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# **So You Want to be a Social Worker:**

A Primer for the  
Christian Student

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North American Association of  
Christians in Social Work

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**So You Want to Be  
a Social Worker:  
A Primer for the  
Christian Student**

by

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## **PREFACE: FOR WHOM IS THIS WRITTEN?**

Many Christians rather naturally choose social work as a profession. Being loved by God, they wish to share some of this love with those who are poor or troubled or are in need of help of some kind. Some may choose to work in a specifically Christian agency, but others will work in programs that do not have a specific Christian base but are part of the whole network that this country has established, in its communities and through its government, to help those in need. This is entirely proper. These agencies need people in them who are Christian. It would be a sad day if Christians were found only in church-sponsored agencies and all other social programs were staffed by non-Christians.

Yet it is true that social work, as a profession, has for the last fifty years or more been taught on humanistic principles. At times, even, it has been very critical of religion, or has ignored the insights religion can bring to its work. And even if the would-be social worker has studied in a Christian school or works for a Christian agency, he or she must deal constantly with a body of knowledge and a set of values that have humanistic roots. If he or she is to have some credibility as a member of this profession and to have some influence in it there must be some accommodation, or some agreement to differ, between a worker's Christian beliefs and what the profession sanctions as acceptable social work.

This is not always easy for Christian workers to accept. They may have to think through very carefully how their religious beliefs affect their practice of social work—what to do about their mission to spread the gospel, or their convictions about sin, or the authority of the Scriptures—not to give up their beliefs but how to integrate them into their practice. What this book attempts to do is to discuss these problems and offer, as far as it can, some guidelines on the matter. Its general conclusion is however that these are not insoluble problems. A Christian can become not only a good social worker but one with a clearer vision of what social work can be and how it fits in with God's purposes in the world.

## I. THE COMMON AND SEPARATE GROUND

Secular social work and religion obviously share a number of values. This is what has made it possible for a Christian, such as Father Biestek, to write about social work values in a way that is acceptable to any social worker, secular or religious, without in any way compromising his Christian insights. It is what makes it possible for young Christians to choose social work both as a profession and as a ministry.

Social workers of all persuasions would probably agree on the worth and dignity of all human beings, and on the general proposition that men and women have the right to be self-determining within certain limits. Another religious social work teacher, Father Swithun Bowers, once called this a "God-given right," but secular social workers would also agree that it is important. Most social workers agree on the need for kindness and understanding, and as Paul Halmos pointed out, in his book *The Faith of the Counsellors*, on the eventual victory of love and hope over hate and despair. They would agree also on generally accepted ethical principles, such as honesty, fairness, justice and prohibitions against exploiting those whom they help or discriminating against them on irrelevant grounds such as race, age or sex.

This apparent concurrence of values is generally ascribed to two related factors. Social work developed in a society that honored, and still for the most part honors, what is known as the Judeo-Christian tradition, which stresses kindness and justice. And social work itself developed largely in the Christian church and the synagogue. Nearly all of social work was under religious auspices until the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century.

But a great deal too much can be made of this common ground. It exists largely at the level of general statements of principle, phrased so that no decent person could possibly object to them. But when we examine them more closely we see that these principles mean very different things to people with different beliefs. Even the statement about the dignity and worth of man means something very different to a secular humanist and to a Christian. To the humanist it emphasizes mankind's autonomy and the ability of people to overcome their problems and those of society by their own efforts. To the Christian, however, people are of worth not because of their strength but, in a way, because of their weakness. They are the beings for whom Christ had to die, if they were to have any future.

That makes quite a difference on how one treats people and how one looks on their failings.

And, indeed, that is the problem with high-sounding principles, which may appear to bring us together but in fact serve to conceal our disagreements. We say that we live in a “democracy”. The East Germans say the same about themselves. The official name of their country is the German Democratic Republic. In this case we see the difference, and can argue, if we want to, that the Communists’ use of the word is wrong, or deliberately misleading, but the East Germans wouldn’t agree. To them their economic system is more equitable and therefore more “democratic.” “Justice” means one thing to a prosecutor and quite another to a civil rights worker. “Freedom” has quite a different meaning to a man who is refused service because of the color of his skin and to a man who contends that he should be allowed to serve or not to serve those he pleases.

And it is with these subtle or not so subtle implications or interpretation of principles that the Christian worker is likely to find difficulty when he or she enters this largely secular profession. The days when a Christian social worker was automatically looked on with suspicion by his secular colleagues are for the most part over, although they linger on in some places. What is more likely nowadays is the assumption that any differences are unimportant and so never get thought through.

But the fact is that the Christian starts with an entirely different concept of what the universe is like, what its purpose is, and what part human beings play in it, and this cannot but have implications for how and why he or she helps others, and what sort of things he or she wants to accomplish. What these are and how they are related to more specific religious beliefs will be explored in subsequent chapters. Nor, of course, are all Christians united in the implications they draw from their beliefs, and this, too, we must explore.

Indeed, in some cases we may find that there is a closer correspondence in values between one group of sincere Christians and secular humanism—although, I would suggest, never a complete agreement—than there is between two groups, both of whom claim to be Christian. These groups hold much the same formal beliefs, use very much the same language, each be convinced that they know the truth, but interpret their beliefs quite differently when it comes to putting them into practice. They may even come to diametrically opposite conclusions, which may be something of a shock to those who believe that formal belief is all that matters.

At the moment, however, let us look at one significant fact. Social work, at this time, holds a number of values with which Christians can agree, but there is no guarantee that this state of affairs will continue. The

profession and the world are changing. As time goes on the link between humanistic values and their roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition grows weaker. Humanistic values, unless they are instinctual, as some scientists would hold, have no authority behind them except the prevailing culture. They may be good values. At the moment the majority probably are. But as social conditions and fashions of thought change, so do the values that society espouses. A minor example might be the value society appears to be putting recently on everyone's right to "self-fulfillment" and, one might say, one's duty to go out and find it for oneself, in marriage, in one's work and even, lately, in one's sex-life, normal or abnormal, even if not married, and the decline in emphasis on the values of commitment and responsibility. Another might be the value many psychologists are giving to self-assertion and on being aggressive.

But Christian values do have roots, in the Bible, in the ethic which Jesus taught, and in the authority of the Church. When cultural values change they do so often so subtly that one hardly notices what they are doing. But the Christian has an absolute standard to use as a plumb-line. To the search for self-fulfillment the Christian has to say, "But he who finds his life shall lose it," and to the emphasis on self-assertion, "But the meek shall inherit the earth."

This makes it all the more important that we study our beliefs and their implications for the practice of social work.



## II. SOCIAL WORK AND CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

What kind of a theology—that is, an understanding of the nature of God and the purposes of His actions—makes it possible for Christians to be good social workers? And what sort of theology would be likely to help us become even better ones?

At first sight it might seem that these questions should not be asked. One's theology comes from one's beliefs, and we cannot, and obviously should not, change our beliefs in order to become social workers, or even to become better ones. Our beliefs are, in a sense, givens. They constitute our faith. But here I think we must make a distinction between formal belief in a proposition, such as, that Christ was resurrected or that God created the world, and our understanding of how these events reveal the nature of God, or His purpose, and what our response should be to them. Thus Jesus' resurrection might be of primary importance to one person or group as a promise that the faithful will inherit eternal life. To another it might carry, first of all, the message that the Lord is still with us. He died, but He is not dead. Others might see in it definite proof of Jesus' divinity, that He was indeed the Son of God. Some might learn from it, first of all, that Love is the eventual victor over force and live their lives in this revelation. All these people believe in the same event but their responses are quite different. What it means to them will depend not only on other texts and traditions, but on their temperament, their experience, religious and otherwise, and their observation of the world and of human nature.

There can, in fact, be many theologies within the same set of beliefs, and some of them are conducive to good helping and some are not.

Before we go on we should indicate what we mean by Christian beliefs. They are beliefs in those actions and happenings which are fundamental to the faith and are shared by the great majority of Christian churches. They include the belief that God created the world and within it, human-kind, endowing His human creatures with intelligence, will and moral or spiritual perception. Humans then exercised their will, which they received from God, and disobeyed Him or as some would put it, tried to do without Him, and so fell into sin. God gave them laws but these were insufficient to reconcile them with Him, and at a certain historical time God Himself took flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, in his life and his preaching, revealed God's true nature. He was, however,

rejected by the authorities of that day and was executed as a common criminal. In and by that act of submission He forgave man's sin and assured those who trusted (believed) in Him of eternal life. Three days later He was raised from the dead and remained a short time on earth. He sent us the Holy Spirit to guide us and strengthen us, and promised to return at some future date, at which time God's purposes will be fulfilled and a perfect society established under His control.

These might be called Christianity's primary beliefs. They unite all Christians. They are not accepted, however, by those groups and those individuals who, although recognizing in Jesus the greatest teacher the world has ever seen, deny that He was God Incarnate. These men and women may be very ethical people—they often are—and may follow many Christian principles and think of themselves as Christian, but the word "Christian" implies the belief that Jesus was indeed the Christ. They should more properly be named Jesusites, and we are not considering them for the purpose of this book.

Within these primary beliefs there are a number of secondary beliefs, chiefly about how things were done, rather than whether they happened. Thus some Christians believe that the act of creation was instantaneous, or occurred in a very short time period, and others, just as sincerely, that it took place in the course of evolution. But both agree that there was a point at which God gave people His spirit and they become "living souls." There are many explanations, too, of how exactly Jesus' death on the cross assured man's salvation, whether He was a vicarious sacrifice punished for our sins, a ransom paid to Satan, or whether by sharing man's most dreadful experience He showed the depth of God's love for us, but all agree that mankind was saved by the event. There are many theories of what will actually happen in the Last Days, whether Christ will reign on earth or only in Heaven, but all Christians agree that there will be a Second Coming.

These secondary beliefs are often very strongly held but need not be divisive unless they are given primary status and are used to assure someone that he does indeed have the truth or to exclude those who interpret the Good News somewhat differently. It is a common human failing to be more concerned with the absolute correctness of one's intellectual belief than with one's response to the Good News as a whole. So many groups like to think that only they, and those who think exactly like them, really have the truth and are therefore assured of Heaven.

And then there are what might be called tertiary beliefs which have little to do with the primary ones, and which account, to a large degree for the fragmentation of the Church Universal—beliefs about the authority of the church, the meaning of certain sacraments, the priestly role, the literal or

allegorical nature of some parts of the Scriptures, etc., which, although they are often passionately held, can only exist within the framework of the primary propositions. We will not deal with these in this book except where a specific belief directly affects social work practice. For the most part they can be held without affecting one's performance as a social worker.

The real difference between Christians when it comes to theology does not lie in their secondary or tertiary beliefs. It lies in their whole attitude towards the Good News. It is essentially a matter of emphasis. There are Christians, for example, whose interest in their religion is directed towards their own relationship with the Almighty. They are concerned chiefly with their own salvation. Theirs might be called a vertical religion. All communication is upwards and downwards, between themselves and God. Their relationships with other people are not seen as part of their religion, except, perhaps, as they try to obey the commands that God has given them about justice and mercy and "loving one's neighbor as oneself", which they try conscientiously to do, but without any real concern for what their neighbor is thinking or feeling. The result, in too many cases, is a concern only for the spiritual state of their neighbors, a narrow form of evangelism and a lack of concern for such things as tolerable living conditions for others. They sometimes express their views by speaking of the "spirituality" of the church. The church, in their view, should be concerned only with the saving of souls, and need not trouble itself with the plight of the hungry, the oppressed or the troubled. It should also steer clear of any temptation to become involved in questions of social justice.

The opposite position is what is sometimes known as the "Social Gospel". At first this theology, which emphasizes Jesus' teaching about our relationships with each other and stresses the second half of the Great Commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves, seems to be more promising as a theology for social work. But the Great Commandment has two halves and although one's motive for serving others may be one's gratitude to God for what He has done for one, and therefore one's love for Him, all the emphasis tends to be put on this service and not on what God has done. God becomes often not much more than the embodiment of what we think desirable. We even try to tell Him what we think He should be like. "The God of lower food prices," said Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the proponents of this theology, "He is my God." What is missing is any sense of the work of the Holy Spirit, not only in giving us strength to do or to dare what we could not do or dare ourselves, but in making use of us for His own purposes. We need to do more than respond to God's love, although that is the first step. We need to allow ourselves to be a conduit for that love, to let Him use us as He pleases, to

have Him override, if He wishes to, our theories, our fears, our prejudices, our preferences and our temperaments. Paul had this sense. It was not he but Christ in him, who was preaching.

Our theology then must be both vertical, between us and God, and lateral, between us and our neighbors. It must recognize both our dependence on God and our interdependence with each other. Micah told us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. If we are truly to be Christian social workers, we must not forget his third injunction. Otherwise we are little different from the secular social worker, and as Paul Tillich has pointed out, are prone to become just as sentimental.

Then, too, our theology must be primarily one of Grace rather than of Law. It is not that God's laws are unimportant, or that we are not willing to try to keep them. But we were not appointed, or chosen to be social workers, to enforce God's laws. We were given the task of conveying the Good News to the poor and the troubled, and that Good News is one of forgiveness, encouragement and Grace. It is that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. Many of the people a social worker serves are sinners under the Law and are aware of it. What they need from us is some part of that forgiveness, encouragement and grace conveyed through what we do to help them and not a reiteration of the Law, particularly in its penal or retributive aspects. We need not only to trust wholeheartedly in Grace but to look for it in others.

Even more so this theology must be one that leaves judgment to God. The world is not divided into good people, who obey the law, and bad ones who don't. As Paul said, there is now no distinction, for all have fallen short of the glory of God. And we might remember Saint Chrysostom, too: "And yet be we as large hearted as we may we shall never be able to contribute such love towards man as we stand in need of at the hand of a God that loveth man."

The theology that can help us is entirely Biblical. It puts God first. It recognizes His love for all mankind, and although it is aware that He acts sometimes as a judge, it does not see this as the predominant characteristic of His relationship with us, but stresses rather His Grace, His support and His forgivingness. It is both a guide to our own actions and the message we have to convey to the poor, the troubled and those whom our society disfavors. To put it into practice in a practical and even a pragmatic way is the task ahead of us.

### III. THE NATURE OF HUMAN BEINGS AND SOCIETY

What one believes about human beings and, of course the society they have constructed, makes a great deal of difference in how one treats them and what one wants for them. And there are in general four views, two secular and two at least nominally Christian, that are current today. We need to understand them if we are to be clear in our own thinking, especially as most of us tend to believe a little bit of all of them, perhaps at different times, but sometimes all at the same time.

One is the purely scientific view. This sees human beings as essentially complex biological organisms reacting largely to chemical and physical stimuli and to certain instincts, particularly those of self-preservation and the preservation of the species. Humans, in this view, are morally neutral at birth, but develop concepts of right and wrong as they learn what actions have pleasant or unpleasant consequences and what is approved and not approved by their culture. They are also much influenced by their early childhood experiences, which are often repressed and cause them to act irrationally. By and large how they behave is due to their biological make-up and their life-experiences and relationships with other people.

There is a great deal of truth in this view. People are affected, sometimes very strongly indeed, by these factors. Particularly, of late, science has been developing a wealth of knowledge about the effects of chemical imbalance on behavior, so that, for instance, dysfunctions such as manic-depression can be treated chemically. Early experiences and even family patterns do tend to affect behavior. Abused children not infrequently become child abusers themselves.

The wise Christian does not discount these findings. They are often useful guidelines and if someone can be helped by chemical means or by recognizing how one's childhood experiences have warped our views, one can only be glad of it. What the Christian does hold is that there is much more to a human being than can be explained in this way. To try to explain all human behavior in such terms also leaves man without a purpose for his existence, other than to fulfill his needs, physical and instinctual, and perhaps get along in his society and ensure the continued existence of his race. He has a very limited future. Moreover, since science

tends to generalize and concentrate on deviation from some norm, what so often emerges is a very gloomy picture and a depreciation of those whom we are trying to help. As one writer has said: "Sharper social study methods . . . bring to us daily more usable information about the uncontrolled impulsivity, the impairment in capacity to form relationships, and the ego and superego defectiveness of those whose social and emotional dysfunctioning come to our attention."

This hardly seems a sound base on which to build a helping relationship.

A second view which is often, curiously enough, held at the same time as the foregoing, is that humans are basically good, or would be so if only society could be reformed. If only, for instance, the economic system were more equitable, or everyone were better educated, or had adequate housing, or weren't discriminated against, or could give freer expression to their feelings, or whatever else is seen as needing to be put right in society, men and women would not need to behave in ways unacceptable to themselves or to others. This view can be said to have started with Rousseau: "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains." It is the view of many humanists and writers of Utopias, like Edward Bellamy, William Morris, and B.F. Skinner.

At first it seems like a very hopeful view, and also to contain some truths. There is a good deal wrong about the world, and many people would find it easier to be co-operative and productive if some of them could be put right.

But this view has one fatal flaw, and a rather strange one when one considers that it is often held by people who also consider themselves scientific. It is strangely unrealistic. People are not naturally good. As the Christian knows, it was in Paradise itself that they first got into serious trouble. And when conditions are put right, or ameliorated, and people still go on lying, or stealing or whatever they did before, those who believe in people's essential goodness are in a dilemma. The only thing that they can believe, and keep their illusions about people, is that the people who are still uncooperative or immoral are either sick, or are being led astray by someone or something outside the paradise they have created. These people must be controlled, more or less forcibly re-educated or given appropriate treatment. And gradually this control is extended to more and more people until it becomes a way of life.

The Russian revolution is the clearest example of this process in today's world. The leaders of that movement believed, and the evidence is that they did so sincerely, that they could build a state in which there would be very few laws, virtually no bureaucracy, "not even one typewriter", said one, no secret diplomacy, no discrimination on racial grounds, and that

everyone, (except the old ruling class who would lose their privileges) would gladly cooperate with it. And nearly seventy years afterwards we have a state that appears in no way ready to give up its rigid and repressive control.

While nothing so drastic has happened in America, or in social work, social work, which has for the most part taken this humanistic, utopian and also scientific view, has during the last fifty years become more prescriptive and more concerned with social control than it was fifty years ago.

There are two Christian views about people which we need to look at. They are strangely different. One is most helpful, and the other just the opposite.

The second, which was typical of the Puritans and is still held by members of the "Moral Majority" today, is so convinced of the utter depravity of man that it believes that if he is not disciplined, restrained by law, controlled or punished he will naturally lie, steal, refuse to work, drink to excess or misbehave sexually. Or, perhaps we should say, the poor, the non-elect and those who have not professed Christ will do so. Moreover everyone, especially the poor, is totally responsible for his or her own condition. Everyone could, if they would, rise out of poverty. As one recent writer who is, unfortunately, very influential in our present national government, says "the poor need most of all the spur of their own poverty". Therefore to alleviate the miseries of that condition is to indulge them and deprive them of the incentive that they need. Factors such as a poor environment, an inadequate diet, lack of education, an economic system that works to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others, must not, if one holds this view, be taken into account. They are merely excuses, and so are such things as childhood experiences, and mental illness, etc. Individuals have risen above their circumstances, it is true, but they have not necessarily been the most moral or even those who worked the hardest, and many moral and hard-working people have remained in poverty. Nor have successful people always been those who have become professing Christians.

This negative view of man is obviously not a good starting point for the practice of social work. It is also questionable theology. The sinful nature of human beings is a reality, but so is the operation of Grace. What people who hold this view are saying, although perhaps they don't realize it, is that the poor, the troubled and the deviant, have sin and the good, the successful and those whom the economy favors have a corner on Grace.

The thoughtful Christian, on the other hand, recognizes that man is a creature, extremely fallible, easily swayed by temptation, and this includes him or herself as well as his or her clients. No one can know how he or she

would react if faced with the circumstances of another person's life. We are all sinners, forgiven sinners, it is true, but sinners all the same. We may sin in different ways, but we sin all the same. In view of this a Christian social worker can never be disappointed in what people do. He or she may be saddened. He or she may have wished that someone had found it possible to do something different, as Jesus did when the rich young ruler did not take His advice. But Christians cannot set standards for others and then blame them if they do not reach them. They have no right to expect goodness in the first place.

And they also know something else. The Holy Spirit is at work. Even the most fallible of humans may behave in an utterly unexpected way, finding some courage, some unselfishness, even some capacity for self-sacrifice. God works in a mysterious way and sometimes uses for His purposes the most unlikely of agents. The Christian social worker looks for the signs of Grace, rejoices in them, and nurtures them when he finds them. He or she doesn't see people as "naturally good" or "naturally bad", but as fallible creatures who, by the Grace of God, are able sometimes to transcend themselves.



## IV. SOCIAL WORK INSIGHTS FROM ONE'S FAITH

Social work has developed many different insights into the way people grow and change, the problems they encounter and what can be done to help them. Some of these have come from practice, as for instance, when Mary Richmond, who wrote the first real professional social work book, discovered that people did much better when they were allowed or encouraged to participate in the plans that were being made for them. Some have come from social studies. An example might be the finding that one of the factors associated with child-abuse is being cut off from the support that used to be offered by the extended family. Some have come from theories developed by pioneers in psychology, medicine or some other science. Social work learned from Freud, for instance, the value of looking at a problem through the client's eyes rather than formulating the problem as the social worker sees it. Some are just plain everyday wisdom, if one just stops and thinks about it, such as that it is hardly reasonable to expect a poor person to show a great deal of initiative and effort if he or she is undernourished.

With a great number of these insights Christians can agree. With some they may not. And social workers vary in the importance they ascribe to certain kinds of insight. Which are the really important ones that should guide one's practice, even if the latest theory, or popular opinion, or even what seems like common sense, would appear to ignore them? What in fact can our beliefs, our theology, our study of the Bible tell us about people, their problems, and how to help them that will be of real use to us as social workers? What insights are so important that we cannot gainsay them? And along with these goes another question. What theories and statements, perhaps arrived at by observation, or research, or even common sense, can we understand better or on a deeper level, because what they tell us is either indicated or implied in our religion?

One might say that there are a million, the greatest part of which have not been recognized. Or one might say that every Christian social worker must discover them for him or herself. All that can be done here is to discuss some of them that have been identified and to urge Christian social workers to explore their beliefs more fully and find others for themselves.

Some are rather general in scope, but none the less essential. One is that man is a choosing being, endowed with free will but responsible for his actions. God did not put a fence around the tree in the Garden. Adam and Eve were free to disobey God, which they did, and suffered the consequences, but at the same time God did not cease to care about them. Another might be that human beings are of infinite worth, irrespective of their behavior. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. And from that fact comes the knowledge that it is love that earns good behavior rather than good behavior that earns love. From the resurrection, too, we can learn that although force may appear to win victories for a while, love is the eventual winner.

To know these things, and others like them, cannot but have an effect on what one does to help people, and also on what one does not do. One does use those methods that enhance a person's right to choose and be wary of those which rely on man-made rewards and punishments to control behavior. One does try to establish what Martin Buber calls loving "I-Thou" relationships, rather than cold, impersonal "I-it" ones, not only because of the command to love one's neighbor as oneself, but because these are the relationships that really help. One does not give up on someone who has done something wrong, not only because Jesus told us to forgive our brothers seven times seventy times, but because it is then that he or she needs us most, as Adam and Eve needed God more after the Fall than before it.

But there are more particular insights. Christians for instance have sometimes doubted the discovery by the psychologists of the strength of the unconscious mind that leads people to act in ways that they themselves do not understand, and often against their own best interest. We would all probably like to believe that anyone, once he knew what was good, could by a simple act of will, by wanting to do it enough, do the wise or the moral thing. But Paul shows us what the human predicament really is. It is not that we don't know what to do, or want to do it. It is that without God's help, which may be purveyed directly or through a human agency, we find ourselves unable to do it. "I do not understand my own actions," Paul wrote, "for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . I can will what is right but I cannot do it." (Romans 7:15 and 18b). And should we be looking for a model of the kind of relationship we should be cultivating with those we help, more precise than loving them as ourselves, Paul again offers us a very telling set of directions in I Corinthians, 13, including two of great importance because, perhaps, they are the easiest to overlook: love does not insist on its own way, and, in the words of the King James version, "love never ends."

But there is more. In a consistent Universe, which Christians certainly believe in, it is unlikely that God would have created two very different processes through which humans could ask help from Him and from their fellows. There would be differences, of course, because of the different situation, but the principles would be the same. By the same token those humans who set out to help their fellows might be said to be acting on His behalf, whether they know it or ascribe their desire to help to some other cause. The Christian at least will recognize that the parable of the Prodigal Son not only describes God's love for his errant children, but also how He would have us treat our own children or our clients. We are created "in His Image", and although what we can do is very limited compared with what He can do and does, and He reserves certain things such as judgment, to Himself, His saving relationship with us is the model for what we do in the human context.

If we study what it takes both to give and to accept help and the nature of God's saving activity we would expect to find some close correspondences. And indeed we do. One of our insights as social workers is that most people resist taking any meaningful help that will really change their way of life. They may apparently ask for help, but on their own terms or seem to take help by doing everything that the helper suggests, but make little or no inward change. Really to take help requires four things. It asks that one recognize a problem and that one cannot solve it oneself, which is the true meaning of repentance. It asks that one tell someone about it (confession). It requires that for the moment at least, one recognizes this other person as more knowledgeable than oneself (submission) and that, finally, one is willing to give up the old, and the familiar, however unsatisfactory, for the new and unfamiliar, however promising it looks. And this is the essence of faith itself, the essence of things unseen, putting all one's eggs in a basket one cannot prove is really there, and a basket too that may require a lot of effort on our part to maintain in working order.

With this insight one ought to be able to understand people's resistance to real help and the fears that lie behind it, and not ascribe it to lack of will, stubbornness, stupidity or lack of ambition. It should also help us to recognize the many devices people use to ward off help, for many of us have done the same things in our religious life—hoped, for instance, that if we go to church, pay our tithe, and refrain from obvious sin, God will not ask anything more of us. We have not always been above demanding that God solve our problems in the way we would like Him to do so and without the need for any change in ourselves.

When it comes to how we help people, we also have a guide from our faith, not so much in individual texts, but in the whole Christian story. It is true that we might arrive at the same general conclusions from observa-

tion or experience in helping, without a specific Christian orientation, but what our Christian faith can add is a sense of how essential is the process that we have observed, why it is so, so that we include it in all that we do. And, what is even more important, it can give us a deeper understanding of what is involved in each part of the process.

What those who have studied helping know, although they don't always express it in these terms, is that in any helping situation the helper brings three things to the person being helped. One is a sense of reality. This is how things are. This is the likely result of you doing this or that. These are your options, your rights, the law, and what I can do to help. But reality is very hard to face. The helper has to do two other things. First, he has to understand the other person's fears, the temptations he or she is subject to, his or her resistance to change—not sympathize with them, that is, agree with them, or pity the other person, which means feeling superior to him or her, but know, feel and express what the other person is going through without losing sight of what the problem really is. This calls for the very difficult quality that we call empathy, or an act of the loving imagination, which demands both feeling with the other person and yet not becoming so identified with him or her that one has nothing new or different to bring to the situation. And second, he has to assure the person he is trying to help of his or her continued presence and interest, which we call support.

We also know that these three qualities, or actions, for they are both, are part of a single process. None of them is helpful apart from each other. It isn't much good empathizing with someone about something that isn't real, or just expressing empathy without offering support, and reality can be very harsh.

Also, none of the three is easy. We none of us like to face reality. It is easy to gloss over it, and to offer false reassurance instead of dealing with a problem. Empathy easily slips over into sympathy, or becomes restrictive: "I can understand you feeling this way, but not if what you feel is that." And support becomes conditional: "I care about you, but only if you do what I want you to do."

What has this to do with our faith? Simply this, that God has acted towards us with reality, empathy and support, very largely through the three Persons we distinguish in our Trinitarian belief. First humans know Him simply as Father, Creator, author of all reality, both physical and moral, the "I am", the Wholly Other, the one from whom one could not hide, any more than one can ignore, except at one's peril, the laws of physics or chemistry. There are, of course, little bits of reality, man-made bits, that we can try to change but only within what God has ordained,

and until these little bits are changed, reality is a “given” that we cannot avoid.

But when mankind proved unable to live by these laws alone, God performed the greatest act of empathy that the world has ever seen. He took human form in the person of the Son and, as the King James Version has it “was touched with the feeling for our infirmities” and “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Ephesians 4:15). He also “knew what was in man” (John 2:25). From this we can learn not only the dual, or paradoxical nature of empathy—Jesus was both God and Man, wholly and completely, and we must both feel for our clients and retain our sense of reality—but also that true empathy always involves suffering on our part. It can never be a wholly intellectual thing.

And then before Jesus left this world he promised his disciples a Counsellor, who would be with them for ever, (John 14:16), and Who came as we know at Pentecost. The King James Version uses the word Comforter, which in King James’ time had a much more forceful meaning than it has today. It meant someone who was strong with one, at one’s side, a “present help in trouble” (Psalms 46:1b), and this is what support means. The New English Bible calls the Spirit the Advocate, also a function of support; someone who helps one obtain one’s rights. But perhaps the most important word is “with”: “Lo, I will be with you until the end of the age.”

Reality, empathy and support—mere shadows of what God has done for us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—but what we can offer to others as best we can in our limited human way in His pattern.

## V. SOCIAL WORK AND THE BIBLE

The Bible is, without question, the only authentic account of God's dealing with mankind, at least up to the end of the second century after His Incarnation. Christians have always held it in great reverence. They were known at one time as the People of the Book, although the early church, of course, did not have the New Testament as we know it, and decisions were still being made as late as the Seventeenth Century as to which books should be included and which should not.

Most Christians believe that the Bible was divinely inspired, written, that is, with the aid of the Holy Spirit. It is the source of our understanding of what God intends, our primary source of illumination and, many Christians believe, if read under the guidance of the Spirit, the only infallible guide to faith and practice. No stronger support can be given to an idea or a theory than to show that it is Biblical. Our basic beliefs which we explored in a previous chapter depend on the Bible as it tells of the Creation, the events in the history of a people who first recognized and were recognized by God, the establishment of God's law, the Incarnation, the teaching and acts of Jesus, His death and resurrection, the coming of the Spirit, the founding of the Church and the eventual coming of the Kingdom. There is no question but that this is the word of God and a source of infinite riches.

There is some difference of opinion, however, among sincere Christians, about the exact meaning of the word "inspire". Did God use human writers, giving to them as much understanding as they were capable of receiving and communicating to the people for whom the Scriptures were intended, which naturally meant within the limits of their knowledge and their culture and sometimes in relation to a particular problem of that time? Or did the Holy Spirit Himself determine exactly what should be written so that what was recorded stands for all time as God's direct revelation of the truth, for all generations and in all circumstances?

The latter belief does sometimes cause problems for the social worker, not because of the belief itself but in the way that some who hold it make use of it.

Many Christians do indeed believe that the Bible is the actual Word of God, accurate in every detail and therefore an exact prescription for what we should do and what we should not do, independently of when, or by whom, it was actually written, or of changes in human society and even in

the meaning of the words. Their faith is threatened by any suggestion that there may be some inconsistencies, some later interpolations, some mistranslations, some allegories or even some occasions where an early statement is superseded by a new, except that in general they do accept that Peter's vision frees them from the obligation of following the Jewish dietary laws, and that Jesus did revise the Mosaic "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth".

If someone holds this faith sincerely there is no reason to dispute it. But we do have the right to ask that people be consistent in their belief. One cannot accept one statement and reject another. If one is God's direct command, so then is the other. Yet many Bible-believing Christians quote only those texts which agree with their own ideas. If they believe in corporal punishment for children, they will quote Proverbs 23: 13 and 14, but they will ignore Deuteronomy 21: 18 to 21, which counsels delivering up a rebellious son to be stoned to death. If their chief concern is the consumption of alcohol they may quote Proverbs 20:1 or any one of a number of texts that warn one against drunkenness, but fail to mention either the moderate advice in 1 Timothy 5:23, much less Proverbs 31:6-7 which tells one to give strong drink to the perishing and wine to those in bitter distress so that they might forget their poverty, and Deuteronomy 14:26 which commands one, if one cannot bring one's tithe to God because it is too far, to turn it into money and spend it "for oxen, or sheep, or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves." For great deal of emphasis has also been placed on certain passages, notably Paul's statement that if anyone will not work, then let him not eat, which appears to refer to the common meal that early Christians shared and not to earning one's own living in the industrial world. Paul himself complains that only he and Barnabbas, among the apostles, have no right to refrain from working for a living. (1 Corinthians 9:6)

It is not that the texts that are chosen are wrong. One may be very much concerned about alcohol or people who are work-shy. It is rather that by selecting particular texts with which one happens to agree, and justifying them through the Bible, the whole message of the Bible is distorted. The Bible is not primarily about disciplining children, not drinking alcohol and working for a living. It is about the Mighty Acts of God, and if there is any one part of it that should be given special emphasis for human behavior, it is Jesus' revelation of the true nature of God, the Sermon on the Mount, the Parables, and some of His comments that do not go along with generally accepted judgments. A person given to quoting texts to support his point of view will rarely quote, "Blessed are the meek" or the commands to love one's enemies, to turn the other cheek or to forgive seventy times seven times, much less, "woe to you who are rich" (Luke 6:24) for these

require actions on our part that run counter to our day to day opinions. Yet they are just as much part of the Bible as the statements with which our worldly wisdom agrees, and, it might seem, might be given special attention both as the teaching of our Lord Himself and by the very fact that they are not what we would have arrived at by the use of our ordinary reason. To believe in them requires a real act of faith.

The truth is that one can prove almost anything one wants to by the Bible, and a good deal of what we now consider unacceptable, such as polygamy or the obligation to impregnate one's widowed but childless sister-in-law, for which failing deliberately to do so Onan was punished with death (Genesis 38). Perhaps the answer is that the Bible needs to be read under the guidance of the Spirit, and this is not always done.

Nor does the Bible speak directly to some of the most pressing moral problems of our time. It says very little or nothing about abortion, the stockpiling of nuclear arms that could destroy the world, child-abuse, mothers who work, drugs other than alcohol or a problem that not even the churches have raised very often, although it destroys many lives, living on credit. One has to deduce one's stand on such problems from its general tenor and not from specific texts. What it does do is to give us some very clear indications of what our relationships should be with other people. We are not to judge. We are to forgive. We are to meet the basic needs of the poor. We may be angry, according to Paul (Ephesians 4:26) but not let the sun go down on our anger. We must love, or care about, our enemies as well as our friends. The injunction, however, does not tell us to make friends of our enemies. And if we are doubtful about the exact nature of this love we have in I Corinthians 13 an analysis of it that has never been surpassed.



## VI. SOCIAL WORK AND SIN

Professional social work, by and large, has rejected the notion of sin, or at least the use of that word. This has been largely for four reasons.

First, the doctrine of Original Sin, which holds that man has been born sinful ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, has been used too often to justify harshness towards the poor. The poor were believed to be the unregenerate. It was their fault that they were poor. Indeed it has been said that in the Nineteenth Century in England the only two groups that showed compassion for the poor were the Unitarians and the Quakers, because they “were not hampered by a belief in Original Sin.” The well-to-do and the successful, on the other hand, were thought of as favored by God, and therefore presumably less sinful. And this belief is not simply a thing of the past. The leader of a popular religious movement has been quoted recently as saying that material wealth is the way in which God rewards those who do His Will.

Second, many Christian groups have developed a rather narrow and one might say legalistic concept of sin. They have become concerned not with the whole state of a person but with individual acts, or in some cases, failures to act. They have confused “sins” with sin itself. Thus to steal is a sin, but to covet, that is to desire something that is not one’s own is not seen as so serious, despite the Tenth Commandment. Similarly, to use a swear-word is seen as a sin, but the state of mind that uses God to justify one’s own very wordly desire, even the success of one’s football team, is hardly thought of as sinful. It is, however, just as much taking the name of one’s God in vain.

Social work, with the knowledge it has acquired of human motivation, both conscious and unconscious, and its concern with the whole person in his relationship with others, sees this concept of sin as much too simplistic, and so do more mature Christians. The early and medieval church arrived at a much more useful concept of sin which is worth studying today. It listed seven deadly sins, each of which is a state of mind that makes it impossible for one to be in communion with God. Three, which are known as the “hot-blooded” sins, are anger (rage, not righteous indignation which may not be a sin at all), lust and gluttony, which includes all forms of indulging oneself immoderately. Three, which are “cold-blooded” ones, are avarice, envy (covetousness might cover both) and sloth, which has had an interesting history. While today it is often inter-

require actions on our part that run counter to our day to day opinions. Yet they are just as much part of the Bible as the statements with which our worldly wisdom agrees, and, it might seem, might be given special attention both as the teaching of our Lord Himself and by the very fact that they are not what we would have arrived at by the use of our ordinary reason. To believe in them requires a real act of faith.

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preted to mean refusal to work or to earn one's own living, its original meaning was depression, hopelessness or indifference to what was happening around one. And the source of all the deadly sins, the one of which the others are off-shoots, is pride, or more properly, arrogance—the Latin word is “Superbia”—feeling oneself superior, and specifically behaving as if one was God or could do without Him. It was what the Devil tempted Eve with—“you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). It includes, of course, disobedience, which is one of its results.

Restricting the notion of sin to deliberate acts of disobedience to God's will, or from a secular point of view, to the mores of a society, leads to the third reason why social workers have objected to the idea of sin. For far too many Christians, convinced that they know what is a sin and what is not, either from a reading of the Bible or from the teaching of their church, and believing that all it takes not to commit such acts is an act of will on the part of the sinner, take it upon themselves to reprove, blame, refuse to tolerate, punish or in some cases enlighten, the sinner. And about this two things might be said. It is bad social work and it is questionable Christianity.

It is bad social work because reproof, blaming and punishing are not either effective or acceptable ways of helping people grow and change. Even those methods in social work that specialize in changing someone's behavior, such as Behavior Modification, have found that positive reinforcement is more effective than is negative, and what most of our clients need is to be loved, forgiven and encouraged rather than to have their guilt and their sense of worthlessness deepened.

But it is also questionable Christianity. It is so for two reasons. First, Christianity is a religion of love. Jesus, it is true, did sometimes reprove groups of people, chiefly the proud and the insensitive, but when he dealt with individuals, and when he healed them, it was always through love and never through blame. He might say afterwards, “Go and sin no more.” but He died for sinners, loved them as Himself and it is God's love for us, and His forgiveness of our sins which is the mainspring for our desire to help others. But second, and even more cogent, perhaps, is that to arrogate to oneself the right to reprove others is at least very close to the sin of pride and also disobedient, for Jesus was very explicit that we had no right to judge others.

Some Christians maintain at this point that since they have an infallible guide, in the Bible or in the teaching of their church, to what is forbidden, they are not making a personal judgment, and this raises the fourth problem. Many Christians are very selective and put undue emphasis on the sins that they themselves see as the most serious. Thus, for instance, acts

arising from the supposed sins of the poor, specifically lust and sloth (in its modern sense) have met with much more condemnation, even from churches, than those more common among the rich: avarice, or gluttony, in the sense of “conspicuous consumption” and pride itself. Lust has been seen by many Christians as the primary sin, despite the fact that it was of this sin that Jesus said, “Let him who is without sin among you throw the first stone at her.” And similarly He was more forgiving towards the woman of Samaria who was “living in sin” than He was to those who behaved proudly. Dorothy Sayers, in her pamphlet “The Six Other Deadly Sins”, said that she knew of many institutions for “fallen women” but none for reformed usurers.

Christians moreover do not agree among themselves about what is sin, even on such a vital matter as abortion. Deeply as one may feel on the subject, one cannot really maintain that one’s judgments are impersonal, short of a specific Biblical command about which there can be no possible question, as, say, in the command not to judge, or to forgive seventy times seven times.

Then how does a Christian social worker relate to the problem of sin? One obviously cannot condone it. One cannot pretend that to sin is all right, or be indifferent to it.

The usual advice that is given is “to hate the sin but love the sinner.” This is not as easy as it sounds. If we tell someone that what he or she is doing is sinful we are setting ourselves up as monitors of his or her behavior and claiming to be wiser and more moral. One can, perhaps, do this with children or with a client who is just at the beginning of a Christian commitment or an understanding of the faith, but even then we need to be careful not to arrogate to ourselves a right to judge his or her actions that we really do not have. We can, of course tell people that in our opinion, or in the opinion of most people, or in the view of the church, if that matters to them, that what they are doing or proposing is wrong, and ask them if they have thought that through, but the eventual choice is theirs. “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.”

One helpful thing may be to see that the states of mind which we as Christians know as sinful—that is, out of tune with God’s will—such as lust, anger or envy, and which result in actual sins—are what secular social workers call maladjustment, dysfunction, neurosis or even character disorders. They are what they, too, are trying to help people deal with. They are not for the most part deliberate acts of will, although the actual “sins” may be so, but these acts are themselves the product of a sinful or irrational state of mind. And these are not happy states of mind. Not only do they often have unpleasant consequences but a sinner is never satisfied. Lust never fulfills one’s need for closeness with others, avarice or

envy one's need for possessions, pride one's need for power or recognition. The miser goes on accumulating wealth for which he has no possible need. The lecher is always seeking a new, more titillating experience. While Christians know that only through Grace and complete surrender to God does one fully find peace with oneself, dissatisfied human beings can find a measure of contentment in human relationships or achievements once they recognize their dissatisfaction and ask for help. Thus a reasonable question to ask when someone's state of mind leads him to a wrongful act, or a contemplation of one, is: "Will this really satisfy you?" or "Is that what you really want to do?" or even, "Will you be able to live with that decision?" One is, in fact, more likely to help someone avoid a sinful act by this kind of questioning than by forbidding or reproving.

Christians who hold very strong beliefs about the sinfulness of certain actions or practices, such as abortion or homosexuality, often see their beliefs on these subjects to be in sharp contrast to what they see as secular "tolerance" of these practices. Perhaps they need to understand that it is no part of a social worker's job either to tolerate or to forbid anything. It would be an enormous pity if to be a Christian meant to be intolerant. And people who react against what they see as "tolerance" may find some difficulty both in letting clients tell them of their problems in these areas and in helping a client who may be considering what to do about them.

They are also faced with the question of how understanding they can be of a client who chooses such a course. Theoretically they may see that one cannot make up one's mind unless one has considered all possible alternatives, good and bad, but the worker's conviction may be so strong and an action so repugnant to him or her that it is too strong for this knowledge. And any agency or worker has the right not to participate in any action that it believes to be harmful. It has the right, and even the duty, to make its convictions clear. It has the right and the obligation to show why it believes a practice wrong, or unproductive, or likely to lead to disaster, but not to make others' decisions for them or to condemn them.

The doctrine of Original Sin, which has been so often misused, is one that should help social workers relate to other people's sins. What it tells us is that we are all sinners, although perhaps not in the same way. There is now no distinction, since all have fallen short of the glory of God. Secular social work learned much the same principle when it adopted Freud's theory of the "universal neurosis." Social workers are not the "good" people, telling others what is right or wrong. That is what the Pharisees tried to do. They are people just like the people they help and what may seem to some like tolerance is in fact understanding of how deep the roots of sin or disharmony are and how hard it is to eradicate them.

## VII. A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF SUFFERING

In his book, *The Philosophy of Social Work*, Herbert Bisno takes as his very first postulate that "human suffering is undesirable and should be prevented, or at least alleviated, whenever possible." He also takes issue with what he believes to be three Christian views of suffering; that it is often deserved, and therefore proper and natural; that it is a way through which people can atone for or and expiate their sin; and that suffering is enobling, or, as some people say, "builds character." Let us look at these possible views and see if we can arrive at what a Christian social worker can or ought to believe.

Most of us would agree with Bisno that the greater part of human suffering is undesirable and ought to be prevented or alleviated. Jesus healed the sick and the handicapped. He commended those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked and visited those in prison. No true Christian sees anything proper, useful or enobling in a child being abused, someone wasting away from starvation, living under oppression or being rejected by society. We all would try to relieve the suffering of a terminal cancer patient or a parent whose child has died. These are, as far as we can see, unnecessary forms of suffering, within our power to do something about, and social work is rightly committed to do what it can to relieve them.

We must also be careful not to condone suffering, to allow it to go on, because we think that the person who is suffering had brought it on himself. That is making a judgment that we have no right to make. Society does, it is true, inflict suffering on some people because they have committed crimes. Quite apart from any question as to how much good this really does, it is only done in this country through the due process of law, with many safeguards for the accused, and social workers are not judges. Some of the greatest Christian social workers, like, for example, Elizabeth Fry, have spent their lives trying to alleviate the plight of prisoners.

Nor can we turn our back on human suffering because God does apparently sometimes use suffering to chasten or to challenge someone. The story of Job is a good example. Some Christians believe that there must be some purpose beyond our understanding in all suffering, or God would not allow it, and some early Christians, faced with apparently needless suffering, took refuge in the belief that the more one suffered in this life, the greater would be one's reward in Heaven. But the problem is

envy one's need for possessions, pride one's need for power or recognition. The miser goes on accumulating wealth for which he has no possible need. The lecher is always seeking a new, more titillating experience. While Christians know that only through Grace and complete surrender to God does one fully find peace with oneself, dissatisfied human beings can find a measure of contentment in human relationships or achievements once they recognize their dissatisfaction and ask for help. Thus a reasonable question to ask when someone's state of mind leads him to a wrongful act, or a contemplation of one, is: "Will this really satisfy you?" or "Is that what you really want to do?" or even, "Will you be able to live with that decision?" One is, in fact, more likely to help someone avoid a sinful act by this kind of questioning than by forbidding or reproofing.

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## VII. A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF SUFFERING

In his book, *The Philosophy of Social Work*, Herbert Bisno takes as his very first postulate that “human suffering is undesirable and should be prevented, or at least alleviated, whenever possible.” He also takes issue with what he believes to be three Christian views of suffering; that it is often deserved, and therefore proper and natural; that it is a way through which people can atone for or and expiate their sin; and that suffering is ennobling, or, as some people say, “builds character.” Let us look at these possible views and see if we can arrive at what a Christian social worker can or ought to believe.

Most of us would agree with Bisno that the greater part of human suffering is undesirable and ought to be prevented or alleviated. Jesus healed the sick and the handicapped. He commended those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked and visited those in prison. No true Christian sees anything proper, useful or ennobling in a child being abused, someone wasting away from starvation, living under oppression or being rejected by society. We all would try to relieve the suffering of a terminal cancer patient or a parent whose child has died. These are, as far as we can see, unnecessary forms of suffering, within our power to do something about, and social work is rightly committed to do what it can to relieve them.

We must also be careful not to condone suffering, to allow it to go on, because we think that the person who is suffering had brought it on himself. That is making a judgment that we have no right to make. Society does, it is true, inflict suffering on some people because they have committed crimes. Quite apart from any question as to how much good this really does, it is only done in this country through the due process of law, with many safeguards for the accused, and social workers are not judges. Some of the greatest Christian social workers, like, for example, Elizabeth Fry, have spent their lives trying to alleviate the plight of prisoners.

Nor can we turn our back on human suffering because God does apparently sometimes use suffering to chasten or to challenge someone. The story of Job is a good example. Some Christians believe that there must be some purpose beyond our understanding in all suffering, or God would not allow it, and some early Christians, faced with apparently needless suffering, took refuge in the belief that the more one suffered in this life, the greater would be one’s reward in Heaven. But the problem is

that so much suffering is beyond our understanding, or, as the psalmist said, "too wonderful for me." We do not know why people suffer, and it is clear, from Matthew 25 and from Jesus' own actions, from James 1:27 and from the whole tenor of the Gospel, that God expects us to relieve suffering, whatever its cause.

But we also know something else, and it is here that we might question Dr. Bisno's categorical statement.

We know that some suffering is necessary to growing up, to making a wise, mature decision, to becoming a responsible person. Repentance is often agonizing. So, often, are other forms of facing up to the truth. And we also know, despite Dr. Bisno, that some suffering can be ennobling. An obvious case might be Helen Keller, or a boy or girl who overcomes polio and becomes a great athlete. A recent study shows that some children who were mistreated developed a particular sensitivity to the needs of others and became most loving parents. Our mistake would be to think that this was always so. Suffering probably breaks down many more people than it builds up. We have rather few clues at the moment as to how some people manage to turn apparent defeat into victory, except that it is through the Grace of God, although we do know, in human terms, that people are more likely to do so if they are allowed to express both their anger and their grief.

So how do we know what kinds of suffering we should do our best to relieve, and what kinds are necessary to a person's growth and maturity? There is, of course, suffering that a person deliberately undergoes in order to reach some goal. There are the long hours of training, some of it very painful, that a dancer, a musician, a doctor and even a social worker goes through in order to be good at a job. There is the renunciation of everyday pleasures that a nun may undertake. The ultimate example is, of course, Christ, who chose to suffer for our salvation. Even to repent "in sackcloth and ashes", if it is not neurotic self-punishment, can signalize a new beginning.

But to think only of self-chosen suffering does not solve our problem. The more common case is where someone is faced with a responsibility, or has a difficult decision to make, and having to do so will be painful. We could avoid that pain by shielding him from the truth, or taking over his or her responsibility. We could protect him or her. But to be protective of someone, except in a situation where he or she is completely unable to cope, is to treat that person like a baby. It is to depreciate him or her, to deny that they really are persons for whom we want a more abundant life. It is depriving them of an experience of being a responsible person. If we really wanted people never to experience pain we would keep them under drugs, half-alive, or drunk.

A frequent case in point is the unmarried mother who may have to give up her child for adoption. Some doctors and some social workers never let her see the child because if she once saw it she might find it very painful to have to give it up. If we whisk her child away we are not only encouraging her in irresponsibility but we are denying her the right to make her decision to give up a part of herself out of love and concern for her child. We are robbing her of the experience of being a mother. All too often the result is that in the years to come she will be haunted by anxiety for the child she brought into the world. And there is evidence that it matters to an adopted child when he or she, in later life, needs to know his or her true identity, that he or she was given up out of love and not out of indifference. The poet Tennyson wrote, "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," but modern psychology tends to say, "Don't love anyone too much, because it will hurt too much if you lose them." When Jesus said that we might have to give up everything, including those we loved the best, for his sake, he did not suggest that we should not love what He is asking us to give up, but rather that any sacrifice on our part was even more valuable because we loved the other very much.

## VIII. SOCIAL WORK AND WITNESSING

Christians are obligated to witness for Christ, to spread the Gospel, to “win” souls for Him. They also, if they are loving people, naturally want to share their experience of Him which has meant so much to themselves. They may be convinced that if only a troubled person would “accept” Christ most of his or her troubles would be over and perhaps, even more importantly, that if someone does not do so, that person will not inherit eternal life. Therefore the impulse to tell the Christian story, to urge others to believe it, is both very strong and at the same time laudable. It is a little more questionable when it takes the form of trying to convert people to the particular beliefs of a denomination or sect, to which both non-Christians and other Christians might and in fact do object, but if one really believes that only those who hold these particular beliefs will be saved, one’s motives cannot be impugned.

Why then should a Christian social worker not witness on any and all occasions, urge all his clients to become Christians, be in fact missionaries for the faith? The answer lies not so much in concepts of role—what social work is and what it tries to do—or in people’s right to choose their own religion or even to have no religion, although these are worth thinking about, but in the nature of faith itself.

Faith is not something that one acquires just because someone tells one that one ought to have it. One has, first, to have faith in that person. And, moreover, what one is asked to have faith in must make some sense in the light of one’s own experience. There may have been a time, even in the United States, when the majority of people had never heard of Jesus Christ. But that is not the major problem today. Today’s problem is that although most people have heard the Word of God all too many of them, and particularly the people with whom social work is largely engaged, have no reason to believe it.

Why should they? How, in fact, can they? How does one put one’s trust in a loving Father when “Father” to you is someone who comes in drunk and beats you? How believe that one’s sins are forgiven one by Someone one cannot see, if no one that one can see has ever been in the least forgiving? You do not know what forgiveness is. How trust a Man who told you that the meek shall inherit the earth when everything that you’ve ever had had been won by fighting for it? How trust anyone or anything when everyone and everything you tried to do has let you down?

There has to be some state of mind, some experience of human love, some success in one's life, some hope before one can understand and put one's faith in the Christian message. Paul said that faith was the gift of the Spirit, which is true, but what we can do as social workers—and we do have a wonderful opportunity to do so—is to show such love and forgiveness that a confused and desperate person can understand the Spirit's message when it comes.

A consideration of the Parable of the Sower may be helpful here. The seed only grows to maturity when there is good ground to receive it. But stony or even shallow ground can be converted into good ground by the addition of nutrients (love) or ploughing (facing reality) or breaking up clots (getting rid of blocks) and perhaps what social workers can do for the most part is to be tillers of the ground, rather than the Sower, who must in the long run be God Himself. It is true that certain men and women, powerful preachers or prophets, may act, as it were, for God as sowers, but even they have for the most part audiences that have some readiness to listen.

When, then, is it appropriate for a Christian social worker to witness directly to his or her faith? Four situations suggest themselves.

1. When a client is a Christian or would like to be one. When he or she understands Christian language and it has some meaning to him or her. When people want to know more or need your companionship in the faith, to pray, or to meditate or to explore what the faith can mean to them.

2. When a client enquires why you or your agency takes so much trouble with him or her or helps him or her when no one else will. This can be a real revelation to a client, particularly, as unfortunately sometimes happens, when their former encounters with religion or with religious people has been with its harsher aspects. Many people's image of religion has been soured through association with a puritanical or judgmental parent, relative, or pastor and the discovery that it can lead to joy, or love is a new one.

3. Where the clients are religious but their view of the faith is distorted or inadequate. One has to be careful here, however, not to contradict a person's beliefs but rather to enlarge them. Thus without in any way throwing doubt on the beliefs of someone who is meticulously following God's commandments but has chosen only those that feed his or her anger against wrongdoers, one might point out that the Bible also says that the "anger of man does not work the righteousness of God" (James 1:20) or that all the commandments are summed up in the single demand to love one's neighbor as oneself (Romans 13:9).

4. When someone begins to ask the sort of questions to which religion speaks directly, such as, "How can I live with myself?" or even, "How can I possibly do that?" Sometimes these won't come as questions, but as statements: "I can't trust anybody or anything" or "I can't see any hope for myself." Here what the social workers might say is, "Have you thought that God does forgive your sins," or "Maybe you and God could do it together" or even, "You know, Christ died for people like you." The more a person comes to terms with him or herself the more his questions will be ones to which religion provides an answer, and the readier he or she will be to see faith as a live option.

It perhaps does not need saying, but yet should always be kept in mind, that the most effective Christian witness is not talking about religion but treating people in a Christian way oneself. And perhaps one should add a word of warning to the worker who, in his or her desire to share his or her experience of God, makes a personal testimony. The most dangerous of all helpers is the one who has solved his or her own problem and has forgotten what it cost.

## IX. THE SPIRITUAL AND THE MATERIAL

"Man," said a speaker at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1905, "is a spiritual being and if he is to be helped it must be by spiritual means." She was expressing what many Christians would think of as a Christian point of view. It is true that another speaker made the point that what the poor really wanted was less good advice or spiritual enlightenment and more money to buy food with, more affordable housing and better medical care. For, although men and women may be spiritual beings they are also biological ones and it is hard to be spiritual if one is hungry, cold or sick.

No one knew this better than our Lord Himself. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew he did not say, "I was in need of counsel and ye counselled me not," but "I was hungry . . . naked . . . sick." Although He included in service visiting the sick and those in prison, He put material needs first. And He is the only Founder of a great religion who prayed for daily bread. He also fed the five thousand.

Yet many Christians seem to feel that they are doing less than they should if they are concerned about people's material needs. They want to be counsellors or therapists and not have to deal with the practical matters of everyday living. In a recent discussion of what social workers wanted for their clients, Christian social workers were much less concerned than were social workers as a whole that people should have a healthy and adequate diet or get adequate medical care, and more concerned that their clients should behave in a generally acceptable way.

This feeling probably has three roots. In the first place there is still a lingering belief that people are poor, or in trouble, because of some moral weakness. If only their characters could be improved then they would stop being poor and solve all their problems. The Reverend Thomas Chalmers, a great humanitarian two hundred years ago, was asked once whether if one gave a man a coat, he would come to church. No, he said, but if you can get him to come to church, he will go out and buy himself a coat. This sounds like a good moral statement, but is not very realistic. It assumes that somehow by coming to church the man could find the money he didn't have before; it assumes that he didn't buy a coat before because he was lazy or spent all of his money on drink. While this might be true in a few cases, it certainly isn't so for someone who is unemployed, disabled or

left in charge of a number of hungry children. Some nineteenth century Christian social workers even held that all material help to the poor was a mistake. The one outstanding exception was General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, who had experienced poverty himself.

Secondly, dealing with intangible things, such as emotions or relationships, has an air of professionalism about it that dealing with practical things doesn't have. This is not something that attracts Christians only. Secular social workers, entranced with the knowledge they acquired about people and their problems, are often much more interested in someone who exhibits bizarre behavior than in someone who needs a job or a little money to live on. They feel that they are not using the skills in which they have been trained when they perform simple actions that people need in order to live reasonably normal lives. Anyone, surely, can provide material things, but only social workers can deal with feelings and emotions. Yet more and more it is becoming apparent that it is these simple actions, and the way in which they are done, the love that accompanies them, the knowledge that someone cares, the understanding that is shown of what someone is going through, which is the starting point for someone's spiritual growth.

But it is the third reason which perhaps poses the most problems for the Christian social worker. We most of us have been taught from our childhood that people have a soul, which is the spiritual part of us, and a body, which is worldly, or material, or, even, we say, carnal and not spiritual at all. But this is not Biblical at all. Man became a living soul (King James Version) or a living being (Revised Version)—the Hebrew word "nephesh" means a complete human being. He did not become a soul in a body. That is a borrowing from other religions. Christians believe in the resurrection of the body, of the whole person, body and soul. Perhaps the best statement of the problem is the following: "Bread for oneself is a material thing. Bread for one's neighbor is a spiritual."



## X. WORKING IN A SECULAR AGENCY

Some Christian social workers prefer to work in a religious agency, and some decide to set up for themselves in private practice. But, as we have said, there is a need for Christian workers in governmental and other secular agencies, particularly those that have to do with providing the basic needs of people. How these needs are met, grudgingly or lovingly, with respect for the recipients or patronizingly or disapprovingly, has a great deal to do with what kind of a country we are and what kind of an example we show to the rest of the world.

If one takes a job in a secular agency one is, of course, committed to carrying out that agency's policies as long as one stays with it or is not moved to protest openly or sacrificially against some policy or practice. One has no right to ignore policies or give them subtly some other meaning than that which the agency intends. Clients have a right to rely on an agency's consistency and Government or a Board of Trustees that its money be spent as it directs. But there may arise occasions when a Christian cannot, in good conscience, carry out a policy that he or she either sees as being harmful spiritually or unchristian in its treatment of people.

One then has two choices. One can resign or one can refuse to carry out the policy, as a young man named Bennie Parrish did some years ago when he refused to make a midnight raid on a client's home, to see if she was co-habiting with a man. Mr. Parrish, who may have been activated by religious principles, or by simple decency, lost his job but his action led to the Supreme Court outlawing the policy he protested. And there have been other cases.

A Christian social worker may encounter some suspicion if he or she uses religious language. Many social workers and governmental officials are extremely sensitive to anything that they feel might promote any particular form of religion, or indeed religion at all. This is, for the most part, a reaction against "Christians of Morality" who would use social work to impose their own beliefs on clients or are interested only in a narrow form of evangelism, but sometimes it goes to absurd lengths. Anything that smacks of religion is taboo, although a majority of workers in the agency may be believers. There is, however, a constitutional problem here. Government must not seem to favor one form of religion over another and this has been interpreted lately to include not having any religion at all.

This presents a problem to the Christian who wants to make clear where he or she stands and naturally thinks in religious terms. It may seem like betraying one's faith not to speak out as one has been taught. But even Paul when he spoke at the shrine of the Unknown God, began with something his listeners knew and accepted. What a Christian may have to learn is that certain phrases, such as "being saved", "accepting Jesus" and even such words as "sin" and "grace", although they may mean much to the speaker, have little or no meaning, and may actually be offensive, to a person who has rejected the Christian story, or is of another faith. They may even be so to some Christians who use a different vocabulary. They are in fact poor communicators to those to whom they are not familiar, and hinder, rather than help, communication.

What the Christian social worker can do is to learn first the professional language, just as a missionary would learn the language of the people he or she works among, and then relate it to his or her Christian understanding. Thus we have suggested that much of what social science calls "dysfunction" or "alienation" is what we would call a state of sin, and it might be appropriate sometimes to make that point with an unbeliever. He or she would be much closer to understanding what we are about. But largely your witness will be that of treating people in a Christian way and living our religion. The early Church did not prevail so much because of its preaching but because of the way that Christians withstood persecution, loved each other, and cared for the poor. People began to wonder from where they got their strength and soon began to believe with them.

In 1983 the North American Association of Christians in Social Work developed, in non-religious language, a set of assumptions which they believed underlay Christian social work and could be understood by the non-Christian. These principles are each based on Christian understanding although the connection may not at first be obvious. They are, in fact, entirely biblical.

Most of them have been discussed in this book. Not every social worker will agree with all of them, since social workers are not consistent in their beliefs. They represent a particular emphasis in social work rather than a consensus, but they are all compatible with National Association of Social Work's Code of Ethics and the values held by a large number of social workers. They can therefore be used to interpret to secular workers where Christian social workers stand, as well as serve as something of a guideline for Christian social workers themselves. But they should in no way limit the Christian's understanding of what social work can be or the insights the Christian social worker can derive from his religious experience.

The assumptions, which are, of course, open to question in the light of any one person's religious belief are as follows:

As a member of NACSW I practice, learn and teach social work within the following philosophical frame:

1. Human beings are of infinite worth, irrespective of gender, race, age or behavior.
2. At the same time human beings, including myself, are fallible, limited creatures. They are not capable, and never will be, of solving all their problems or of creating the perfect society. Nevertheless they are sometimes capable, with appropriate help, of transcending their nature in acts of courage and compassion.
3. As a fallible being myself I have no right to pass moral judgments on others, to assume authority over them except as mandated by law, or to imagine that I know everything about them.
4. Human beings have been endowed with the faculty of choice, which must not be denied them except by due process of law, or where their actions or threatened actions are demonstrably gravely harmful to others or self-destructive, or where they voluntarily surrender this right for a prescribed purpose.
5. They are, however, responsible for the consequences of their choices, and may need help in perceiving what these are likely to be.
6. No person is beyond help, although at this time we may not have the knowledge or skill to help.
7. All programs and policies that depreciate people, treat them as objects rather than as subjects, seek to impose on them behavior not mandated by law, manipulate them without their knowledge and consent or deny them choices permitted others in our society, are to be avoided or resisted.
8. Our society is far from perfect, and it is not my business to act as its representative, but rather to help people determine their relationship to it.
9. Love, understanding and compassion are the source of wellbeing and acceptable behavior, rather than the reward for them.
10. While force is sometimes the quickest way of obtaining an immediate result, in the long run it is self-defeating. Compassion, understanding and concern are the eventual victors.
11. The social sciences provide much useful knowledge for practice, but cannot explain all phenomena and their pronouncements need constantly to be evaluated in terms of the values they subsume.

12. There are outcomes to human helping that cannot be measured statistically as well as those which can.
13. All human institutions, ideals and commitments are liable to subtle perversion of their values, unless these are constantly examined. The new is not necessarily the best, nor does new knowledge always invalidate the old.
14. Professional education and training in self-discipline are indispensable to good social work.
15. As a Christian committed to the dissemination of what I believe to be the truth, my task as a social worker is not so much to convince others of this truth, as to provide them with the experience of being loved, forgiven and cared for so that the Good News I believe in may be a credible option for them.