Conceptual frameworks for addressing spirituality in social work practice

Habilitation Thesis

Alexandru Neagoe

ABSTRACT

The present thesis is a synthesis of the research which I have conducted since the completion of my PhD (London, 1998), as well as a short presentation of my specific plans for research in the coming years. The thesis focuses on my contributions to the development of conceptual frameworks for addressing the issue of spirituality in social work practice. These contributions have been published by prestigious publishers (including Cambridge University Press), as well as in important international journals (such as *International Social Work Journal).*

An introductory chapter sets out the stage for the thesis. It places it in the wider international context by referring to some of the key contributions in the field and the trends which they represent. Also, this chapter describes my personal connection with the subject. A review is then offered of some of the key factors which would seem to underline the legitimacy and the importance of addressing issues of spirituality in the practice of social work. Such a concern, it is argued, is in line not only with the history of the social work profession but also with several important contemporary trends in the field of social work, such as the systemic models, the strength-based approaches, the practitioners' need for cultural competence and self-reflection (Neagoe, 2011d; 2013c).

Given the extremely wide spectrum of beliefs and experiences which may be associated with the notion of spirituality, the second chapter narrows down the object of investigation to Christian spirituality. However, as indicated in subsequent chapters, many aspects of the relationship between social work and Christianity are also applicable, in modified forms, to the practitioners' relationship to other faith groups. As far at Christianity is concerned, a key period for reflection is that of early Christianity (mainly its first century) given the programmatic role of this period for all later generations. Hence, specific attention is paid to the relationship between faith and society during the early church. Such an analysis of early Christianity, through the canonical writings belonging to this period, has a significant academic history (Neagoe, 2013a). My publications in this area have highlighted a number of aspects: (i) that early Christians have made important efforts towards the social legitimation of their relatively new faith (Neagoe, 2002; 2004; 2009a) and to stress the positive

contributions which Christians could offer in the struggle against existing social "evils" (Neagoe, 2014).

Building on insights from the study of faith versus society in the early church, chapter 3 of the thesis moves to the present context, commonly understood (at least in Europe and the West) as being characterised by postmodernity and secularism (Bauban, 1982; Haarvey, 1989), or, according to certain authors, even postsecularism (Habermas, 2008; Morozov, 2008; Betz, 2009; Neagoe, 2013c). My research in this area has sought to highlight some of the most dominant features of this context, as well as to articulate possible implications related to the relationship between profession and faith in such an environment (Neagoe, 2013c; Neagoe & Zorgdrager, 2009). Chapter 4 discusses this relationship even more specifically, bringing to the fore situations where social workers may be faced with important dilemmas resulting from the dynamics between their professional commitment and their personal values or beliefs (Neagoe, 2011c, 2013c).

One of the most important fields on which social work practice meets spirituality is that of faith-based communities. It is common knowledge that many such communities develop social care services. Although the professionalism of some of these services has been (often on legitimate grounds) called into question, there can be no doubt that faith communities continue to be important players in the field of social work. Recognising this fact, chapter 5 presents some of my research, in which I have sought to identify and explain a number of typical characteristics of social care projects within such settings, as well as to compare and distinguish "regular" social work with this type of social work, often referred to as "diaconia" (Neagoe, 2006a, 2006b, 2011d).

Beginning with chapter 6, the thesis focuses on specific categories of service users. Of primary interest has been social work with families, and specifically a systemic approach to working with families (Neagoe, 2007b, 2007c, 2009b, 2012a). The systemic approach is of special significance to the subject of this thesis because, ultimately, a systemic approach to social work services is the key to understanding and practicing social work in a way which integrates and addresses (among many other factors) the spiritual elements which may be present in the helping process.

Chapter 7 focuses on another category of service users, for whom the systemic model, as well as the family factor and the spiritual dimension are often very important – namely the elderly population (Neagoe, 2009b). My work in this area was based on the observation that in many cases the difficulties which the elderly encounter are aggravated by disfunctionalities in their families. In this respect, the whole family system needs to be regarded as a *target* for

the social worker's intervention. At the same time, it is equally important to understand that the family represents a crucial *resource* in the effort of increasing the quality of life for the elderly.

Similarly, chapter 8 indicates another area of social work in which I have applied the systemic model, i.e. that of delinquency, especially in its relation to the family environment and to spirituality. Thus, one section of this chapter focuses on the subject of systemic-based rehabilitation programs for penitentiary inmates (Tiurean & Neagoe, 2011), while another section seeks to illustrate the relevance of spirituality in relation to delinquency by presenting the role of one specific faith community in this respect: the Baptist community in Timişoara, as part of similar initiatives in other areas of the world (Neagoe, 2012c).

Chapter 9 returns once again to the subject of family welfare, this time in relation to the phenomenon of Romanian migration. The issue of migration is described as part of a broader "socio-spiritual" reality, namely people's struggle for better living conditions and the price they are willing to pay for this "better life" (Neagoe, 2011a).

Another phenomenon of great contemporary importance in Romania is that of drug use among the young population. Chapter 10 deals with this subject and presents a research project in which I have been involved (Tomiţă & Neagoe, 2013). The goal of the project was to explore the potential of Christian spirituality in limiting the incidence and the effects of drug use among youth. The results were indicative of the broad spectrum of possibilities and resources which Christian spirituality can offer in this area of social work.

Finally, the last section of the thesis presents a number of intended directions for my research in future years: (1) an inter-cultural study (in cooperation with representatives of Baylor University, USA) aimed at analysing some of the key factors which shape the approach of spirituality among social work students, professionals, and academics; (2) an analysis, in partnership with teaching staff from the University of Bradford, of the impact of religion and belief on social work professional practice in Romania and the United Kingdom; (3) a further extension (in cooperation with teaching staff from Georgia State University, USA) of my previous research related to use of drugs among youth and the possible role of spirituality in the limitation of this phenomenon. My teaching and administrative roles will undoubtedly continue to provide important incentives for the further development of the areas of research which are presented in this thesis, alongside other areas.