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Christian Values and Ethical Values in the Professionalized Social Work Practice

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Abstract: *Within this theoretical analysis, we will approach social work as a professional practice starting from these six values stated by NASW - service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence - which the specialized literature also considers as a starting point in understanding and deepening social work.*
It is valuable to understand how the social work of the 21st century, under the pressure of continuous socio-economic changes, is still grounded in biblical teaching, which over time has supported humanity's understanding of human value, of the intrinsic dignity of every human being as he is created in the image and likeness of God. Each value that guides the NASW practice will be briefly analyzed, considering their relationship of interdependence. We observe, therefore, how each value that underpins social work, as developed by international practices, supports another grounding value. Both secular and Christian values have an interconnected relationship towards the fulfillment of the highest interest of the person in need.

Keywords: *Christian values; professional values; social work ethics; code of ethics; professional practice.*

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Introduction

Developed as a practice from several fields of social action and understanding of the context of individual development, such as psychology, sociology, politics, economics, criminology, education, health, ecology, law, philosophy, anthropology, counselling, psychotherapy, social work has become a profession that supports and promotes social transformation and development, social connection, empowerment and freedom of individuals among their peers, under the power of co-responsibility.

Over time, the practice of social work has received several definitions, which together include both the values that underpin the practice, as well as the benefits brought to individuals and society.

According to the International Federation of Social Workers, social work can be defined as follows: "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being" (International Federation of Social Workers, IFSW, 2014).

We reproduce for further elaboration the definition approved by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2002), which refers to the principles and techniques that underpin the professionalization of social workers, by fulfilling some goals: "supporting people to obtain tangible services; counselling and psychotherapy with individuals, families and groups; enabling communities or groups to provide or improve social and welfare assistance and to participate in legislative processes. Practicing social work requires knowledge of human development and behaviour; of social and economic and cultural institutions; "(NASW, 2002).

It is important and valuable to understand how social work manifests itself in practice towards the fulfilment of principles and moral values that ultimately deserve the highest good of the individuals for whom this practice is built and developed. We used the NASW approach to describe those ethical principles that underpin social work as a professional practice, precisely to honour the origins of professionalized social work temporally framed in the 19th century. We see the current ethical principles, as grounding the practice from its beginning. The foundation of such an action is built on healthy interpersonal relations towards fulfilling the well-being of as many individuals as possible. NASW's code of ethics includes a

series of 6 ethical principles, which are obviously based on 6 values, being considered both prescriptive and proscriptive (NASW, n.d.; Berg-Weger & Murugan, 2022). *Service* — helping people in need and providing pro bono services; *Social justice* — engaging in socially transformative work for and with people to promote social justice and challenge social injustice; *Dignity and value of people* - treating people with care and respect, showing sensitivity to cultural and ethnic diversity, promoting self-determination of socially responsible people; *The importance of human relations* – maintaining positive relations with the beneficiaries/ clients; good interpersonal relations are vital in determining changes; social workers enter into relationships with people as partners who empower them through the help process; *Integrity* — involves social workers by responding honestly and responsibly to build trust; social workers become responsible both for their own ethics and integrity, as well as for the service organization they represent in the process of individual transformation; *Competence* — involves practicing and developing expertise as a social worker and perpetually seeking to improve and contribute new professional knowledge and skills (NASW, Code of Ethics, n.d; Siedlecki et al. 2014).

The Code of Ethics of the largest professional social work association in the United States (NASW) encompasses this set of principles rooted in six core values (Siedlecki et al. 2014). We consider the connection between these values stipulated by NASW, as seemingly secular values, with Christian values worthy to be analysed.

Social services are now adapted to a technological world and subject to the urgency of all actions, and the professionals in the field are adapting in their practice, but without discounting the Christian values in which social work originates. It is valuable to understand how the social work of the 21st century, under the pressure of continuous socio-economic changes, is still grounded in biblical teaching, which over time has supported humanity's understanding of human value, of the intrinsic dignity of every human being as he is created in the image and likeness of God. The Bible is also the source of teaching about the value of knowledge and wisdom that comes from studying the Holy Scriptures and offers those values and principles that social workers use as a foundation for their practice, even if we are witnessing secularized values.

Service and altruism

As NASW defines, to be in service for someone, from the social work point of view, equals to help the one who is in need without expecting something in return, to work in his/her favour pro bono. Social work aims

to empower individuals, families and communities. *Service* is the value from which all other values of social work come, which we understand in terms of Christian value through *altruism*, *solidarity, charity*. According to Sandu & Caras (2013) social work as a charitable practice is grounded on a process of secularization of charity. This process transforms a Christian value of charity to a general human one, allowing the transition from the Christian morality of helping one's neighbour to the ethical understanding of charity as a social responsibility. We associate it as such, as social workers regularly elevate the needs of their communities above their own personal interests and use their skills and abilities, expertise, to bring about positive change in the well-being of the others. Moreover, social workers provide their experience and/or the time, often beyond their professional commitments.

In a theological analysis, we can observe how the Old and New Testament highlight theological virtues, such as: faith, hope, love for your neighbour altruism, solidarity, compassion, patience, purity etc.

From a Christian perspective, moral values as they are accepted at the social level, are essentially originated in Divinity, and are absolute: "Do not owe anything to anyone, except to love one another; that he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law" (Romans 13, 8); "For the whole Law is contained in one word, in this: Love your neighbor as yourself" Galatians 5, 14; And if we refer to the common destiny given by the divinity under whose power all come together, the Christian idea of the existence of a unitary Whole comes to help in the manifestation of Christian faith in social practices (Matthew 25, 35-40, Holy Scripture, 1991). Thus, when you serve the other, you are actually serving God (Radu, 2020). The divine commandment "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22, 39) and "love does no harm to your neighbor, love is therefore the fulfilment of the Law" (Romans 13, 8, Holy Scripture, 1991) is transposed into the present of our lives precisely by what we choose to do in relation to the other in difficulty. Altruism manifests itself by serving the other, being almost indifferent to the context, because in essence this way you are in connection with God. It is very important for social workers to put the other first and serve them as God, because Jesus said "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20, 26-28, Holy Scripture, 1991).

Social Justice – what it is and how Christians manifest it?

The Bible transforms social justice into a mandate of faith and a fundamental expression of Christian discipleship. Adam Taylor in his article from the official World Vision webpage opines how social justice has its biblical roots in a Trinitarian God who shows again and again his love and compassion towards the weak, vulnerable, marginalized, disenfranchised, disinherited - definitively towards the disadvantaged. Christians following the manifestation of social justice for those in poverty or injustice are guided by the Divine will (Dearborn, 2009), as the prophets of the Old Testament suggest: "Thus says the Lord: Do judgment and justice and tae out the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor, do not oppress and do not oppress the stranger, the orphan and the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place! (Jeremiah 22, 3, Holy Scripture, 1991).

Starting from the model illustrated in "Deep justice in a broken world [...]" by Clark & Powell (2009), Dearborn (2009) states a series of characteristics of social justice from both a spiritual and a secular perspective, which compares them with the defining features of the social service. For the economy of this work, we will only refer to justice, thus: from justice standpoint, as both the victim and the perpetrator, needs life to be fair, so it addresses the whole world, without differences; it is justice that restores human dignity by creating an environment where all involved "give" and "receive" in mutual learning and mutual service; justice is something we do with others, being a social structure and a way of life; justice hopes to achieve results soon, but recognizes that systemic changes take time, being prepared to remove obstacles, so that others can help themselves; justice focuses on how we can work with others to make life just, addressing the causes of suffering as well as the symptoms (Clark & Powell, 2009; Dearborn, 2009).

Dearborn (2009) identifies seven theological foundations for social justice: *The nature of God*: God exists in a communion of the Trinity, setting the way and pattern for righteous and harmonious sharing among mankind; *Human nature*: All people exist in the image of God and therefore must be treated justly; *God's Will*: God loves all of God's creation and wants all of creation to experience the fullness of life in the harmony, justice and reconciliation of God's kingdom; *God's Establishment of Righteousness in Jesus Christ*: In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God acted decisively to overcome all these it prevents life from being just and establishing the kingdom of God of justice on earth; *God's work through the Christian community*: Because justice involves human life in reconciliation and harmony, human participation as agents of justice is vital. Therefore, God chooses to work

through people to establish justice; *God's work through the Spirit*: God is not limited to human agency. It is the work of the Spirit to convict the world of righteousness (John 16, Holy Scripture, 1991). Therefore, human engagement in justice is rooted in dependence on prayer and discernment, and those who seek justice can celebrate expressions of justice wherever they are found, regardless of the human agent; *God's Ultimate Proposition of Righteousness*: Biblical Faith is rooted in believe that one day the world will be recreated as a domain of justice. Evil, oppression, injustice, and suffering will be removed from the new creation (Dearborn, 2009).

Biblical justice is about people living the way God intended for them to live. Living in accordance with the Divine commandment, it means defending the dignity and rights given by God to all people, including those who are abused, excluded and exploited. Respecting the principle of social justice, having compassion for the needy and helpless, it means following the biblical precept and the Christ model: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11, 28, Holy Scripture, 1991).

Dignity as intrinsic value of the human being

Dignity is defined as the quality of being respected, honored or esteemed. Lam (2007) sees it as a professional that can go in two directions: respect for one's own dignity - self-directed value and respect for the dignity of others. Dignity is the foundation of human rights and many other values are grounded on it, "the 'ultimate value' that gives coherence to human rights" (Hasson, 2003). Social workers believe in the worth and dignity of individuals, groups and communities that they deserve and every effort is made to intervene with a non-judgmental attitude. Christian approach of the human being considers the individual as being gifted with intrinsic value, worth and *dignity*, no matter his/her social status, age, and capacity. Edifying in this sense are the biblical teachings: "So do not be afraid; you are much more valuable than birds" (Matthew 10, 31); "I will praise you that I am such a wonderful creature" (Psalms 138, 13-14); "But God shows his love for us in that, for us, Christ died while we were still sinners" (Romans 5, 8, Holy Scripture, 1991).

From Christian perspective, the individual has Divine origins, as we are made in God's own image and likeness (Kilner, 2015). A social work inspired from Christianity is seen by Radu (2020) as an alternative to the usual categories such as power, wealth, education or social class, which cannot provide happiness and fulfillment to man. Christian thinking on the natural rights of man as the source of the idea of value and human dignity can be the guiding thread of the practice of professional social work.

If we consider the Romanian national specific context, social workers promote the principles of social justice, stipulated in the normative acts regarding social work and social services (Romanian Parliament, Law no. 466/2004, art. 20); ensure equal opportunities regarding assisted persons' access to information, services, resources and their participation in the decision-making process; respects and promotes the dignity of the individual, the uniqueness and value of each one persons (Art. 20); also, social worker must not practice, tolerate, facilitate or collaborate in any form of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender and orientation sexual, age, political or religious beliefs, marital status, physical or mental deficiency, material situation and/or any other preference, characteristic, condition or status (Romanian Parliament, Law no. 466/2004, art. 21).

The value of dignity and worth of the person is transferred into practice by social workers by the principle of respect for individuals' dignity and worth of the person, by promoting the individual's socially responsible self-determination. Moreover, the individuals are supported to change and enhancing their own capacity to address their own needs.

The importance of human relations

The social workers honor the human relations, recognizing their importance for the fulfilling of the greatest good for those who need support in their individual and social change.

In a secular approach the importance of human relations lays in the grounding idea that we are social beings and we grow healthy from physical, spiritual, emotional, mental points of view, in connection with the others. In this respect, social workers engage individuals as partners in their own process of transformation. Also, social workers connect people who need assistance with organizations and people who can provide appropriate help. Social workers recognize that facilitating human relationships can be a useful vehicle for creating change and excel at engaging potential partners who can create, maintain, and enhance the well-being of families, neighborhoods, and entire communities (Kennedy, 2019). In these regards, Christian charitable organizations and churches manifest their willingness in supporting those in need, in the name of God and divine love: "To love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind" - this is the great and first commandment. And the second one: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22, 37-39, Holy Scripture, 1991).

In fact, the practice of social work is based on the development and support of interpersonal relationships. Social work practitioner simultaneously creates relationships at all levels in their practice. The

effectiveness of welfare practices is directly correlated with the skills of the social worker and his competence to manage relationships (Ferguson et al., 2002). The social worker can become an agent of change, through his communication and relational skills.

Integrity – the key to transformative lives

Emerging from the value of the importance of relationships, the value of integrity comes to facilitate these relationships, by empowering people to improve their lives. But any action taken by social workers needs to be based on trust. People will respond positively to the relationship with social workers, only after, through intention, attitude, posture, behavior, the social workers will emanate trust, consciously respecting and assuming the mission, values, principles and ethical standards of the profession. Integrity resides in the possibility of being a good moral example to those to whom it is addressed. By honoring and demonstrating personal integrity, social workers can promote the organizations they are affiliated with while creating the greatest value for the populations they serve - connecting to bring about transformative change in those who need it.

In the Christian view, the integrity is associated with the irreproachable character of God, through the merit of being respected for his correctness. People, being created in the image and likeness of God, are called to manifest themselves as such, with love, honesty, integrity (Aladegbami, 2021). In the Ten Commandments, God exhorts man to be honest, even if the commandments are prohibitive, the ultimate goal is to remain in agreement with the divine likeness: the 7th commandment: Do not be debauched; the 8th commandment: Do not steal; the 9th commandment: Do not bear false witness against your neighbor (Deuteronom 5, 11-21). As such, the social worker will behave with integrity and promote integrity among people they work with: "This is our praise: the testimony of our conscience that we walked in the world, and especially in you, in holiness and divine purity, not in carnal wisdom, but in the grace of God" (II Corinthians 1, 12, Holy Scripture, 1991).

Competence

Among the 6 values that underpin the NASW code of ethics, the value of competence is the one that brings each of the other values into practice. Any profession requires *competence*, and professional social work is based on the *competence of practitioners*. To exercise competence in social work means – from a professional point of view – the ability to implement knowledge and skills to effectively support the well-being of the community,

under the imperative of achieving social justice. In the biblical sense, the professional competence of those who work with people in need, must be accompanied by discernment, love and truth as the Apostle Paul teaches us: "And do not be conformed to this age, but be changed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect (Romans 12, 2, Holy Scripture, 1991). Strive to show yourself tried, before God working with a clean face, righteous teaching the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2, 15, Holy Scripture, 1991). Whatever you do, work with all your heart, as for the Lord and not for men (Colossians 3, 23, Holy Scripture, 1991).

It is the responsibility of the social worker to apply those ethical principles suitable for social change (NASW, nd.). Knowing how to choose the most appropriate ethical approach in solving some social situations or cases is based on a correct and professional evaluation of the dynamics of events.

Conclusions

Biblical justice is about people living the way God intended for us to live. Living in accordance with the Divine commandment, it means defending the dignity and rights given by God to all people, including those who are abused, excluded and exploited. This also means loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. We observe, therefore, how each value that underpins social work, as developed by international practices, supports another grounding value. Both secular and Christian values have an interconnected relationship towards the fulfillment of the highest interest of the person in need.

To serve implies the desire for social justice, while justice comes to defend human dignity and the rights obtained by divine grace. Further, each individual, worthy of being respected for his being, become a link in the interhuman chain of evolution. Each individual is called to take action in the benefit of the community and so the importance of relations arises. Social workers honor the human relations, recognizing their importance for the fulfilling of the greatest good for those who need support in their individual and social change. Emerging from the value of the importance of relationships, the value of integrity comes to facilitate these relationships, by empowering people to improve their lives. All of these values are put into action by the competence of the social workers, guided by ethical and Christian values.

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