

# **Spirituality and Social Work Students in their First Year of Study at a South African University**

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## **ABSTRACT**

President Mandela poses a challenge for social workers and educators with his call to heal old wounds and build a new South Africa. This paper focuses on the identification and development of the internal resources which need to be mobilised for this process: spiritual commitment; experiences of suffering; and interconnectedness with others. These issues were investigated with social work students. The findings have shown that students are committed to values of justice, compassion and hope, and have a profound sense of interconnectedness with others. This can be explained by notions of personhood (*botho/ubuntu*) in Africa. This has implications regarding what is taught and how it is taught; the kinds of relationships social work educators have with their students and how they assist students through their educational journey; and the contributions social work educators themselves make to the development of justice and peace.

## **Introduction**

During all the speeches that President Mandela made over the period of the first South African democratic national election and his inauguration as State President (3-10th May 1994) he repeatedly emphasised that this was the time for healing old wounds and for building a new South Africa. It is a time for reconciliation, reconstruction and development.

This poses challenges for both social workers and social work educators in South Africa. What is needed to facilitate this process? How can students be prepared to face the enormous task that lies ahead of them in the process of 'healing wounds' and of contributing to the healthy development of all South Africans?

For this to happen, it is necessary to mobilise resources: the external structural resources as well as the interpersonal and intrapersonal human resources.

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By means of an exploratory investigation with thirty-five social work students in their first year of study, this paper identifies some internal resources that students bring with them into their social work education. These resources are necessary for the sustained commitment to reconciliation and development in the face of extensive need and woundedness within the people they serve during their field practice – and will serve once qualified. Specifically, this paper focuses on spirituality from the perspective of offering important resources for the development of social justice and the sustained commitment to peace-making in South Africa.

The impetus for undertaking this investigation into students' perceptions of their spirituality, their experiences of suffering and their entry into social work arose from a perusal of students' entry essays into social work. Students identified their reasons for entering social work as relating to their spiritual commitment, their own experience of suffering, their response to the suffering of people and the destruction of the very fabric of the South African society.

A few examples of their reasons are quoted below:

*"Many people in the townships are living a war, not knowing whether they will get up alive in the morning. There are children who see people being shot and hacked to death. They need help even though they cannot afford it."*

*"My religion has taught me that to be truly successful one has to possess qualities of humility, modesty, compassion and dignity."*

*"We are all made in the image of God and if my brother (fellowman) is in trouble so am I."*

*"I am religious and this is a great source of inspiration to me. I have experienced suffering. I have had firsthand experience of the kind of life in the black townships. I have a genuine desire to serve the South African society."*

*"When I see poverty it grieves me."*

This exploratory investigation was undertaken as part of a commitment to the development of indigenous social work where students' perceptions and experiences are seen as valuable and necessary sources of knowledge for educators.

## Spirituality

### *Definitions of Spirituality*

Edwards (1980:234) defines spirituality as:

*"...the underlying dimension of consciousness that openly waits and searches for a transcendent fulfilment of our human nature."*

Johnson (1992:194) describes the essence of spirituality as being:

*"...the urge toward that greater reality, experienced in the psyche as the feeling that there is something we ought to know but don't, a great secret that we are searching for."*

Similarly, Joseph (1987:15) perceives:

*"...that spirituality is at the ground of our being and seeks to transcend the self and discover meaning, belonging and relatedness to the infinite."*

For Joseph (1987:14) spirituality is also closely related to faith. She sees it as a drive, power, or capacity:

*"It is the underlying dimension of consciousness which strives for meanings, union with the universe, and with all things; it extends to the experience of the transcendent or a power beyond us. For believers, it includes one's relationship with and experience of God."*

In linking this need for transcendence with the world of human relationships, Henriot (1992:11) defines spirituality as:

*"...a kind of faith response that enables the work for justice and peace to continue and to continue with strength."*

According to Henriot, the role that spirituality plays in one's life is that of clarifying, motivating and sustaining. Fowler (1981:276-7) identifies three components of faith. Firstly, people have centres of value which are:

*"...the causes, concerns or persons that consciously or unconsciously have the greatest worth to us...and give our lives meaning...and...exert a powerful structuring on our way of seeing and being in the world."*

These centres of value provide motivation. Secondly, there are images of power which we draw on to sustain us in the face of hopelessness and despair. According to Fowler these images of power are not necessarily transcendent. Thirdly, faith is also comprised of master stories which are the symbols: "...by which we interpret and respond to the events that impinge on our lives" (p 277). Essentially master stories clarify for us what we believe to be 'fundamental truth.'

From a resource perspective spirituality offers the opportunity to understand our centres of values which provide motivation; images of power which sustain us during times of defeat; and symbols, master stories, which guide us and give our lives meaning.

To bring this discussion closer to the South African context, spirituality from an African perspective needs to be highlighted.

### ***Spirituality Within an African Context***

Historically, within Africa:

*"...there has been no distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life" (Mbiti, 1971:2).*

When one speaks of spirituality in Africa one talks about a way of life, one talks about life itself (Mbiti, 1975). From an African perspective, spirituality is connected with all aspects of human experience (Kimaro, 1993). Divinity and humanity share life together (Parrinder, 1953).

*"The African...conceives the world beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile yet unique reality that seeks synthesis" (Senghor, 1966:4).*

Setiloane (1986) perceives African spirituality to be the experience rather than the formulation and expression of religion in set terms. It is something lived and practised, not discussed. In fact, African religion is so integrated as a way of life that African languages have no word for religion as such (Setiloane, 1986; Mbiti, 1975). Given this integration, the terms *spirituality*, *religion* and *theology* are used to refer to the same experience.

Inherent in African spirituality is a deep understanding that it consists of very practical actions within relationships in the community. It is precisely this African notion of community that needs exploration in order that its relevance to social work students in their first year of study can begin to make sense. *"The most cherished principle in life-together is to include rather than separate"* (Setiloane, 1986:10). This is the single most important concept within African spirituality. It

is based on the very existence of being human, on one's humanness (*motho/umuntu*). Belonging in community is the root of being human. In Africa I belong, therefore I am. "To be human is to belong to the whole community" Mbiti, 1971:2).

Philosophically, Senghor (1966:4) refers to African notions of the universe which perceive reality to be a:

*"...network of life forces which emanate from God and end in God, who is the source of all life forces. It is God who vitalises and devitalises all other beings, all other life forces."*

Setiloane (1986) looks to African mythology and the presence of *seriti* (dignity) to understand this interconnectedness. One of the myths explaining genesis in Africa is known as "the hole in the ground" myth. This myth accounts for the arrival of men, women, children and animals – all together as a community – on earth from a hole in the ground, having been escorted by Loowe, to fulfil the will of Divinity. In addition to this arrival on earth as a community, the other dynamic accounting for this interconnectedness is the presence of *seriti*. Each human person as well as all living things are filled with Divine energy, which is a vital force. This Divine energy, this vital force of all that lives is in communion and is in dynamic participation. Belonging and being a vital force in participation is made possible by *seriti*. One's *seriti* interplays with another's *diriti*. Parallels are evident in Senghor's work where he suggests that Africans have a certain emotive sensitivity, "...an effective rapport with the forces and forms of the universe, a direct and immediate contact with 'the Other.'" (Ba, 1973:74).

Personhood then, being human (*botho/ubuntu*), is attainable only in community. It is of note that when African spirituality declares that *botho/ubuntu* is a dynamic concept, it refers to all humans not only African people (Setiloane, 1986). What begins to emerge from these insights is an understanding that the destruction of the fabric of the South African society is the destruction of life itself. So, when a student comes into social work because "*poverty grieves me*," one understands that his own humanity is at stake and this impulse comes from deep within his atavistic being.

In the context of understanding the roots of belonging and of personhood (*botho/ubuntu*), another related debate needs to be raised, that of Black Theology. Black Theology (Mosala, 1989; Nolan, 1988; Maimela, 1987; Mosala & Tlhagale, 1986) is the discourse which has attempted to make meaning of the suffering of the Black people of South Africa from a Christian perspective. Black Theology was a product of:

*"...concrete struggles that were being waged by black people....these struggles were themselves a more contemporary expression of the historic struggles of black people against colonialism and capitalism" (Mosala & Itumeleng, 1996:vii).*

It developed out of Christian student circles, in particular out of the 1971 black theological project of UCM (University Christian Movement).

*"Black Theology is an explicit, articulate and scholarly reflection upon the Christian significance of black suffering and oppression in South Africa" (Nolan, 1988:3).*

From this perspective the oppression of African people in all aspects of life could not be ignored. In fact, the Church has been under divine obligation to proclaim liberty to God's people who found themselves suffering (Maimela, 1987).

Black Theology has attempted to restore the destroyed dignity and to reclaim the rightful place of community within the African people of South Africa.

### ***Spirituality and Social Work***

A number of social work authors (Sermabeikain, 1994; Dudley & Helfgott, 1990; Canda, 1988b; Loewenberg, 1988; Joseph, 1987) have expressed that the human experience of spirituality has been somewhat neglected in social work education and practice. However, social work and spirituality has been given greater attention within recent years. The rationale being that the profession is rooted in spiritual notions of human dignity and social justice and that social workers operate from an ecological perspective with the purpose of enhancing the interactions between people and their environments. People should not be seen only as bio/psycho/social beings, but also as beings with an existential dimension. Some of the literature reveals that this realm within social work has been explored in the areas of values (Constable, 1983), theory (Cowley 1993; Canda 1988a), research (Faver 1986), clinical practice (Sermabeikain, 1994; DiBlasio, 1993; Cornett, 1992; Canda, 1988b) and social work education (Sheridan, et al, 1992; Dudley & Helfgott, 1990; Canda, 1989).

### **Social Work Students in their First Year of Study**

In this limited research referred to earlier, an exploratory and qualitative methodology was utilised to discover the significance of spirituality in the lives of social work students in their first year of study at the University of the Witwatersrand.

An administered schedule, containing open-ended questions was the means by which the data was gathered. The contents of the answered questionnaires were analysed and broad themes were identified.

## ***The Students***

Thirty five students took part in the study. The age range was 18 to 41 years, the median age being 20 years 6 months. Seventy percent of the respondents were women and 30% were men.

Eleven of the respondents were from Nguni-speaking backgrounds; 17 students were from Sotho/Tswana-speaking backgrounds and 7 students were from English-speaking backgrounds. The religious affiliation of respondents were as follows: None 11,4%; Confused 2,9% Catholic 26%; Methodist 20%; Other Christian 34%; Orthodox Jewish 2,9%; and Muslim 2,9%. Four students (11,4%) had no religious affiliation with two being atheist: one believing in "*Justice*" and the other believing in "*the care and the genuineness of some people.*" The other two students honoured their ancestors. One student felt "*confusion as to which religion.*" However, he prayed to God and communicated through his ancestors.

## ***The Experience of Suffering***

While all of the African students have experienced material hardship and oppression under Apartheid policies and laws, two students did not feel they had suffered. The following life events, which impacted on the large majority (87%) of the students in dehumanising and alienating ways, were identified as Apartheid laws and policies; denial of fundamental rights: rights to self-determination, to education, to a decent life; state persecution; hostel violence (1); domination of white morality resulting in the confusion of own morality; death of loved ones; poor relationship with father and abandonment by father; socioeconomic hardship which includes poverty, insufficient food, and unemployment – leaving basic human needs unmet; rejection; parental separation and lack of parental care; visual impairment; parental illness; and political exile.

## ***Students' Definitions of Spirituality***

Most (88,5%) of the students' definitions resonated with the African understanding of spirituality which refers to life itself (Kimaro, 1993; Setiloane 1986; Mbiti, 1975, 1971). The students' definitions included: the belief in God; an ultimate power, as Creator of all that lives; a relationship with God which influences human relationships, behaviours and emotions; giving meaning to life; justice; the wonder of all that is beautiful; the mystery of life – beyond explanation; an inner awareness of being connected with all of one's life and one's ancestors; an awareness that it is as pervasive as "*the oxygen we breathe*" – it is part of all life.

The interviewees in Canda's (1988:243) research on the significance of spirituality in social work practice defined spirituality:

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### **Note**

- (1) Hostels are single-sexed barracks for migrant labourers. During the politically intense period preceding the first democratic national election there was active tension between the hostel dwellers and home dwellers in the townships.

*"...as concern with the human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the non-human environment, and, for some, God."*

### ***Students' Definitions of Divinity***

For most (97%) of the students their definition of Divinity was similar to their understanding of spirituality.

Using Mbiti's (1975:43) typology, the students notions of God can be grouped into: "*...what God does, human pictures of God, the nature of God and people's relationship with God*".

#### ***• What God does***

For the students God was perceived to be creator, provider, saviour and guardian who gives direction, protection, strength, comfort and consolation. God controls all life. God was seen as sustaining the universe and continuously reviving spiritual strength. For a few (8,6%), God was assisted by their ancestors in all that happened to them.

#### ***• Human pictures of God***

Two students reported that they had no human image of God. One student perceived God to be a friend while eight students perceived God in parental terms. Two students saw God as a male figure.

#### ***• The nature of God***

The nature of God was perceived by 60% of the students to be an ever-present, loving, merciful, all-knowing, all-powerful, awesome force; unknowable and which "*transcends experiences and feelings in my everyday life*"; and, judge. For one student God was synonymous with justice which he expressed as "*equality, the absence of war and poverty, and the self-determination of people.*"

#### ***• People's relationship with God***

One student stated that he was part of the collective which fights for justice. Another 29 students (85,7%) described their relationship with Divinity in the following ways: intimate and assertive; asking and receiving of all that is good; a close relationship; respectful and formal; difficult, estranged and resentful; a parent-child relationship; fearful; "*God dwells within me*;" relate to Divinity though ancestors: "*I communicate with my ancestors who are subordinates to God*"; "*harmonious, reverent and awesome*;" "*I am God's son*;" and "*I am a child of God.*"



The students' responses resonate with Mbiti's (1975:43) notion that people living in Africa "*are rich in their ideas about God.*"

Setiloane's (1976) discussion of the attributes and praise-names of *Modimo*, Divinity of the Sotho-Tswana-speaking people, include some of the ideas that the students have raised regarding their notions of Divinity. However, his work challenges, extends and develops understanding about Divinity within an African context. He identifies Divinity as: One; Supreme; whose "*origins are in antiquity*"; "*of my forefathers*"; whose abode is on the highest peaks of the mountains; Owner and Master of all; invisible and intangible; spirit (breath, wind); experienced at all points but not directly sensed; source, root; enabler; mother – a quality of tenderness; light; is in the sky; associated with the earth; is everywhere, involved in everything; wills good to mankind; does not inflict evil save to draw attention to a disruption of harmony by man; preserves justice which is immovable; acts through *badimo* (ancestors); is readily available to individuals in need; is a fearful, awful, ugly, monstrous thing – something to be feared, revered and powerful; and is tremendously mysterious and fascinating. *Modimo* is mysterious, intangible, all-pervasive and at no point capable of definition.

### ***What Divinity Expects From the Students***

The responses the students gave regarding what they thought was expected from them by Divinity falls into three categories: for Divinity; for themselves; and for the world.

#### **• *For divinity***

Students (46%) reported that God expects them to be obedient, believing, trusting, respectful and loyal. They need to love God with all their hearts, to offer sacrifices to their ancestors, to serve and praise God, to be self-disciplined, to submit to God's will, to be faithful, to honour and to be appreciative and dedicated.

#### **• *For themselves***

Six percent of the students stated that Divinity gave them gifts – "*God gave me talents and it is up to me whether I want to follow them or not*" and "*to achieve to the best of my ability.*"

#### **• *For the world***

Students (57%) responded that there was an expectation that they behave towards others according to the tenets laid down by God through the different sources, ie their teachings.

What comes through very clearly is the expectations of Divinity regarding their relationships and responsibilities to society and people: *"I need to contribute to the well-being of the society"*; God wants *"my commitment and responsibility to building a South African society that cares for each other."* Students felt that God expects them to behave towards others with love, compassion, respect, helpfulness, honesty and forgiveness. They felt that God wants them: to show consideration and positive attitudes towards others; to relate to others with humility, complete acceptance, understanding, tolerance, and dignity; to treat everyone with the knowledge that God is in each human person; to help the vulnerable and needy; and to be authentic and be committed to the achievements and accomplishments of others. In the words of one student:

*"God wants me to love others as I love myself, to forgive them if they have offended me, to treat them as I would like to be treated, to respect them, to do good for them and above all to live as brothers and sisters."*

Three students commented that Divinity did not want anything special from them: one, because he does not believe in Divinity; and two, because, according to them, all people are made in God's image and God expects the same from all.

### ***Role of Spirituality in the Students' Lives***

Ninety-one percent of the students saw spirituality as providing: the opportunity to be part of the collective; guidance; clarity; a perspective on life; direction; sustenance; safekeeping; awareness of other people; guidance in human relationships; hope, strength, and confidence; a growing to wholeness; meaning to life; the opportunity to be thankful for life and its gifts; and a reminder of the ever-presence of God.

#### ***• The role of hope***

The role of hope in the students' lives was important (91%). Hope *"stops me from being apathetic and to live in haste"*; provides the journeying forwards with the knowledge that the violence will end; and, that people will be grateful, that nothing is impossible, that there is forgiveness, that one can be free of fears, that good deeds are rewarded, that life will improve for all and, that one is held in times of defeat.

#### ***• Spirituality, life experiences and entry into social work***

Students (83%) stated that their life experiences had influenced their spirituality. Eighty six percent of the students reported that their life experiences had influenced their entry into social work.

## Conclusions

*"God created a reminder, an image.  
Humanity is a reminder of God.  
As God is compassionate,  
Let humanity be compassionate" (Heschel, 1973).*

In the quest for healing wounds, building justice and sustaining a commitment to peace, the internal resources that the students bring with them into their social work education must be recognised, valued and brought to the fore during their education.

The resources that this group of first year students brought were their own life experiences of growing up within the South African context and their spirituality.

Their own experiences gave them a profound knowledge of suffering and a commitment to alleviate the suffering of others. Social work educators need to find ways of assisting these students through their educational journey so that they remain in touch with their commitment to the suffering of others having experienced hardship themselves.

The spiritual resources which the students brought are vital for the sustained commitment to building a healthy nation. These resources relate to values of social justice, compassion, forgiveness and hope, ultimately contributing to the restoration of *botho/ubuntu* in South Africa.

In using Fowler's (1981) components of faith, Faver (1986) reiterates that social workers need to develop a social work faith with a central value of justice, a reliance on the power of love and an openness to multiple ways of knowing. For El-Essawy (1993:71):

*"...when justice fails, all else falters, and life becomes of no avail. Justice is not an end, it is a beginning. Start there: go everywhere. Start elsewhere: go nowhere."*

For Fox (1990), compassion is celebration, compassion is making justice and doing works of mercy, compassion is public, compassion is cosmic in its scope and divine in its energies, compassion is passionate and caring, compassion seeks to know and to understand the interconnections of all things, compassion is a way of life, compassion is a flow and overflow of the fullest Human and Divine energies, and compassion is self-love and other-love at one.

Joseph (1987:23) perceives that *"reconciliation with God can facilitate the forgiveness of others and generate hope and peace."*

Durback (1989:xxvii) sees hope as the:

*"inner dynamic that compels us to explore and pursue the expectations built into the human condition. Hope was born the day the first human being discovered the first bridge and decided not to jump off the bridge in despair, but to cross it."*

When looking at the definitions that students gave for their spirituality and their notions of God, their responses resonated with the traditional images of God in Africa described by both Setiloane (1976) and Mbiti (1970).

What is evident is the knowledge that while the many years of oppression has created hardship and suffering and has jeopardised the very fabric of life in South Africa, the students came into social work showing that the roots of *botho/ubuntu* are still present and can be salvaged if nurtured. It is the African perspective of spirituality, this *"belonging"* and the *"vital force in participation"* made possible by *seriti* (dignity), that social workers need to understand and embrace. However, the ability to *"discern unity in multiplicity is a sophistication denied the Western mind and enquiry"* (Setiloane, 1986:37). Arguing from a philosophical perspective, Shutte (1993:8) believes that African conceptions of human nature and *"human flourishing... can serve as an important corrective to contemporary European philosophy."* Interconnectedness, this unity in multiplicity, is being given some consideration in social work from a Western perspective. According to Constable (1983:30) understanding social work values of social justice and human dignity can only be fully understood through considering, particularly, the reality of human interdependence: *"the ways in which all of us need each other and have claims on each other."* Likewise, for Johnson (1992:207) it is in *"the collective consciousness – experienced as bliss, harmony and compassion – (that) it's easier to fulfil the potentialities of one's personality."*

This means that social work educators and students must value, see as a matter of survival, and enter into the experience of interconnectedness and continue searching for and discovering what it means to be alive in Africa so that ultimately all South Africans can experience a sense of belonging in Africa.

This has implications for what is taught and how it is taught. It has implications for the relationships social work educators have with their students and how educators respond to the challenges that face students at university. It also has implications regarding the direct contributions social work educators themselves make to building justice and peace.

Quite clearly there is an imperative for social workers in South Africa to contribute to the reclaiming of personhood and restoring belonging in community so that all South Africans can enjoy their full humanity. It also appears that the internal resources for these processes exist in first year students at the University of the Witwatersrand.

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