Spirituality in social work in a secularized context.

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Introduction

While there is a wide-spread debate about spirituality and social work in contexts where religion is prominent, like the USA, there is less debate on the subject in secularized contexts, like Scandinavia. In a secular context, social work is not typically directed to people who have a pronounced spiritual identity. Nor are social workers typically motivated for their job by a clear religious identity. The following discussion focuses especially on social work at a structural or systemic level. However, in order to illustrate the functioning of the system, personal examples are drawn upon. Spirituality is presented as a perspective, which can rectify some of the dysfunctions of the system. This critique does not imply that we can disregard the need for economizing the resources made available for social work. The needs of disempowered people are limitless, so some prioritization and rationalization has to be done. However, when the logic of rationalization leads to ignore human needs, then it should be corrected.

Social work and Religion in Scandinavia

Social work consists of an institutionalized extension of the social care, which is the foundation of all social life. Traditionally, social work has been either carried by kins who were subject to a normative bond, which was legitimated by religion in a very basic sense, as indicated by the classic studies of Durkheim (2001) and Simmel (1997). Historically, the extension of social care to people beyond the kith and kin has been motivated by religion. In our European history, social work originated as diaconia, Christian welfare which included all humans as brethren. The tale about the good Samaritan underlined, that even those who did not share your beliefs ought to be subject of a divinely inspired compassion. During the reformation, a series of welfare institutions which originated in the church, were secularized. Along with the wealth of the Church, the King also took over its services for the poor. This initiated the establishment of the public well-fare institutions, which characterize the modern welfare state. With the Reformation and secularization of church holdings, the social responsibility associated with the tithes went to the

Crown. However, religious groups continued to organize different strands of social work. Pietists organized work among people tempted by sinfulness, such as alcohol, prostitution, and asylums for children without parents. What is less noticed is the fact that Enlightenment Protestants – in Denmark associated with Grundtvig – not only organized free schools and open colleges by also social work among children and homeless people. The religious origins of social institutions can still be noticed today in a special spirit within many social institutions in the Nordic countries.

Nevertheless, religion is to-day generally regarded as irrelevant and even dysfunctional for social work. The public well-fare system has been subject to a policy of rationalization, which includes the secularization and professionalization of social work. Professional social work is supposedly based on competence in a field of knowledge, based on scientific evidence. Public institutions are organized according to a limited set of functions, and their operations are based on calculations of how to fulfill these functions with a minimum of allocated resources. Operations are internally controlled by regulations by formalized rules and their degree of success is measured by 'evidence-based' indicators of their functions versus their usage of resources, a weighing costs and benefits.

The Meaning of Social Work

In principle, the term social work involves all social activities which sustain social life. Social work cannot be regarded as a special competence which demands a professional training. Even among professional social worker, a range of activities are involved, which are more or less distanced from the persons to be aided, and which ranges from administration or teaching to direct physical work for helpless people.

According to the International Federation of Social Workers: "The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being." This definition is obviously very wide, overlapping social activities in civil society as well as political activities and economic activities.

The following discussion rests on this comprehensive understanding of social work. This implies, that social work is not limited to the resort ascribed to the Ministry of Social Affairs in Denmark and similar ministries in other countries; neither is it limited to the activities of professional social workers. Social problems go across several institutional spheres: housing, employment, health, family relations and so forth. The resort of the Ministry of Social Affairs points to "children, youth and family", "marginalized adults", "disabled people", and "elderly people". However, it also includes "A civil society that works across fields such as social affairs, health, housing, integration, employment, school and sports to tackle social issues". This indicates a laudable recognition of the complexity of social work in a late modern society. The inclusion of voluntary work and non-governmental organizations also points to recognition of the limits of a systemic rational approach to social problems. Thus, the following discussion does not confront the a prevailing social policy entirely; it merely asks what the full implication of the proclaimed support for civil society in social work is, especially regarding support for spiritually motivated types of social work, whether voluntary or professional.

The concept of spirituality

It is necessary here to clarify the terminology. For many modern Europeans, 'religion' is associated with the Christian church as a prototype. They have difficulties with relating to religion without churches, such as islam, or religion without a deity, such as Buddhism,

Shinto, or modern varieties of spiritualism for that matter. Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (2000) have formed an ideal-type model of religiosities in modern times, based on the relationship between humans, deities and nature. Their spectrum of religion in modern times consists of 'religions of difference', which distinguish sharply between God and the human and natural; 'spiritualities of life' which stress the fundamental identity between the divine, the human and the natural; and, finally, 'religion of humanity', which regards the human as an image of the divine, and relations to nature as a consequence of the human relationship with divinity (2000 pgs 2-3). In the present discussion, religion refers to all three types of religion and their combinations, and spirituality refers to commitment to religion, rather than only to mysticism, Gnosticism, Sufism or modern 'spiritualities of life'. Spirituality thus refers to including a transcendental dimension in considerations about human life and its problems. Human life is thus considered to be not only determined by physical, physiological, and material conditions. It includes a psycho-logical dimension in the basic sense of a 'psyche' or spirit, and a socio-logical dimension characterized by a collective consciousness which cannot be broken down to a constellation of egotistic interests. It is this transcendental dimension which seems to be absent in the kind of instrumental rationalization which predominates the whole range of human services in modern times.

A spiritual stance implies to ascribe absolute worth and dignity to human life, and to embed individuals in a collective history. This opens for a mutual responsibility between individuals and the community they belong to. By a spiritual stance, responsibility is not limited to following rules or each person's egotistic interests. The 'social' content of social work depends on a collective conscience, based on affective bonds rather to rational calculations of personal interests. A spiritual stance does not necessarily point to religion in the sense of 'religions of difference'. However, both 'religions of humanity' and 'spiritualities of life' contain a corresponding value foundation.

It is, of course, possible to imagine agnostic ideologies which also correspond with humanistic values. However, at a closer analysis, such humanistic ideologies have historically been derived from religion. Thus, the Western notion of human rights as expressed by the American Constitution, the French revolution originated historically from

deism, the theology behind ‘religions of humanity’ in the West. The foundation of these values are not ‘self-evident truths’, but founded on a certain view on the relationship between the human and the deity. This is the reason why many Muslims cannot follow the UN declaration on human rights, which tried to establish the ideals of humanistic values as universal.

Spirituality is not a universally human characteristic or a human need. Nor is spirituality inherently more ethical than agnostic views on life. This paper only claims that spirituality can be a source of humanifying social work in a Western context. However, this depends on the kind of spirituality and especially its view on suffering humans. Some varieties of spirituality claim that such suffering are due to God’s will or to the person’s own lack of will. Such varieties will hardly contribute to empowering the sufferers.

Social work as a calling and a profession

Max Weber argued that the spirit of modernity was historically derived from a notion of calling, which originated from Protestantism. We can here bracket the long discussion about the Protestant Ethic and consider the idea of a calling, for the honour of God and the benefit of one’s neighbours. The notion of having a calling can be contrasted with a purely instrumental attitude, where work is regarded as just a means to obtain wealth. Work in social institutions was formerly presented as expressing a calling. Thus, nurses were not supposed to be married. Simultaneously, relations to poverty and social needs were often noticeably cynical, such as when leftover children were subject to public auctions. Secularization has not expelled the notion of having a calling in social work. According to the European values survey, typical Scandinavians regard their job as having an intrinsic value (Pettersson & Riis eds 1994). The job forms a network of colleagues and it provides a sense of worth, which does not just depend on its payment. This probably also holds for social workers. In this sense, we can still trace a sense of calling in modern secularized Scandinavians’ attitudes to their work.

This sense of calling was formerly expressly based on religion. There have been many attempts to inspire a sense of calling, based on a secular ideology. Nationalism thus forms a source of calling among the military personnel and other officials. The core of nationalist

appeal may be regarded as a ‘civil religion’ in the sense of Rousseau and Bellah (1967). A civil religion resembles ordinary religions in their social functions of providing solidarity and a foundation of moral values. However, a civil religion is based on a minimum of tenets which are supposed to be acceptable to all sensible citizens.
State ideologies, such as Nazism and fascism represent extreme cases of calling. However, modern corporations also try to inspire a sense of commitment to the firm, which extends beyond contractual obligations. In Japanese corporations, the notion of calling is expressed in symbols and rituals. It should be noticed that Japanese corporate symbols often have a religious association, and that the obligation is dual. By incorporating a member, both parties are under obligation, the employer as well as the employee. This aspect is often conspicuously absent in Western corporations, which allow themselves to fire experienced employees in order to get in young and innovative ones.
In the sector of social work, the sense of a calling is limited to the job-situation, but it is not absent. Florence Nightingale and her siblings may be extinct, but there is still a sense of worth, usefulness and dignity in the job. The problem is what responsibility the job refers to. Whether it is the institution or the humans which need the services. The religious sense of calling set the agent in responsibility to God. The modern sense of calling is in service systems managed by a set of evidence-based indicators reduced. Your responsibility is limited to performing your task, and let the system obtain good ratings. This narrowing of responsibility may be seen at first as a clarification and relief. It is also the source of the dysfunctions, we noticed above.

We have above referred to IFSW. As its foundation for social work IFSW refers to: “Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.” It refers further to: “Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action.” This description and legitimization of the field is based on a humanitarian approach which is supposedly secular or non-religious. It is, however, questionable whether this humanistic approach is actually self-legimating and devoid of hidden spiritual references.

Purposive rationality

Modernization is associated with a certain logic of instrumental or purposive rationality, or – in Max Weber's terms – Zweckrationalität (1968). Activities is modern institutions are subject to means-ends calculations, where effects, money, time, space and technical resources are central parameters. This leads to subdivide complex human challenges into subsets, where each focuses on a measurable effect. Complexity is thus solved by a serial purposive rationality. Max Weber contrasted the predominant instrumental kind of rationality, which calculates means and ends with a rationality which pursues values, without regard for the costs. Value rationality can either lead to fanaticism or terrorism on the one hand or to heroic self-sacrifice on the other. Those monks who cared for lepers and plague victims, Florence Nightingale and Mother Theresa did not act emotionally but were guided in their rational acts by a specific value. Max Weber also noticed that calculated purposive actions do not ensure substantive rationality. This depends on the purpose or values. Concentration camps were organized according to instrumentally rational guidelines. In a paradoxical manner, instrumental rationalism becomes a value in itself for the social system, without providing guiding values for the rationalized actions.

The prevailing kind of instrumentalized rationality tries to reduce complex problems of human life into a set of malfunctions. Each problem can thereby be handled effectively and the handling can be measured and evaluated objectively. Health thus becomes a matter of physiological malfunction, exercise a matter of training muscles, and therapy a matter of handling mental blocks. In most cases, human problems are individually focused, despite being interrelated to other problems. Human challenges are thus typically regarded as derived from individual conditions and to be solved by individually focused actions. The human problem is seldom seen as complex, involving several interrelated malfunctions and interconnected people.

A purely systematized purposive rationalization may lead to unintended, dysfunctional consequences. While purposive rationalization has shown its worth with regard to many technical problems, it is more problematic with regard to human, social problems. Therefore, we need to consider the limitations of this type of rationality. This consideration logically leads to ask about alternatives. As modern social institutions are subject to secularization, we may ask ourselves what became lost by this, and whether some kind of

spiritual approach could help us better to notice the potential dysfunctions of purposive rational types of social work.

The instrumentalization of social work

The Danish Ministry of Social Affairs rightly point to the need of co-ordination and symbiotic actions between several social subsystems, and 'civil society' as a resource for voluntary or ngo-based social work. However, to take such an integrated approach also means to take up a struggle against the manner, in which the late modern bureaucratic state operates.

The most complex cases of social work refer to the most helpless, disempowered co-humans, small children, patients in coma, demented persons in retirement homes. These people need help to function in their daily lives. In such cases, the term 'social labour' is appropriate, since it consists of physical labour and human interaction. This type of social work is generally poorly paid and low in prestige. If the only job motivation is money, status, power, career, then work becomes a sour duty in such institutions. If instrumental rationality predominates, and work is organized by control schemes, then series of dysfunctions will emerge. the people services become reified, and the services regarded as a series of distinct tasks. This view automatically leads to situations where "operation succeeded, patient died".

I have unsystematically observed an institution for retired people. A member of the staff passed an elderly lady who conversed with a doll. The helper was busy, but still took time to give the old lady a caress and a smile and a remark. She did not know anybody observed her. It was not part of her work schedule. But it gave her work a human meaning to herself and maybe the old lady too. Another story is about an elderly lady at the same institution who called for a very long time for help. When the helper finally arrived, and the elderly lady complained, she was told that she was welcome to find another place to live. This remark was not only condescending. It also stressed the disempowerment of the old lady. She did not dare to complain. And by the way, the new supervisor of the department has not visited her once during the six months since she took over the task. She seems too busy filling out plans.

These people are in the hands of the staff; and if the staff is not humanly oriented, then they are lost. Evidence-based measurements do not humanify the attitude of the staff. Statements about human values in a instrumentally regulated system can even become symbols of hypocrisy. The basic problem with organizing social work according to instrumental rationality is not only that it differentiates peoples' problems, but also that it basically reifies humans, and thereby implicitly allows the staff to regard the job as related to operations rather than to humans.

Rationalized Work in Social Systems

Advocates for a systems theory perspective on social work and evidence-based practices – such as Peter Sommerfeld (2005) – tend to present the advance of systematization and purposive rationality as an inherent consequence of modernization. Thereby, a certain structural construction is presented as unavoidable and necessary for establishing well-functioning societies with a high standard of material living. Such a view is clearly ideological, in the terms of Anthony Giddens (1995).

It is ideologically misleading to present 'the Western model' of an institutionalized system as a historical destiny or social necessity. We not only have choices about our own lives within the given systemic framework, we can also chose the direction of our collective social system. Shmuel Eisenstadt (1987) has clearly demonstrated that there are several models for modern society, and that the Western one is but one option with good and bad features. Furthermore, when we regard social institutions, several different varieties can be found in Western societies, as pointed by Jørgen Goul Andersen. The secularized Scandinavian model described above represents but one solution to the challenges of modern society, and it is not even proven to be the most effective one.

The drive for establishing effective social systems produces new types of social problems. Their efforts to obtain a comprehensible human guidance are often frustrated by the lack of manpower. A more profound example concerns the consequences of concentrating services in larger cities leaves. This leaves many elderly people with reduced mobility living in the country-side, with a series of new problems. They were formerly able to cope

with their daily life, but now find it difficult with communicating with the it-based system, and problematic to contact somebody who can give personal advice or to travel to a public service in the city. To move an elderly person from the country side to a distant hospital or institution also means to break up daily social bonds and threaten that person with isolation.

By differentiating the institutions, co-ordination and prioritization become more problematic. Responsibility for these issues is lifted up to a political-bureaucratic level, where they tend to disappear due to murky compromises, incomprehensible econometric models and bureaucratic complications. The managers are only held responsible for the narrow evidence-based criteria set up by the controlling institutions. The human responsibility is not a general theme, but only emerges in the media as they pick up single stories about the victims of systemic dysfunction.

Max Weber saw the advance of instrumental rationality as an necessary feature of modernization, and Niklas Luhmann took this view even further in his theory about the advancement of self-referential (autopoietic) systems in modern society (1995). However, Jürgen Habermas pointed out that the functioning of a human, democratic society also calls for a life-world, which is not subject to instrumental rationality (1981). It is due to communicative interaction in the life world that people can become humans, and relate to others as co-humans. If the life-world were completely colonized, it agents would become robots in a social system guided by an overarching, unquestioned rationale. Some totalitarian ideologies have that aim. It can even be developed within a society which is formally democratic, but where the citizens do not have a real choice about the major decisions about the structure and the major priorities. In such a total systemic society, social work consists of conforming people to the standardized roles, and to exclude those who cannot or will not conform. A purely systemic society is efficient, according to its given values, predictable and safe for those who conform to its standards and follow its rules. Those persons who do not fit into the system are excluded, muted and made invisible. In extreme cases, they are doped or interned in institutions.

A systemic society is based on an instrumental rational effort to control and rationalize emotions in human interaction. As pointed out by Arlie Hochschild, service jobs try to rationalize emotions (1983). For instance, air hostesses are trained to express the right

emotions to their clients. Social work also involves programmed emotional contact. Social workers are supposed to control or hide their 'personal' feelings towards their clients. This implies to learn to put on a neutrally-friendly mask notwithstanding the clients expression of frustration, anger, or love. When clients call for human contact and personal assistance, they are met by a self-controlled role performer. Form a professional point of view, the emotional barrier may be necessary. However, it also blocks the kind of human empathy that the client asks for. The social worker may present professional values such as justice, recognition and even solidarity, but not personal ones such as friendship, love, annoyance or anger. The social worker is supposed to put on a mask of professional sympathy, but efforts to get beneath the mask are typically deflected, resulting in a mutual frustration. Social problems can sometimes call for a good scolding from a friend, a psychological kick in the arse, but that role is not allowed for professional social workers.

Ivan Illich confronted the irrationalities of modern institutions (1995). Thus he pointed out, that jet flights did not win travel time, if we take into account the amount of time it takes to produce, maintain and operate such planes. Also, he noticed that hospitals not only solve actual health problems, but also generate new health problems. In his spirit, we may add that rationalized institutions for social work also produce dysfunctional consequences. In some instances, social work may disempower people. They may adapt the rationalized, reified look at themselves, and see themselves as useless tools for an economic system. They may turn into mindless robots or permanent clients, instead of contributing to re-empowering them as valuable social agents.

Spirituality, empowerment and the search for meaning

People who encounter major problems not only seek for practical assistance. They typically also want to find a meaningful interpretation of their situation. Some situations can be ascribed to accidents or destiny. Such situations are seen as beyond human control. However, if the person is supposed to engage in solving the problem, then it calls for an explanation.

Religions have provided kinds of answers to human problems. They were regarded as derived from evil spirits or the inscrutable will of a deity. Religions thereby provided a theodicy, which allowed them to adopt to the situation. As pointed out by Peter Berger, the

sense of an anomic chaos seems worse than an adoption to an alienated determination (1967).

In a culture, where scientific explanations predominate, religion can hardly provide a convincing theodicy for physiological, psychological or social problems. Nevertheless, A sense of meaning is still called for. Meredith McGuire's study of ritual healing groups in suburban America indicate that such activities were seldom regarded as an alternative to scientific medicine, but rather as a supplement to it (1988). Ritual healing provided explanations, actions which gave a sense of empowerment, and a supportive social network; functions which are not fulfilled by the rationalized health system.

Despite the general trend of secularization, spirituality has come back in the interface of the health and social institutions, namely in hospices which care for the terminally ill. People who just wait to die need something beyond basic medical care, especially a sense of meaning. Thus, the spiritual dimension has in an unnoticed way crept into palliative care. In Denmark, voluntary social workers in palliative care are increasingly mobilized, and typically through organizations with a religious profile.

Charles Taylor points to the limits of the pursuit of happiness in secular society: "..as a result of the denial of transcendence, we are left with a view of human life which is empty, cannot inspire commitment, offers nothing really wirth while, cannot answer the cravings for goals we can dedicate ourselves to." (2007 pg 717) Existential void is certainly a human and social problem but not one which is addressed by social work.

In modern, secularized institutions, social work is not supposed to contribute to provide a meaningful interpretation of human problems. The problems are thus not referred to in a larger ideological, historical or spiritual perspective. That is seen as an inappropriate interference. Social workers are not supposed to address peoples' life style, and admonish them about moral obligations to themselves and others. Also social workers are not supposed to assist humans to confront systems which oppress, utilize and victimize them. They are supposed to alleviate a problematic present situation, not to empower the person to change the social processes which resulted in the situation. Sometimes, social work

collects a group of people in a similar situation in order to make them interpret it, share it and aid each other to solve their shared problem. Such group processes often have a spiritual character. They are typically established for confronting personally induced problems, such as alcoholism. Collectively induced social problems are typically ascribed to political agencies, while social work is assumed to be politically neutral. However, one kind of collectively induced social problems is hardly addressed at all, namely problems derived from a reified stance to human issues.

Kantian ethics is based on not regarding humans as worthy and not reducing them to purposes. This humanistic ethical stance seems to be based on secular rationality, but it is rather historically derived from a 'religion of humanity'. Modern system-building which allow institutions to pursue their autopoietic logic as effectively as possible undermine the Kantian ethics. Each systemic institution allows itself to limit its social responsibility to a particular function. It is notesworthy, that Luhmann's systems theory had to add a 'contingency function' which was ascribed to religion. However, it is highly questionable whether the quest for meaning can be solved through a differentiated subsystem, rather than by considering the interrelation of the system and especially its lack of coordination and integration.

Exit

A social policy which is guided by a pure Instrumental rationality neglects its human character. It expressly tries to exclude human emotion from the calculus of means and ends. This view on humans is akin to Asperger's syndrome, albeit at a systems level.

To see the fellow human in another person implies to recognize a sense of belonging together through a sacred bond, a fundamental social conscience. This is the 'spiritual' core of all social work, whether voluntary or professional. Our awareness about the danger of reification, cynicism, and abuse depends on the 'spiritual' core.

Religion must not be seen as a universal answer to the threat of reification. As noticed above, religion may be characterized by a variety of relating the human and the deity. Religions of difference may take a stance which subjugates human beings to God, which

regards man as inherently sinful living in a world of vain temptation. This stance demands than humans subjugate themselves to the deity and its authorities in the world. It may provide an existential certainty, but it is based on an alienated stance, as the agent is disempowered in relation to the deity. Spiritualities of life can be a source of confronting the reification of humans, as they tend to regard life as a divine manifestation. However, this approach does not in itself ensure human empowerment as active agents in this world. Some varieties of spirituality tend to regard the problems of the material world as illusionary and the road to liberation as one of escaping from boundaries of the material world. They appeal to resignment and adaptation instead of Instead of empowering people to confront the sources of their social problems. Religions of humanity vary according to the divine model of and for humanity. Some varieties may criticize reification and social atomization, and mobilize for a collective human empowerment. Others may focus on empowerment of individuals within the social system. Varieties which stress individual empowerment could legitimate a self-affirmative egocentrism and refuse compassion for the disempowered. Thus, only some types of religion contain the kind of 'spirituality' which aim to empower human agents in social work in order to overcome reification and insulation. These types are not based on a specific theology – or view of God - but rather on a specific anthropology – or view of humans. They can probably be found among many established religions. The prevailing kind of 'humanism' in Western Europe is historically based on the emergence of a Christian religion of humanity since the Renaissance. It can hardly be regarded as universal, or self-evident to all rational humans. Its basic value of humanism is based on beliefs which are of a 'spiritual' character in a wider sense, namely belief in the sanctity of the human spirit.

A 'spiritual' stance does not give license to discard all rationality. The needs of powerless clients are, of course, immense. Some sense of priority and rationalization is called for. Not all humans are inherently nice, good, and just. Empowerment is not an unconditional goal in itself. Empowering a mass murder like Breivik could result in another mass murder. The point is rather that a spiritual stance allows to recognize the people involved in social problems as being fellow humans with an inner 'spirit' which should not be extinguished. This involves recognizing their problems as humanly related – not just as practical or technical or economic – and social, involving the context of interpersonal relations – not

merely individual. Empowerment involves a co-human recognition, and one source of addressing it is through 'spirituality' in the wide sense indicated above.

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