” (Bowpitt, 1998, p. 676). Virtually every history of social work and social welfare mentions something about the Christian influences and connections of the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, as in Bowpitt’s metaphor of the “family silver,” most references to these Christian influences are portrayed as something from the past that has little if any current relevance to social work and social welfare today.

This article explores contemporary social work’s uneasy and ambivalent relationship with its Christian origins more deeply by use of
the concept of narrative (Smith, 2003a). By placing the conventional social work narrative of professionalization within the larger narrative of modernization—and its offspring, secularization—this article shows that the “story” of the social work profession is not, in fact, a neutral recounting of historical facts, but rather, a version of events that intentionally emphasizes scientific, humanistic accomplishments at the expense of Christian influences and actors (Smith, 2003b). In other words, the story of social work is a contested story; the linked narratives of professionalization and secularization are evidence of adherence to a particular set of values and assumptions and the rejection of other values and assumptions. Or, put differently, the story of social work represents a contest of worldviews in which the modern, professional, secularized version has won the day. It has done so by minimizing, ignoring, and dismissing other versions\(^1\)—the most notable of which, this paper argues, is the part of the story informed by a Christian worldview.\(^2\)

The argument is based on attempting to weave together a number of distinct strands of scholarship that are mostly separate from one another; thus, this paper represents an initial attempt to synthesize material that, for the most part, has remained unconnected. One consequence of this approach is the necessity, for the sake of brevity, to skim across the surface; consequently, much further work remains to explore in greater depth each of the areas surveyed, as well as to identify other areas that have been neglected. The reason for drawing from various literatures is that much of the scholarship on social work and social welfare history has been limited by its confinement to sources within a fairly narrow range, mostly encompassing only accounts and interpretations from within a handful of social sciences: primarily social work, and secondarily the related discipline of sociology, and the sub-discipline of social welfare. My argument is that telling the story only within these disciplines has resulted in an account that privileges a modern, secularist understanding that neglects—or worse, distorts—important elements of the story that are relevant to social work’s narrative told by others. In particular, the article draws upon scholarship in the sociology of religion and in the history of religion that provides alternative accounts of the social work profession’s development.

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religion in Canada that challenge the interpretations and assumptions contained in the dominant secularization narratives of social work. Even though these histories are not directly about social work, the historical evidence from these histories reveals the limits of social work’s conventional narratives and gives rise to alternative interpretations of the profession’s history. Third, the paper discusses the implications of these alternative narratives in one particular area that is currently relevant to social work—human rights—and shows how it has become captive to the secular narrative. The article concludes with raising challenges both for Christians and non-Christians in social work.

**Contested Narratives in Social Work and Social Welfare**

As sociologist Christian Smith (2003a) makes 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),

> The stories we tell are not mere entertainment. Nor do they simply 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…. It is by finding ourselves placed within a particular drama that we come to know … how we are to act, why, and what meaning that has in the larger scheme of reality (p. 78).

As Smith rightly notes, it is not just that social scientists use the concept of narratives to understand others, but that they themselves also come to their inquiry through their own interpretive narrative which shapes how and what they observe. In other words, social scientists must be self-reflexive and become aware of the narrative within which they make sense of the world. Of course, this insight draws from the now-familiar post-modernist position which criticized the modern narratives that privileged and justified the assumptions inherent in Euro-centric, humanist, rationalist, and secular viewpoints (Middleton & Walsh, 1995).

This insight about the interpretive power of narratives has been recognized more recently by social work scholars. John Graham (1996) divides the approach of social welfare historians into three stages: the early stage claimed to approach history from an objective and neutral stance,
and was superseded in the 1960s and 1970s by histories that specifically criticized these earlier histories from the vantage point of particular identified marginalized groups (such as women and ethnic minorities). We are currently in the third stage, Graham argues, in which a multitude of narratives are recognized, but in which none are given dominance, thus leading to endless claims and counter-claims of legitimacy and validity among competing narratives. Following Graham’s analysis, more recent historical scholarship in social welfare has intentionally identified the dominance of modern narratives and sought to expand the universe of narratives from which social work and social welfare are understood (Moffatt, 2001; Payne, 2005). For example, Moffatt (2001) argues that the dominant approach to the history of social work,

...ignores underlying assumptions, the values embedded in these assumptions, and the subjectivities that influenced various events…. Value-oriented, humanistic contributions to our understanding of the social work profession have been neglected because of the dominance of a narrative of social work that presupposes a nonproblematic relationship among empirical findings, scientifically based techniques, and interventionist controls over clients or subjects (p. 3).

Despite this recognition of multiple narratives, the modern, secular, progressive view remains the prevalent viewpoint undergirding most approaches to social work and social welfare history in Canada and the USA. A number of authors have already convincingly demonstrated this secular bias in American social work. Religious historian Martin Marty, in a seminal article in the influential journal, Social Service Review, concluded in 1980 that “the literature of the profession genially and serenely ignores religion” (p. 465).

Subsequent analyses of social work literature in textbooks, journals, conference presentations and course syllabi bear out Martin’s observation. Ram Cnaan addressed these issues in his book, The Newer Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership. Cnaan and his colleagues (1999) conducted a systematic review of the literature that led to their conclusion that “religious issues and religious-based social services have been ignored” (p. 67). Similarly, David Hodge (and colleagues, 2006), currently one of the most prolific writers and scholars on religion and social work, conducted a content analysis of over 70 of the most recommended diversity textbooks
used by the top ten social work schools in the USA. They compared references to several vulnerable groups—African Americans, Latinos, persons who are gay and lesbian, and women—with two specific religious groups: evangelical Christians and Muslims. As Hodge noted, “the results indicate that faith groups are largely invisible in influential social work textbooks as subjects of direct interest. Further, when faith groups are discussed, the portrayals tend to be unfavorable. Rather than being depicted in a manner consistent with their own worldviews, they are portrayed as seen through the lens of the dominant worldview” (p. 221).

Canadian authors have also noted a general bias against religion and spirituality in Canadian social work literature (Coates, 2007). Based on a non-systematic and initial review conducted by the author of the most commonly available textbooks on Canadian social work practice, social welfare, social policy and social welfare history, there appears to be a similar bias as that documented in the American social work literature. Canadian social work literature also pays scant attention to religion, and, when it does include it, tends to portray religious influences as pejorative and anachronistic. Religion, especially Christianity, is typically characterized as judgmental, moralistic, unscientific, and an obstacle to progress, professionalism, and sophisticated diagnosis, assessment, and intervention.

Based on the explanation of the secularization narrative described above, a principal reason for this bias is the underlying narrative that influences these textbook authors’ interpretation of religion, specifically, Christianity. In particular, they appear to be operating from a modernist narrative. What is this modern narrative? Christian Smith (2003a) narrates a version of the modernist progressive story from within the discipline of sociology. While this is not directly social work’s story, others (e.g., Keith-Lucas, 1989) have argued persuasively that social work’s story is similar, and that social work’s narrative is rooted in the same modernist story. Smith’s narrative goes like this:

Once upon a time, the vast majority of human persons suffered in societies and social institutions that were unjust, unhealthy, repressive, and oppressive. These traditional societies were reprehensible because of their deep-rooted inequality, exploitation, and irrational traditionalism—all of which made life very unfair, unpleasant, and short. But the noble human aspiration for autonomy, equality, and
prosperity struggled mightily against the forces of misery and oppression, and eventually succeeded in establishing modern, liberal, democratic, capitalist societies. While modern social conditions hold the potential to maximize the individual freedom and pleasure of all, there is much work to be done to dismantle the powerful vestiges of inequality, exploitation, and repression. This struggle for the good society in which individuals are equal and free to pursue their self-defined happiness is the one mission truly worth dedicating one's life to achieving (p. 82).

According to this narrative, it is perfectly reasonable—indeed inevitable—that religion would give way to science, progress, and technology. But this narrative is based on a distinctly modern understanding of the very concept of religion itself—a concept that has become so entrenched that it has taken on mythical proportions and is accepted without testing any of its underlying assumptions. In the field of international relations, both Thomas (2005) and Joustra (2009) point out that the modern understanding of religion harks back to the 16th century Wars of Religion. The modern, individualistic, and liberal analysis of this conflict is based on understanding religion primarily as a set of personally-held private beliefs. However, this understanding represents a distinct break from a much longer tradition in which religion is understood as a community of people living together out of their shared beliefs. The liberal modern view sees religion as private, personal, and increasingly irrelevant; this is the viewpoint embodied in the secularization thesis. From this point of view, a person who acts out their faith in public is seen to violate the social norms in which religion is best kept safe at home. No wonder, then, that secularization needed to write Christianity out of the social work story; it had no language or conceptual framework to understand how religion could be brought into the public world of social work without transgressing the barrier from private to public.

Recently some Canadian historians have made similar observations, arguing that the modern progress narrative has shaped the way many historians have understood and explained Canada’s transition from the 19th to the 20th centuries, which is the time period when social work emerged as a profession. What this recent work adds in particular is how the modern progress narrative has resulted in a failure to take into account the importance of religion. For example, Gauvreau and Hubert (2006) point out,
... dominant historiographic paradigms ... rely implicitly and unquestioningly upon a master narrative of historical change supplied by the classic secularization theory, positing that modernization, generally defined as industrialization, urbanization, and the expansion of the capitalist market economy, necessarily diminishes the social significance of religion (p. 6-7).

Overall, then, the story of the social work profession and its history has been told by those who either intentionally or unconsciously have accepted the dominant secularization story of the social sciences. From within that narrative framework, social work is widely portrayed as originating from religiously-motivated amateurs who moralized the destitute and the poor in the 19th century. However, armed with new social scientific methods, social workers in the early 20th century developed advanced methods that eliminated religion, increased effectiveness, and therefore opened the way to advancement into full-fledged professionalization. Dennis Guest (2003), author of one of the more respected Canadian social welfare histories, for example, argues that “Protestant theology” justified help to the poor that provided “unsolicited and largely irrelevant advice” (p. 17-18). Several other textbook authors and social work organizations then build on Guest’s analysis by describing social welfare development and the emergence of the social work profession as a process of increasing sophistication guided by scientific methods that improved upon the “moral advice” offered by religiously-motivated “friendly visitors” of the 19th century.

Nevertheless, as part of the broader trend in recognizing multiple narratives in social work and social welfare, new attention is being given to spirituality and religion, in keeping with a widespread increase in the importance of spirituality in the health and human services and social sciences (Koenig, 2004; Thomas, 2005). The recent founding of the Canadian Society for Spirituality & Social Work (CSSSW) has been instrumental in encouraging new investigations of the role of religion in social welfare history. Graham, Coholic and Coates (2007), all original members of CSSSW, observed that:

The conventional interpretation of the rise of social work emphasizes a narrative of transformation from a nineteenth and earlier century tradition of sacred, non-professional volunteerism, low technique, and little established
research, to the early twentieth century emergence of a profession that was secular, scientific, technical, and orientated to higher learning…. Social work, like many disciplines of the early twentieth century, was thought to be part of the triumphant march of secular, technical progress, and human rationality (pp. 24-5).

The recognition of alternative narratives provides the space for reconsidering social work's history and development. The following section of the article takes advantage of that space by presenting an overview of how Christianity has had a much greater influence on social work's story than the predominant secular narrative would suggest.

**Social Welfare History as if Christianity Really Mattered**

Historical scholarship in other disciplines reveals a different interpretation of the development of social welfare. For the most part, these histories explicitly operate from narratives that challenge the modern, secularization-as-progress story. Conventional accounts of social work history, as noted above, demonstrate that these alternative histories have not been included in most social welfare and social work histories. These histories are done by scholars in other disciplines, and their conclusions and interpretations, apparently, do not inform the conventional social welfare history. Whether this is intentional exclusion or simply lack of awareness is beyond the scope of this article, but regardless, there do exist alternative narratives that provide a different understanding of the role of Christianity in social welfare history and development. This is not readily apparent, however, because these histories are not in themselves explicit histories of social welfare or social work, but rather histories of topics and developments that are relevant to social work: for example, histories of the social role of churches, the family, gender, public policy, public education, religious development, immigration, and so on (Christie, 2002; Van Die, 2005). In other words, it takes some careful sleuthing of these histories to identify those parts that provide additional understanding of the origins and development of the social welfare system and the social work profession.

A preliminary, and thus as yet incomplete, analysis of these histories reveals several insights that raise questions about the prevailing interpretations informed by modernist, secularization assumptions. It
is not simply that secularization did not happen, but rather that the
timing and the nature of secularization were more complex and more
contested than the story that has generally been told. The conven-
tional narrative of modernization generally holds that secularization
is a natural and inevitable consequence arising from multiple factors
such as industrialization, the rise of nation states, capitalism, scientific
advancement, technology, and so on (Smith, 2003b). According to this
view, secularization “just happens,” and is, therefore, no one’s fault;
further, no one can be held accountable for religion’s alleged demise.
This perspective minimizes the extent to which particular groups and
leaders actually set out to advance a secular viewpoint intentionally to
replace religious institutions and leaders. For example, Christian Smith
(2003b) describes secularization in the U. S. at the turn of the 20th
century as a “revolution” driven by motivated activists. Similarly, in Canada,
various groups strategically challenged the dominance of Protestantism
by advocating for tolerance based on official multiculturalism in which
Christianity would be forced to give way in the face of other religious
and cultural belief systems (Gidney, 2004; Wills, 1995).

One of the prevailing myths of the secularized account of social work
and social welfare is the untested assumption that Christian approaches
were unsophisticated and unscientific, and therefore a secular approach
necessarily had to replace religion in order for social work to be taken
seriously and to gain legitimacy. For example, Wills (1995) and Finkel
(2006) are typical in assuming that the lack of scientific approaches was
one of the prime factors that drove social welfare away from religion.
These explanations are based on the secular assumption that religious
institutions, and the people who work in them, are either incapable of
or unwilling to use the tools and methods of science, and, therefore,
that religion and science are incompatible. But these assumptions are
not supported by the available evidence. Hudon and Hubert (2006), in
their history of the role of the Catholic church in providing charity in
Quebec in the 19th and early 20th centuries, demonstrate that the church
developed and pioneered an extensive infrastructure and capacity for data
collection and management within parishes. By these means, the church
was able to track trends, uncover social problems, and develop plans for
the collection and distribution of resources. Hudon and Hubert argue
convincingly that these statistical methods actually predated and were
superior to government-based methods such as the census. Similarly,
Maurutto’s (2003) history of the role of Catholics in social welfare in
Canada, specifically in the city of Toronto, demonstrates that Catholic social agencies and the Catholic Church embraced and adapted social science methods and employed them in both Catholic charity organizations and in the establishment of Catholic schools of social work.

The role of Protestants in English Canada also challenges the assumption that the use of scientific methods could only be done from a secular approach. Protestant clergy took the lead in the early 20th century in mastering social scientific methods to gather, interpret, and communicate information about a wide range of social problems. The early motivation was a concern for the decline of rural communities and Protestant leaders organized extensive networks of clergy and laymen to conduct surveys on the plight of these communities. Their expertise in survey construction and analysis led several clergy to academia, where they were leaders in establishing and teaching in departments of rural sociology, agriculture, and community planning. As Christie and Gauvreau (1996) describe, “By making the social survey an endemic part of the local clergyman’s duties, the Protestant churches became the dominant institution in the sphere of social investigation. In terms of both sophistication and number, the Protestant churches far outdistanced the universities” (p. 179).

In addition to the role of individual Protestant clergymen and churches in developing and pioneering social science techniques, the Protestant influence became institutionalized through the establishment of the Social Service Council of Canada in 1908, and their journal, Social Welfare, in 1918. Through the national Council, as well as the provincial Councils, Protestants were at the forefront in studying social problems in Canada and were highly influential in shaping public opinion and government responses to social welfare. In fact, Christie and Gauvreau (1996) argue that the Social Service Council was responsible for building the information infrastructure upon which Canada’s social welfare state was built. As they tell it,

During the 1920s ... the church-funded Social Service Council of Canada functioned as the primary instrument for the investigation, interpretation, and publicization of such social problems as child welfare, immigration, rural planning, housing, penal reform, family law, old-age pensions, and unemployment insurance. These endeavours occurred largely because of the alliance of the churches with women’s groups and other social reform organiza-
tions, and thus provided the fundamental infrastructure of knowledge necessary for the creation of modern social welfare policy…. The Social Service Council of Canada in fact served during the 1920s as the main vehicle by which university social scientists journeyed towards their later role as members of a government brain trust (p. 198).

The Council's journal, Social Welfare, functioned as the pre-eminent scientific and scholarly English-language social welfare publication in Canada, and was accepted by the fledgling Canadian Association of Social Workers as its de facto publication (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Further, the Social Service Council of Canada operated as the umbrella organization for the emerging profession of social work. Although the Canadian Association of Social Workers was founded in 1928, the Social Service Council's longer history, legitimacy, and expertise made it the most influential voice for Canadian social work well into the 1930s.

These histories of social welfare in Canada demonstrate convincingly that far from eschewing scientific methods, Catholic and Protestant Christians adapted and indeed pioneered social science methods that had long-standing influences on the development of Canadian social welfare and on the development and professionalization of social work.

Conventional social welfare history also portrays Christian influence on social welfare as being limited to its European origins from earlier centuries. For example, one social welfare textbook's treatment of history discusses Christian influences in the 1700s, but then makes no more mention of it throughout the 19th or 20th centuries (Turner, 2009). Here, too, however, historical research from other disciplines demonstrates that Christians continued to have an influence on social welfare well into the 20th century (Gauvreau, 1991; Christie, 2002; Rawlyk, 1997). In addition to the active participation and leadership of Christians in social work and social welfare science and data gathering, both Protestant and Christian leaders were at the forefront of social welfare and social work advancement. Catholics, for example, played a prominent role in developing a large and influential system of social services agencies in Toronto throughout the mid-20th century (Maurutto, 2003). Similarly, a recent English-language translation of a book on the origins of Quebec's social welfare state shows that Catholic and Jesuit leaders actively lobbied for the Quebec Family Allowance Act of 1943, including Father Leon Lebel, who was involved in this struggle as early as the 1920s (Marshall, 2006).
In English-speaking Canada, too, Christians played key roles within social welfare and social work education, and thus continued to contribute Christian perspectives well into the first six decades of the 20th century. Clergyman were directors and faculty members at the University of Toronto (E. J. Urwick), McGill University (J. H. T. Falk), and St. Patrick’s College (later Carleton University; Fr. Frank Swithun Bower, Fr. Shaun Govenlock) from inception up until the 1960s (Christie & Gauvreau, 1996; Graham, Coholic & Coates, 2007).

The social gospel movement also played a significant role in mobilizing Protestants to become involved in addressing a wide array of social problems confronting Canada in the early 20th century. Many Christians played an active part, but probably one of the better known, James S. Woodsworth, serves as a good example of the influence of the social gospel on Canadian social work and the development of the Canadian welfare state (Christie & Gauvreau, 1996; McNaught, 2001). Although Woodsworth began his career as a clergyman in the Methodist church, he was actively involved in social issues, notably serving as superintendent of the Christian settlement house, All People’s Mission in Winnipeg, Manitoba. His experience in settlement work, as well as his passion for mobilizing the church to address the social problems of the day, also led him to found the Canadian Social Welfare League. The League was the vehicle for developing a social work training program in which Woodsworth was one of the principal persons involved in creating and delivering the curriculum. From there he turned to politics, and was one of the co-founders of the Cooperative Commonwealth Foundation, which eventually evolved into the New Democrat Party. He was elected to federal parliament in 1921 and served for more than two decades until his death in 1942. As leaders within the CCF/NDP, Woodsworth and others, including Tommy Douglas, the Baptist minister and first leader of the CCF, played prominent roles in convincing a series of mostly Liberal federal governments to adopt many of the planks of Canada’s welfare state that Canadians now take for granted, including old age pensions, unemployment insurance, family allowances, and universal health care.

Secular accounts also portray women as actively challenging patriarchy by drawing on so-called secular approaches to confront males in leadership positions. These accounts pit secular women against men defending the establishment status quo, including institutional religion (Finkel, 2006; Graham, 1996). But, again, historical scholarship outside social welfare paints a more complex picture. Mitchinson (1987)
describes the role of three prominent women’s organizations in the late 19th century, all of which were explicitly religious: the missionary societies that were affiliated with Protestant churches, the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Each of these groups actively worked for reform in Canadian public life, not as a secular challenge to religious influence, but as a direct extension of their religious beliefs that had a substantial influence on Canadian social welfare. As Mitchinson noted, “It is in the three areas of their religious motivation, awareness of secular problems in society and desire for a stable social order that these women’s organizations prepared Canadians for the welfare state and perhaps even directed the shape it took” (p. 89). Similarly, Charlotte Whitton is often hailed as one of the most influential women in Canadian social work history; what is missing or downplayed was that Whitton was an Anglican who professed a clear connection between her Christian faith and social work (Kinnear, 2001; Moffatt, 2001).

Beyond the social work profession itself, Christian influences continued to exert themselves in Canadian public life well past the Second World War, again, contrary to the narrative told in conventional social welfare and social policy accounts. Four brief examples make the point. First, official Canadian government policy and the rhetoric of leading political figures consistently regarded Canada as a Christian country into the 1960s (until officially superseded by the Multiculturalism Act of 1971), and this is made clear by the existence—indeed, the official government sanctioning and support—of the “Christian Pavilion” to showcase Canada to the world at Expo 67 in Montreal (Miedema, 2005). Second, historian George Egerton (2004, 2005) demonstrates that Christians were actively involved in the protracted negotiations that led eventually to Canada’s own constitution and Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as evidenced by the preamble, “Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God….” Third, Canadian public universities evoked Christian imagery and rhetoric well into the 1960s to articulate their role in Canadian society. As historian Caroline Gidney (2004) notes, “Indeed, for the first six decades of the twentieth century, university presidents and principals continued to project a moral vision of the university that was rooted in the nexus of beliefs that characterized liberal Protestantism” (p. 25). Finally, Christian groups from all denominations have continued to have an extensive influence on crucial public policy right up until today on a
wide range of issues including poverty, Aboriginal justice, immigration, criminal justice, mental health, persons with disabilities, child welfare and more (VanderVennen, 1991). All of these examples demonstrate that religion—particularly Christianity—continued to have a prominent influence in Canadian public life (Bowen, 2004; Van Die, 2001), even though conventional narratives of social work and social welfare largely depict religion as being essentially irrelevant after the 19th century.

Some Implications for Contemporary Social Work: Human Rights

How do these differing narratives matter today? What difference does it make that Christianity’s role in the history and development of social welfare has been minimalized or regarded as mostly negative? The argument of this article is that it does matter, and thus affirms the contribution of others3 who have already called for recovering the importance of religion to social work. Rather than repeating their calls for greater “cultural competence” with regard to specific areas of practice, the article concludes by briefly showing how the dominance of a secular perspective has shaped one current issue in social work and social welfare: the recent attention in social work to human rights.

Even though the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights is more than sixty years old, it has only been recently that social workers have begun to focus on human rights explicitly as a critical area for social work practice and social work education (Finn & Jacobsen, 2003; Hawkins, 2009; Ife, 2005; Mapp, 2007; Reichert, 2007; Webb, 2009). The overriding concern in these writings appears to be a lament for the lack of human rights principles as a guide for social work practice, and a corresponding call for social workers to incorporate human rights into their practice and into social work education. In an example that typifies this concern, Hawkins (2009) pointedly argues for increasing human rights literacy.

All of the documents which comprise the United Nations Agreements on Human Rights are readily available via the internet. As discussed below, familiarity with these documents should be part of every student’s higher education, particularly in social work. In addition, students should have basic knowledge of the philosophical underpinning, historical development, and contemporary debates of these fundamental principles. Basic knowledge of the
underlying premises of human rights and familiarity with the specific documents outlining these rights is known as “human rights literacy.” (para. 28).

While not contesting the value of human rights principles for social work practice, what is surprising in the social work literature on human rights is the almost complete absence of references to the substantial contributions that Christians have made to the concept of human rights. Typical historical overviews of human rights in social work literature begin with Greek and Roman democracy, skip lightly from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, and land on the 20th century “birth” of human rights in the 1948 United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. According to Lena Dominelli, a prominent British social work theorist on oppression and human rights (2007),

The idea of human rights has a long history. John Locke espoused the concept of “natural rights” as the basis for life, liberty, and property, residing with individuals. These understandings were further developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau… [and] also shaped the thinking of participants in the French and American Revolutions…. Adherents to these causes and their ideas often crossed the Atlantic to reach beyond the particular nation-state where they first arose and underpin liberal democracies today (p. 19).

However, an ample literature exists to document the substantive role that Christian actors and Christian thought have played in the formation and development of the concept of human rights over the past centuries (Bucar & Barnett, 2005; Hollenbach, 2003; Nurser, 2005; Shepherd, 2009). For example, Max Stackhouse (2005) argues that “intellectual honesty demands recognition of the fact that what passes as ‘secular,’ ‘Western’ principles of basic human rights developed nowhere else but out of key strands of the biblically rooted religions” (p. 33). Similarly, John Witte, Jr. (2009) suggests,

While acknowledging the fundamental contributions of Enlightenment liberalism to the modern rights regime, we must also see the deeper genesis and genius of many modern rights norms in religious texts and traditions that antedate the Enlightenment by centuries, even by millennia (p. 32).
What explains the absence of Christian contributions to human rights in the writing of social workers? John Nurser's account of the role of churches' participation in the efforts to develop a universal statement of human rights is fascinating and instructive. According to Nurser (2005):

> It has become clear that the part played by Protestant groups, but also Catholics and religious Jews, in establishing human rights in international affairs is deeply unwelcome to those who have written on the subject. The picture commonly conveyed is of an initiative by a group of public service jurists working wholly within the *laique* framework of the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man. Even individuals well disposed to the Christian tradition assume the essential independence from religious roots of human rights…. Some of those most involved in preparing and putting into effect the human rights revolution of the late 1940s are (often unintentionally) airbrushed out in properly Stalinist style. This results, at a minimum, in tendentious history (p. 3).

> It would seem that a secular bias prevents certain observers from being able to see—let alone account for—the substantial contribution made by Christians in human rights. Even when such accounts are clearly available, they appear not even to be considered when social workers discuss human rights and its implications for social work practice. It is not surprising, therefore, that David Hodge refers to religious freedom as the “forgotten human right” (2006).

**Conclusion**

The narrative framework of secularization has so captivated the social work profession that it has failed to take fully into account the Christian influences in its own history (Bowpitt, 2000). Secularization assumes that religion is irrelevant, biased, private, and unscientific; these assumptions relegate religion to a minor part in the story. What this article has shown, however, is that Christianity is central to social work's history and development as a profession. The social work profession bears the marks of the Christian imprint clearly, yet the 20th and 21st century tellers of social work history barely mention it. For the social work profession at large—both
Christians and those of other faiths or none at all—this conclusion affirms two areas of importance that have already been identified by others.

First, thorough historical scholarship must remain a priority in order to avoid accounts that oversimplify or misrepresent the complex and nuanced developments of our past. In the introduction to a recent issue of *Arete*, the editors observed that, “[s]ocial welfare history continuously struggles for recognition in the social work academy” (Carlton-LaNey & Brice, 2007, p. 1). Social work and social welfare historians (Jennisen & Lundy, 2011, Moffatt, 2001, Popple & Leighninger, 2004) have consistently argued for increasing—or at least maintaining—the level of historical research and this article confirms these pleas.

Second, as already noted above, there has been a recent heightened awareness of the need for greater understanding of spiritual diversity within social work and the need to incorporate these understandings into the work of cultural competence. These developments have led to the explicit inclusion of standards related to spiritual competency in the most recent revisions to social work accreditation standards in both the USA and Canada.

The argument of this article—that Christianity’s role in social work’s history has been minimized—also poses challenges for Christians in social work. Speaking now personally as a Christian to other Christians in social work, I would argue that our task is to heighten our awareness of the influence of the secularization paradigm, and thus be better able to challenge and refute the secularization narrative. Further, as Nicholas Wolterstorff (2006) urged, we need to recapture our own story and get in the habit of telling and re-telling it. But here lies a problem: religious pollsters (Chaves & Anderson, 2008) have affirmed what many readers of this journal probably already suspect—Christians are not so confident anymore in claiming that our story has any greater claim than any other story (Berger, 2010). Here we see the influence of postmodernism, even as we acknowledge the power of the modern myths of secularization (Meinert, Pardeck, & Murphy, 1998). So, in telling our Christian story, can we be content merely to get our story included among all the other stories offered in the “postmodern smorgasbord” (Middleton & Walsh, 1995, p. 59)? Or, are we prepared to make the claim that our story—what we would argue is actually God’s story—really is the “true story of the whole world” (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2004)?

To Christians, I would humbly submit that we must be bold: we say that the biblical story is true, and if we don’t claim it as so, we reduce
the power of God’s word to just another dusty historical manuscript. There is no point to the biblical story unless one claims that it is true. As theologian N.T. Wright argues (2006), Christianity only makes sense if one reads the biblical story as the grand narrative, not just one narrative among many. What we need, then, is to tell and retell the story so that we begin to take up our calling to join in God’s great work of redemption and reconciliation in which he is making all things new (Isa. 65: 17; Rev. 21:5). Anything less is a capitulation to some other story in which we fail to love God with all our heart, soul and strength, and instead put our trust in human efforts to save us.

But just saying this is not necessarily going to convince those who live by different stories. What do we say to them? Here I appeal to what Christian Smith calls a “civil pluralism.” As he puts it, “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” (2003a, p. 93). As Christians we need to speak with conviction from within our own narrative in such a way that others can hear us. But, we also have to be respectful enough of others to listen to their story, and to engage in the tough work of nurturing relationships that foster respectful dialogue in which we seek common ground among our different stories. Anything less than that is a failure to love our neighbours as ourselves.

**References**


Endnotes

1. Others have already noted how the standard narratives have ignored other groups, most notably those identified as oppressed or marginalized, such as women (Day, 2000; Mitchinson, 1987) and various cultural, ethnic or linguistic minorities (Day, 2000; Estes, 2007; Graham, 1996; Jansson, 2005).

2. Or rather, Christian worldviews, since Christians participated and acted not from within one unified and coherent worldview, but rather many and sometimes conflicting variations of Christian thought.

3. Cnaan points out in his preface that he himself is secular, and therefore seems to argue that he does not have a personal stake in advancing religion, unlike others who have written on this topic.

4. I want to particularly note the invaluable contribution of the McGill Queen’s University Press series on Studies on the History of Religion. It was discovery of this series that first led me to this topic, at their book display at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in 2005 at the University of Western Ontario.

5. For example see Cnaan & Wineburgh (1999), Canda & Furman (2010), Coates, Graham, Swartzentruber & Ouellette (2007), and Hodge (2009).

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