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Perspectives of a Macro Practitioner

By

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It was a Vision Quest that turned his life around. It was a Vision Quest that initiated his journey from an alcohol dependent street-person at death's door to that of a successful artist, happy husband and proud father. It was this story and others like it that provoked the reflections for this paper. As a trained social worker, I observed members of the Aboriginal community talking about spirituality; they were talking openly about it being an essential part of their healing. For me, spirituality was a private matter. It was not part of my training at the masters or doctoral level, and as noted by Michael Shane McKernan (2004) it was "beyond the pale of the credible professionalism that we sought to attain – 'just don't go there' summed it up nicely" (p. iii). Even now, I must admit a certain uneasiness about addressing a topic that is so intensely personal, powerful and even political. For the past twenty-five years my practice as a social worker has been primarily in the area of community development and social policy. Hence, my reflections will be confined to those areas of practice.

Academic literature, popular media and conferences such as this suggest a resurging interest in religion and spirituality. At a conference held earlier this month journalists noted that fear and aging are prompting people to ask "Big Life" questions that will probably lead to more media coverage on the topic (Fear and Aging, 2006). Walsh (2003) suggests that "a breakdown of communities and the fraying of our social fabric, accompanied by a widespread sense of social isolation, powerlessness, and despair" have contributed to this renewed interest in religion and spirituality (p.4). Much has been written about spirituality and religion, spirituality and aging, spirituality and psychotherapy, women and spirituality, and spirituality and the environment. Daryl Koehn (2004) also notes a recent wave of books on business and spirituality; he

"sardonically observed that there must be more Zen in American boardrooms than in Buddhist monasteries" (p.1). Given this expanding discourse on religion and spirituality, what are the implications for the macro areas of social work practice?

The link between religion and spirituality is well established in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism (Osborne, 1996). What we observe in the story of the Vision Quest is a return to the earlier traditions of the Aboriginal people. A search for meaning and healing that could be found in the spiritual teachings of the past; in their respect for mother earth and in oneness of spirit. Karen Armstrong (2006) in her recently released book "The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions" suggests we too look to earlier times for spiritual meaning. As we face problems that "seem particularly intractable" and face a future that is "increasingly uncertain" she suggests "we can find inspiration in the period that the German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age because it was pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity" (pp. xi, xii). She points out that:

> From about 900 to 200 BCE, in four distinct regions, the great world traditions that have continued to nourish humanity came into being: Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece. This was the period of the Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Jeremiah, the mystics of the Upanishads, Mencius, and Euripides. During this period of intense creativity, spiritual and philosophical geniuses pioneered an entirely new kind of human experience. Many of them worked anonymously, but others became luminaries who can still fill us with emotion because they show us what a human being should be. The Axial Age was one of the most seminal periods

of intellectual, psychological, philosophical, and religious change in recorded history; there would be nothing comparable until the Great Western Transformation, which created our own scientific and technological modernity. (p. xii)

I will return to this idea of "spiritual archaeology", but first a point of clarification (Armstrong, 2006, p. xii). The terms religion and spirituality are often used interchangeably, but numerous authors have noted a distinction. Take, for example, Mary Malone's (2001) account of the spiritual life of women in the medieval world. Women known as Beguines practiced a form of spirituality that "seemed to depend more on the inner wisdom and the direct contact with the Holy Spirit rather than on the dialectic of the new theology of the schools" (Malone, 2001, p. 126). The "Beguines raised questions about the place of the scriptures in the life of the ordinary Christian and the nature of prayer" and despite "their unique gifts" they were rejected (p.124). They were considered heretics and banished from the Christian church. Malone described it as a "lost opportunity" as this women's movement of approximately two centuries in duration could have altered the history of Christianity (p.124). Spirituality, in many forms, exists both inside and outside of the religious traditions. Walsh (2003) makes the following distinction. Religion, she describes as an

> …organized belief system that includes shared, and usually institutionalized, moral values, beliefs about God or a Higher Power, and involvement in a faith community. Religions provide standards and prescriptions for individual virtue and family life grounded in core beliefs. Particular ideas and practices are often

considered to be right or true and go unquestioned. Congregational affiliation

provides social and health benefits as well as support in times of crisis. (p.5)

Spirituality, on the other hand, has been described as "…an overarching construct,

[that] refers more generally to transcendent beliefs and practices (Walsh 1998); as an

experience "either within or outside formal religious structures, and is both broader and

more personal" (Elkins, 1990); as "that which connects one to all there is" (Griffith &

Griffith, 1999); and as an "active investment in an internal set of values" (p.6). Walsh

further expands the description by acknowledging that "it fosters a sense of meaning,

inner wholeness, harmony, and connection with others –a unity with all life, nature, and

the universe (Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon, & Helmeke, 1994) (as cited in Walsh, 2003, p.

6).

Although the distinction between religion and spirituality has been acknowledged

in the literature, it is something I wondered about when considering the social discourse

in a broader sense. From a social policy perspective, Martin Rein (1974) highlights the

importance of values or world views in the policy making process. Choosing a course of

action, in a policy sense, is usually about competing values. "People who hold positions

of political and/or social power have disproportionate influence on which values are to be

held as important" (as cited in Graham, Swift & Delaney, 2003, p. 162).

Consider the perspectives presented by McKibben in an article titled "The

Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong"; it was published in the

August 2005 edition of Harper's Magazine. McKibben notes that depending on which

poll, and how the question is asked, approximately 85 percent of people in the United

States consider themselves Christians. However, "only 40 percent can name more than

four of the Ten Commandments, and a scant half can cite any four authors of the Gospels"(p. 31). Even more astounding, is that three quarters of the people in the United States believe the Bible teaches that 'God helps those who help themselves'" (p31). According to McKibben, many in the United States actually believe Ben Franklin's words are part of Holy Scripture. However, he goes on to suggest they are actually counter-biblical and supportive of an individualistic culture and its political agenda. The paradox is in the disconnection between the words and the actions. Many in the United States identify themselves as Christians, but if their policy stance is to be judged by a simple criterion such as giving aid to the poor; what would we find?

McKibben points out that, in 2004, as a share of their economy, the United States ranked second last among developed countries in their contributions to foreign aid. On the domestic scene, the record shows that nearly 18 percent of children in the United States lived in poverty (compared with, say, 8 percent in Sweden) (p.32). On measures of childhood nutrition, infant mortality and access to preschool, the United States lagged rather than led the developed nations. McKibben expands his analysis by presenting comparative statistics on such things as divorces rates and murder rates to show that "the idea of Jesus has been hijacked by people with a series of causes that do not reflect his teachings" (p.35). His observation is that:

> [The] consumer gospel of the suburban mega churches is a perfect match for the emergent conservative economic notions about personal responsibility instead of collective action. Privatize Social Security? Keep health care for people who can afford it? File those under "God helps those who help themselves." (p.36)

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It is a United States' "world view" or values perspective that has the power of organized religion behind it, not in the true biblical sense as McKibben has argued, and not in a spiritual sense as I would contend. The point is, religious teachings have drifted and the "bottom line" now replaces the "golden rule." As implied by the statistical comparisons, the United States' world view and their stance on social policy differ from other countries. So, should those outside the United States be concerned? Well, Barlow (2005), Hurtig (2002) and others believe so. The effects of globalization and the signing of various trade agreements, they argued, have caused a harmonization of social policies. When he was Finance Minister of Canada, Paul Martin Jr. publicly announced that the greatest challenge going forward would be for governments to maintain their ability to formulate domestic policy. As Finance Minister, he recognized the external pressures created by the global economy and the prominence of the United States' world view within those pressures.

So, as I reflect on social work and spirituality, I wonder about the dominant discourse and its preoccupation with the bottom line rather than the golden rule. It was, by Kuhn's (1996) criterion, a paradigm shift that occurred around 1980 and coincided with the neo-conservative governments of Thatcher, Reagan and Mulroney. Some trace its beginnings to the mid 1970s with the abandonment of Keynesian economics and a return to Classical, "supply-side" economics. It was described by Reagan as the "trickle down" approach whereby social spending was significantly reduced and financial incentives were provided to individuals and corporations with the ability to create jobs for the unemployed. In theory, tax breaks to the wealthy were to trickle down to the poor, but what has been observed is an ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor.

Perhaps we are ready for another paradigm shift; John Ralston Saul (2005) suggests there could be a collapse of globalism. Perhaps the masses will come to see how inherently unfair the economic policies have been. It is possible, but when I read Bigelow's (2005) article titled "Let there be markets: The evangelical roots of economics" I began to wonder. He argues that the current economic system is also propped up with biblical rendering presented as moral imperatives. At the centre of evangelical doctrine, in the early (1800s), "was the idea of original sin: we were all born stained by corruption and fleshly desire, and the true purpose of earthly life was to redeem this" (p.35). Bigelow notes that:

> … poverty [was regarded] as part of a divine program. Evangelicals interpreted the mental anguish of poverty and debt, and the physical agony of hunger or cold, as natural spurs to prick the conscience of sinners. They believed that the suffering of the poor would provoke remorse, reflection, and ultimately the conversion that would change their fate. In other words, poor people were poor people for a reason, and helping them out of poverty would endanger their moral souls. It was the evangelicals who began to see the business mogul as a heroic figure, his wealth a triumph of religious will. (p.35)

Again, it is a religious interpretation that provides a powerful justification for an economic and political agenda that disadvantages the poor and less fortunate among us.

For a social worker, reflecting on spirituality raises some interesting questions. For example, are there answers for the macro practitioner in the writings of the Saul Alinsky (1969, 1971) who recognized the power imbalance between the Haves and the Have-Nots and believed the only way to assist the Have-Nots was by threatening the

Haves? He saw the opposition as the enemy, and in the battle for equality one of his rules was to "pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it" (Alinsky, 1971, p. 130). Alinsky acknowledged the importance of anger… saying that a deep anger could pitch an organizer into action (Encounter with Alinsky, 1967). In his arrogant and irreverent fashion he was critical of those who cloistered themselves for a life of prayer. Personally, he was willing to "get corrupt" to assist the poor and disadvantaged. "Alinsky encouraged controversy and conflict often to the dismay of middle-class activist who otherwise would sponsor his activism" (Wikipedia). As a social work educator, teaching both community development and social policy over the past eighteen years, I am aware of how widely Alinsky's work has been embraced. In some quarters, he has been considered the "father of community organizing" (Wikipedia), and Rothman (2001) has advanced his ideas on social action based on the work of Alinsky.

When I consider the plight of the poor, the oppressed, and the discrimination that certain groups have faced, I can understand the anger Alinsky talks about. I can also appreciate how his ideas had resonance with those who worked with the marginalized of society. However, as I reflect on social work and spirituality I am left with questions about his approach. Clearly, he was a champion of the poor, but what about his means to the end? What about his rule of picking a target, freezing it, personalizing it, and polarizing it? What about his description of the opposition as the enemy or his use of threats and ridicule to shift the balance of power to the Have-Nots? Can answers to these questions be found in spiritual archeology?

Armstrong (2006) contends that in times of spiritual crisis people have always sought guidance from the past. She notes that "the prophets, mystics, philosophers, and

poets of the Axial Age were so advanced and their vision was so radical that later generations tended to dilute it" (pp. xii, xiii). The religious traditions, as noted earlier, have been interpreted to produce "exactly the kind of religiosity the Axial reformers wanted to get rid of" (p. xiii). My reflections have focused on the Christian tradition, but Armstrong states that "in every single one of the religions of the Axial Age, individuals have failed to measure up to their high ideals. In all these faiths, people have fallen prey to exclusivity, cruelty, superstition, and even atrocity" (p. 390). As we in the present era are facing challenges, so too were the Axial sages, and the most gifted among them realized is that "if you wanted to outlaw brutal, tyrannical behavior, it was no good simply issuing external directives" (p. 391). In the present day, we observe religiously inspired terrorism that is driven by fear, despair and frustration. There is a hatred and rage that would entirely be against the Axial ideals.

So what should our response be? According to Armstrong, the Axial sages give us two important pieces of advice. First, there must be self-criticism. Rather than pointing fingers and laying blame we must look at our own behavior. Armstrong cites examples from the actions of the Jewish prophets to the Indian doctrine of karma. She says that "the piety of the Axial Age demanded that people take responsibility for their own actions" (p. 394). She further notes that:

> The Indian doctrine of karma insisted that all our deeds have long-lasting
> consequences; blaming others without examining how our own failings might have
> contributed to a disastrous situation was unskillful, unrealistic, and irreligious. So
> too in our current predicament, the Axial sages would probably tell us, reformation
> must start at home. Before stridently insisting that another religion clean up its act,

we should look into our own traditions, scripture, and history – and amend our own

behavior. We cannot hope to reform others until we have reformed ourselves. (p.

395)

The Second piece of advice is that "we should follow the example of the Axial sages and

take practical, effective action" (p. 395). The sages confronted aggression in their own

traditions, rewriting and reorganizing their rituals and scriptures to eliminate the violence

that had accumulated over the years. By way of illustration, Armstrong points to the ritual

reformers of India who took the agon (i.e., contest between good and evil) out of the

sacrifice; Confucius who took the aggression out of the ancient creation stories; and

Yahweh who blessed all his creatures (p.395).

Given the sages position on violence, anger and aggression one has to question

the ideas of Saul Alinsky as a means to addressing the power imbalances in societies that

have oppressed and marginalized people. If an argument could be made for the spiritual

qualities of Alinsky's work it seems to me one would have to turn to other sources for

support.

In the Axial Age, a sage's search was for a cure to the spiritual malaise of humanity

whereas today scientists search for a cure to cancer. We have different preoccupations.

Armstrong notes that:

The Axial Age was a time of spiritual genius; we live in an age of scientific and

technological genius, and our spiritual education is often undeveloped.

Today we are making another quantum leap forward. Our technology has created a

global society, which is interconnected electronically, militarily, economically, and

politically. We now have to develop a global consciousness, because, whether we

like it or not, we live in one world. Even though or problem is different from that of

the Axial sages, they can still help us.

The sages of the Axial Age provide some wonderful insights with respect to the problems we grabble with today, however, not with respect to women. Armstrong observed that women were on the peripheral during the Axial Age. "The sages were not out and out misogynist like some of the fathers of the church, for example. They were men of their time, and so preoccupied with the aggressive behavior of their own sex that they rarely gave women a second thought" (p.xvii). Answers to women and spirituality were not provided in the case in the Beguines and nor do the Axial provide any spiritual solace. Hence, on the question of women and spirituality one must look elsewhere. Chittister claims that the patriarchal worldview that has held the basis for many religious and spiritual belief systems deprives and unequivocally denigrates humanity. We must be open to learning from past mistakes, a past structured on values such as power, hierarchy, conformity, exclusivity and inequality. Chittister notes, "religion itself, the great value agent of culture, is being re-evaluated for patriarchal distortion of its liberation roots" (p.32).

Much can be learned through "spiritual archaeology" and as Aldous Huxley said "If one is not oneself a sage or saint, the best thing one can do is study the works of those who were" (cited Vardy p.435).

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