



THE CHALLENGES OF SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Ioana-Eva CĂDARIU

"Tibiscus" University of Timișoara

Marius MARICI*¹

Stefan cel Mare University

Faculty of Educational Sciences

Abstract

This paper examines how spirituality and religion can be included in social work, focusing on their potential to support clients' resilience and emotional well-being. It explores three key areas: how spirituality and religion are defined and understood in the context of social care; the challenges of introducing these topics into social worker education; and the ethical risks that can arise when spiritual beliefs are misused or oversimplified in practice. The discussion emphasizes the need for a reflective approach, where professionals are aware of their own values and remain open to the diverse spiritual perspectives of those they support.

Keywords: *spirituality, religion, social care, social worker education*

Integrating spirituality in social care. Issues

Spirituality is often seen as a deeply personal path that helps individuals make sense of their lives, stay centered, and feel a sense of connection—whether with themselves, others, or something beyond the physical world (Suchomelová, 2016; Rinkel et al., 2018). It reflects values and motivations that guide people, but it doesn't always follow the structure of organized religion.

Unlike spirituality, religion tends to be more formal, involving shared doctrines, rituals, and community practices (Opatrný, 2024). However, the two often overlap: some people express

¹ Corresponding author: Marici Marius, email: marius.marici@usm.ro

their spirituality through religion, while others explore it through personal reflection or life philosophy (Hodge, 2015).

In social work, understanding this distinction is vital. Professionals are encouraged to respect each client's beliefs—whether religious or not—without imposing their own values (Oxhandler & Ellor, 2017; Opatrný, 2024). A client-centered approach that includes spirituality helps build trust and supports ethical care.

When spirituality is part of someone's life, it can serve as a resource for emotional healing, identity rebuilding, and resilience (Rinkel et al., 2018; Gardner, 2020). It offers hope during adversity, especially when rooted in meaningful personal connections (Marici, 2025) or transcendent experiences.

Although Europe's social work tradition has largely been secular, recent social and cultural shifts—like increased migration and growing diversity—have revived interest in integrating spirituality into practice (Gibson et al., 2021). The current trend favors a broader, more inclusive understanding of spirituality as a universal aspect of human dignity and the need for meaning (Baumann, 2021).

That said, there is still no consensus on what spirituality actually means. Some see it as personal religiosity, while others view it as a basic human need for transcendence or love (Kaňák, 2016; Suchomelová, 2016). Crisp (2018) notes that interpretations vary widely depending on cultural, professional, or institutional context, making the concept inherently complex.

Historically, spirituality had a clear role in social work, especially in the U.S., where early practice was shaped by Christian ethics and the Social Gospel Movement (Cole, 2021). But in its pursuit of scientific credibility, the profession later distanced itself from its religious roots. Even so, current professional standards—such as those promoted by CSWE and NASW—encourage integrating spirituality as part of a holistic view of the person (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2017).

Cole (2021) offers a practical model for doing this through the ecological framework, which emphasizes the interdependence between individuals and their environment. She suggests incorporating spirituality into both the curriculum and practice, not just through optional electives but by weaving it into all core training areas.

However, not all perspectives are aligned. Baldwin (2025) takes a critical stance, arguing that spirituality cannot be treated as a neutral or universal concept. He believes that stripping it of its cultural and religious roots leads to a shallow, decontextualized version of spiritual life. He

also warns that defining spirituality only in functional terms—useful only when it aligns with professional norms—risks ignoring its deeper, often paradoxical nature.

One of Baldwin's concerns is the artificial divide often made between religion and spirituality. While social work literature sometimes treats religion as rigid and spirituality as flexible, real-life experiences show these are not always distinct. Many religious practices include personal elements, and many spiritual paths involve structure or moral frameworks.

Another key theme Baldwin explores is the ethical tension between respecting clients' spiritual beliefs and maintaining professional standards. He criticizes the tendency to accept only those beliefs that align with social work's secular ethics, arguing that this approach reduces spirituality to what is professionally convenient. For example, intense or unsettling spiritual experiences, such as *mysterium tremendum*—the awe or fear associated with the transcendent—are often ignored, even though they are meaningful to the person.

This conversation extends into the field of education. Although the literature around spirituality in social work has grown, universities are slow to adapt. Gardner (2020) points out that many programs are reluctant to address spirituality openly. Students fear being judged, and instructors avoid the topic to prevent conflict. Spirituality ends up being treated as a cultural element, rather than a meaningful, lived dimension of identity.

Integrating spirituality into education also faces practical hurdles. Curricula are already full, and adding new content requires careful planning. Baldwin (2025) cautions that when spirituality is squeezed into training as just another competency, it becomes instrumentalized, stripped of its depth and cultural roots. Gardner (2020) advocates instead for an approach that weaves spirituality across subjects through critical thinking and awareness, rather than isolating it into a standalone topic.

Both authors agree that a more reflective and respectful approach is needed. Spirituality must not be accepted only when it fits mainstream expectations. It should also be engaged with in its more challenging or unfamiliar forms. The growing complexity of today's societies - from religious pluralism to climate anxiety - demands that future social workers be better prepared to recognize and support the spiritual identities of those they serve.

Integrating spirituality into social work is not a trend, but a necessary step toward holistic, ethical, and human-centered practice. Achieving this means confronting conceptual confusion, institutional resistance, and ethical dilemmas. It also requires educators and practitioners to move beyond surface-level inclusion, and toward a more thoughtful, critical, and inclusive engagement with spirituality in all its depth.

The ethical risks of instrumentalizing spirituality

In recent years, social work has begun to pay closer attention to the role of spirituality in the lives of service users. Rather than associating spirituality only with religion, current perspectives describe it as a broad, human experience linked to meaning, connection, and transcendence—experienced both within and outside of religious contexts (Hodge, 2018).

This broader view allows practitioners to respect diverse spiritual expressions, whether they come from faith traditions or personal inner journeys. However, as the inclusion of spirituality becomes more common in social care, there's also a growing risk of it being used only for its practical benefits, such as reducing stress or improving engagement. Lizano and colleagues (2019) warn that when spirituality is treated as just another therapeutic technique, it loses its depth and authenticity.

An ethical approach to spirituality means going beyond utility. It requires acknowledging spirituality as something meaningful in itself, not just valuable because it improves outcomes. Recognizing the client's spiritual worldview is about respecting their identity—not simply using that worldview as a means to an end (Lizano, Godoy & Allen, 2019).

At the same time, Hodge (2018) draws attention to the ethical tension that can arise when a client's beliefs seem to challenge the profession's core values. In such cases, social workers must carefully navigate the space between respecting individual beliefs and upholding principles like human rights and equality. This involves neither imposing professional standards nor avoiding value conflicts entirely, but instead engaging in thoughtful, respectful dialogue (Vișcu, & Marici, 2025).

In education and practice, this means that spirituality should not be reduced to a checklist item or optional add-on. It should be understood as a dynamic part of some clients' lives, requiring both sensitivity and self-awareness from practitioners. Lizano et al. (2019) emphasize that when addressed with care, spirituality can support resilience—but only when integrated in a way that honors the person behind the belief.

Ultimately, respecting spiritual self-determination means acknowledging difference without judgment, remaining open to complexity, and avoiding overly simplified frameworks (Marici, & Runcan, 2023). Ethical engagement with spirituality is not about using it—it's about recognizing it as a meaningful part of the human experience and allowing it to be present in ways that are authentic to each client.

Hodge and Lizano's contributions remind us that integrating spirituality into social care isn't just about methods or outcomes—it's about values, relationships, and how we understand what it means to support someone fully.

Conclusions and limits

The integration of spirituality in social care contributes significantly to supporting coping, resilience and regaining meaning in life. The continuous development of professional competences and the implementation of institutional policies that support a holistic and respectful approach to spiritual diversity are recommended.

The paper is mainly based on theoretical analysis and examples from the literature, without integrating own empirical research. It also takes a predominantly European perspective and may not reflect the cultural particularities of other regions. For future studies, empirical investigation of beneficiaries' perceptions and the practical impact of spirituality-centered interventions, as well as extensive cross-cultural comparisons are recommended.

References

- Baldwin, C. (2025). *Spirituality and social work: A view from the borderlands*. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*.
- Baumann, D. (2021). *Spirituality in social work: A postsecular approach*. *European Journal of Social Work*.
- Cole, H. L. (2021). Intersecting Social Work Practice, Education, and Spirituality: A Conceptual Model. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 40(1), 68-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2020.1831420>
- Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2015). *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards*. CSWE.
- Crisp, B. R. (2018). *The spiritual dimension in social work practice: Some reflections on practice and theory*. *Journal of Social Work*.
- Gale, F., & Dudley, M. (2017). *Social work, spirituality and working with people from diverse faith backgrounds*. Australian Social Work.
- Gardner, F. (2020). *Spirituality and Social Work: Integrating Spirituality in Direct Practice*. Routledge.
- Gibson, A., Sandal, J., & Sowden, L. (2021). *Spirituality and religion in social work: The European perspective*. *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work*.
- Hodge, D. R. (2015). *Spiritual competence: What it is, why it is necessary, and how to develop it*. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*.
- Hodge, D. R. (2018). The evolution of spirituality and religion in international social work discourse: Strengths and limitations of the contemporary understanding. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 37(1), 3-23.

- Kaňák, J. (2016). *Approaches to spirituality in social work: Cultural and theoretical perspectives*. Social Work & Society.
- Lizano, E. L., Godoy, A. J., & Allen, N. (2019). Spirituality and worker well-being: Examining the relationship between spirituality, job burnout, and work engagement. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 38(2), 197-216.
- Marici, M., PhD. (2025, May 14). Towards a New Theory of Couple Functioning. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/ypkw2_v2
- Marici, Marius, & Runcan, Remus (2023). Cultural competence in transnational migration: A social work perspective. *Multiculturalism and Social Assistance*, Presa Universitara Clujeana, 9-22.
- Oxhandler, H. K., & Ellor, J. W. (2017). *Integrating clients' religion and spirituality in social work practice: A national survey of social workers*. Social Work.
- Rinkel, M., Larsen, K., Harrington, C., & Chun, C. (2018). *Effects of social work practice on practitioners' spirituality*. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 37(4), 331-350.
- Suchomelová, L. (2016). *Spirituality and social work: European developments*. Social Work Review.
- Vișcu, L. I., & Marici, M. (2025). Overseeing the parallel process in social work. *International Journal of Social and Educational Innovation (IJSEIro)*, 119-138.