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Christianity and Social Work: Applying an Intersubjective Framework to Clients' Search for the Sacred in Clinical Practice

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Abstract

Intersubjectivity, relating to the consciousness of two minds, begs the notion that humans can relate simply through the sharing of worlds. In the absence of theoretical principles and inquiry, intersubjectivity relies on the commonality of the human condition to propel understanding. Trials that are intrinsically human, such as sorrow, grief, anger, pain, and suffering, do not necessarily require agreement to be collectively experienced. In social work practice, there is an emphasis on human relationships as an integral vehicle in the pursuit of change. However, this ideal of co-learning rarely exists within the realm of clients' spiritual and religious lives. Current and past clinical research suggests that there exists a unidirectional system of spiritual and religious knowledge that perpetuates a unidirectional standard of thought that cannot be challenged in the clinical relationship. Considering the influence of worldly, traditional orientations of spirituality and religion, the author argues that clients' search for the presence of God, the sacred, is compromised and thus require critical reflection to be optimized through the Holy Spirit. In addition, current clinical research highlights cultural, faith-based challenges affecting Christian social workers presented with such clinical environments. This paper seeks to introduce an intersubjective framework for exploring the personal, social, and institutional orientations that influence clients' search for the sacred, a purpose-filled identity that inspires faith in God. Existential and humanistic theory are incorporated to aid in marrying this seeking of the sacred, and its attendance to self-disclosure and relationship in the pursuit of healing others in clinical practice.

INTRODUCTION

Over many millennia, Christianity has served as a conduit to the application of biblical scripture; a theoretical lens that also provides practicality in the goal of spreading gospel-like truths and commandments (Davis et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2018). Developmental constructs denoting faith, spirituality, and religion all lay the foundation from which Christianity arrives. While definitions within the field of Christian theology are not standardized, a Christian generally refers to a person who believes in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is believed that God, the father of Jesus Christ, freely gave Jesus to humanity to atone for the sins of the world; the resurrection of Jesus and subsequent biblical testimony is proof of God's divinity. Thus, there is a substantial debt owed which calls for Christians to share biblical and experiential truths that expose the grace and power of God. Most notably, the unconditional love beneath the actions that took place 2,000 years ago. For the purposes of this paper, the definition of a *Christian* is adopted as is dictated within the *New International Version*, 1978/2011), as one who receives the Holy Spirit "who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:14). A Christian is one who is included in Christ's family following witness to the gospel of truth. Upon believing, is reborn and made new, as promised by the Holy Spirit, guaranteeing everlasting possession of God's love (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Ephesians 1:12-14). Most salient, a Christian is one who, following witness to the gospel, extends the self sacrificially so that others may too be saved (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 2:1-2).

When considering the robust amount of theoretical and conceptual research identifying connections between healing and recovery and spiritual and religious integrations (e.g., see, Eng, 2019, Grim & Grim, 2019, Monteiro & Wall, 2011, Park, 2005, 2007, and Roth-Cohen et al., 2022), and related empirical research (e.g., see Elliott & Reuter, 2021, McGeehan & Baker, 2016, Rogers & Stanford, 2015, Suitt, 2020, and Upenieks, 2023), it becomes clearer of the impact of spiritual and religious integration on an individual's life. To this end, many mental health professions have encouraged the integration of clients' spiritual and religious domains to clinical outcomes (Bledsoe et al., 2013; Fitzgerald & Vaidyanathan, 2023; Wang et al., 2003). The following section depicts the complimentary nature of Christianity and the profession of social work within the context of human relationships.

Arguably most aligned to Christianity is the profession of social work. According to the National Association of Social Workers [NASW, 2021] code of ethics, human relationships are described as an integral vehicle by which change is enabled. The NASW (2021) code of ethics recognizes human relationships as valuable partnerships in the change process, directing social workers to establish and foster such relationships "in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities" (ethical principles, importance of human relationships). Biblical commandments and scripture offer similar interpretations. Five themes can be suggested that aid in the interpretation of

human relationships from a biblical perspective: love, communication, honesty, forgiveness, and respect.

Love is a principle that is dominant within scripture, emphasizing love as the foundation by which all good relationships derive (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). The bible (*New International Version*, 1978/2011) commands to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31) and "love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12). A human relationship founded on the biblical aspect of "love" requires social workers to operate within an exorbitant amount of empathy, whereby a client's problems are addressed within the context of life and its ordinary pain. To "love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12), social workers must address love from a comparative mindset (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). The NASW (2021) code of ethics emulates biblical interpretations of love through its long-standing mission to care for the most vulnerable of society. A historic and characterizing feature of social work is the profession's binate focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society (NASW, 2021). The foremost mission of social work is to enhance human well-being by caring for and aiding individuals to meet basic needs; such idealism require "attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living" (NASW, 2021, preamble). To love biblically is to operate from empathy; empathy is a social work characteristic.

Communication is a principle that displays holiness, for there is a righteousness found in the way that individuals speak to one another (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). The bible (*New International Version*, 1978/2011) instructs followers of Christ Jesus to behave in ways that honor God, particularly in the way in which language is utilized in relationships. Proverbs 15:1 states, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage highlights the impact of harmful communication on an individual's ability to manage painful, or otherwise difficult circumstances. James 1:19-20 cautions this same use of language, urging "everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). The NASW (2021) code of ethics dedicates ethical standards to the use of language with and regarding clients, suggesting the interpretative power of deprecatory language amidst client challenges. According to the NASW (2021) code of ethics ethical standards, "social workers should not use derogatory language in their written, verbal, or electronic communications to or about clients. Social workers should use accurate and respectful language in all communications to and about clients" (section 1.12 derogatory language). To honor God with communication requires both an understanding of the impact of harmful language in the lives of individuals in distress, and an intrinsic desire to model effective communication.

In general, honesty is a positive attribute for individuals to hold; however, for Christians, it is a commandment (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). The ninth of the Ten Commandments is "you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Exodus 20:16). This

commandment does not discriminate against varied types of lying; it includes all structure of lying. The Ninth Commandment is founded on the principle of integrity and morality (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Exodus 20:16). Truly adhering to the directive to not lie requires altering how we think. For instance, a fair amount of research indicates that lying and memory are relational (e.g., see Dianiska & Meissner, 2023, Johnson et al., 2001, Vieira & Lane, 2013, Polage, 2012, 2017, and Walczyk et al., 2014), such that false descriptions are recalled and stored differently than truthful ones in memory and related cognitive processes (Vieira & Lane, 2013). Given the constructive methods innate to creating elaborate descriptions, such lies are more likely to be retained (Walczyk et al., 2014). Nevertheless, in the event an individual forgets that the description was created in deceit, that false description is also more likely to be later *incorrectly recalled* as accurate (Polage, 2012, 2017). On this occasion, the details of the lie are retained, but the purpose for its creation (i.e., to deceive) is not. This effect most likely occurs due to the lie sharing phenomenological features with honest memories, resulting in individuals confusing the internal versus external origin of the report (i.e., a false description internally procured vs. an honestly experienced event; Johnson et al., 2001).

When considering this relationship between lying and memory in the context of human relationships, it can be suggested that an individual that lies, by which deception is repeated, is more likely to confuse phenomenological experiences rooted in those lies, including those innate to secondary individuals' experiences (i.e., the experience of the individual being deceived). Such effects offer harmful consequences to the cultivation of trust, empathy, and compassion, and emphasize the importance of honesty in biblical relationships. Proverbs 12:22 states, "the Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage highlights the importance of avoiding deceitful behavior and practicing integrity in relationships.

Likewise, the NASW (2021) code of ethics dedicates an ethical principal to the value of integrity, emphasizing the necessity for social workers to "take measures to care for themselves professionally and personally" in the context of trustworthy behavior (ethical principles, integrity). It can be suggested that this excerpt lends to the findings between dishonesty and memory (e.g., see Dianiska & Meissner, 2023, Johnson et al., 2001, Vieira & Lane, 2013, Polage, 2012, 2017, and Walczyk et al., 2014), and its impact on client-practitioner relationships While reasons for lying vary, people generally lie due to feared consequences; less consideration is placed on the consequences of managing lying behavior, such as emotional stress, on functional outcomes. Social workers who practice shifting their thinking relative to lying behavior are better positioned to manage this human conflict. Social workers are commanded to behave in a trustworthy manner with those they serve, thereby improving memory and the ability to recall important relational experiences with clients; God honors trustworthiness, as it reveals the shortcomings and deceitfulness of lying behavior on an individual's life and relationships.

Biblical teachings indicate that forgiveness is requisite for healthy relationships. In Matthew 6:14-15 Jesus states, "for if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage suggests that relationships test and subsequently measure an individual's ability to reciprocate grace in the presence of wrongdoing. In this way, grace is not assumed earned by an individual who has wronged another, such that repentance precedes forgiveness; rather, it is presumed in the manner by which Christ forgave; it is unconditional and freely given. To offer forgiveness in the former way suggests themes of worldly pursuit, such that an individual's worthiness is contingent on their ability to be in the position of the *forgiver*, rather than the forgiven; this is contradictory to the intention and purpose of the cross and Christ's crucifixion (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). In contrast, *unconditional* forgiveness aligns with gospel-like truths inherent in Christianity, and positions humans in mirror-like relationships that coerce introspection and empathy amid relational wrongdoing.

While the NASW (2021) does not explicitly mention forgiveness-based concepts (e.g., grace) in related principles or guidelines, research pertaining to its connection to social work practice has occurred. For instance, an empirical study by Couden-Hernandez et al. (2012) sought to evaluate the impact of a psychoeducational program that aimed to enhance Christian adults' forgiveness capability. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the authors incorporated intensive interviews and empirically established scales to evaluate the effectiveness of the program on participants' ability to forgive and feelings of anger and pain regarding a specific forgiveness dilemma (Couden-Hernandez et al., 2012). Findings indicated that the psychoeducational program significantly reduced participant's' feelings of anger and pain and improved their ability to forgive; it is important to note that this study did not construct forgiveness in the sense of worldly forgiveness; rather, forgiveness was consecrated from internal healing and reconciliation, as is biblically dictated (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). In addition, the authors suggested that social work, as a profession, is best suited to deliver therapeutic approaches and applications of forgiveness, largely due to the profession's relevance to educating clients on the psychological and physical considerations to emotions of anger and pain (NASW, 2021, preamble); and the mission-focused task of restoring client well-being (Couden-Hernandez et al., 2012; see also NASW, 2021, ethical standards, section 1.01 commitment to clients). Although Couden-Hernandez et al.'s (2012) study consisted of participants identified as Christian, the relative findings highlight the cognitive restructuring impact of Christian-based forgiveness perspectives (e.g., relational restoration, spiritual and physical healing, love, and emotional wholeness) in comparison to those which are worldly-based (e.g., responsibility, assessment of fault, personal justice, and revenge).

A later conceptual study by Lander (2016) explored the therapeutic application of forgiveness therapy in social work practice by way of case study

analysis. The structure of the forgiveness therapy detailed within this study's case analysis involved a series of individual and conjoint sessions, in which the victim and perpetrator of wrongdoing were individually and jointly assessed and interviewed by the attending social worker. Over the course of four months, the attending social worker (a) elicited interest in the concept of forgiveness as a mechanism by which past interpersonal injury may be approached, thereby incorporating the social work value of dignity and worth (NASW, 2021, ethical principles, dignity and worth of the person), and purveying the assumption of self-determination for clients to solve their own problems (Lander, 2016; see also Sheafor et al. 1994); (b) situated the client's forgiveness dilemma within the context of their environment (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] (2022), thereby bridging the influence of related unpleasant symptoms externally (e.g., familial, community, and societal factors), evoking clarity and increased understanding (Lander, 2016; see also Sheafor et al. 1994); (c) intentionally evoked deep-rooted, painful emotions pertinent to the client's forgiveness dilemma, operating from the social work commandment to expose affect (CSWE, 2022) and clearly express the range of human emotions in the pursuit of healing and recovery (Lander, 2016; see also Hepworth et al. 2013); and (d) emphasized the complexity of human life and the human condition in the presence of wrongdoing and victimization, whereby the client was exposed to the concept of empathy as one of the most integral mechanisms to reduce psychological pain and cognitive dissonance within human relationships (Lander, 2016; see also Wade et al. 2005).

In comparison to Couden-Hernandez et al.'s (2012) study, Lander's (2016) study does not explicitly mention Christianity (i.e., values, beliefs, knowledge principles), nor does it discriminate the meaning of the term forgiveness in its methodology; *forgiveness*, in this conceptual study, is inclusively organized to depict the consequences of "unforgiveness" on an individual's well-being, such as emotions of anger and pain, and behavioral symptoms of avoidance (Lander, 2016). Nevertheless, findings from this case study analysis uncovered many themes and points of convergence between social work and the principles of forgiveness (Lander, 2016). Despite findings from Couden-Hernandez et al.'s (2012) and Lander's (2016) studies, all authors have indicated that the acceleration of forgiveness-based approaches and treatment modalities in social work practice is slow in momentum, with little attention to the concept and its effectiveness demonstrated in social work research. Biblical forgiveness understands that although the term *forgiveness* can be conceptualized variedly, the related consequences of *unforgiveness* is quite universal. Human relationships that can comprehend this delineation are blessed; social workers are perfectly positioned to work with clients suffering from unforgiveness symptoms, by which the focus is less on simply becoming the *forgiver*, and more on the psychological freedom in *forgiveness*.

Respect is a principle that is based on relationships that are unassuming of agreement, but expectant on understanding. The bible teaches that respect is a critical component of healthy relationships (*New International Version*,

1978/2011). This is because granting respect, in biblical terms, is not contingent on an individual's capability to "act according to the rule;" rather, it recognizes the tendency for individuals to "act according to themselves." In this way, an individual's freedom to choose a specific action is not predicated on the *agreement* to the rule, but an *understanding* of the action. Scripture highlights the importance of mutual respect within different types of relationships. For instance, Ephesians 5:33 states, "however, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage emphasizes the positive correlation between respect and honor in marriage; when a man loves his wife in the same way as he loves himself, he honors her more, and this results in an increase in respect by way of his wife. Exodus 20:12 commands to appropriate this same honorable behavior with parents, suggesting that such behavior enhances livelihood and longevity (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Respecting authority is also identified in scripture, describing such relationships with authority as practicing faith in God's appointment to judge and provide righteous justice. 1 Peter 2:13-14 states, "submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to the governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage reflects two points pertaining to the principle of respect: (1) respect is not designated for those with which an individual wholly agrees, but with all who have been appointed by God to enact Holy justice, and (2) through obedience an individual can expect the positive correlational effect of honor when respect is granted.

The NASW (2021) code of ethics recognizes this relationship between honor and respect, emphasizing two additional factors: dignity and worth. Dignity and worth underscore the principle of respect because they precede its union; for an individual to practice respect in a relationship, there must be an established condition by which dignity is actuated and worth is allocated. This can be better illustrated when considering the NASW (2021) ethical principle "social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person." This ethical principle commands social workers "treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity" and "promote clients' socially responsible self-determination," thereby establishing the conditions by which dignity can be actuated. In addition, this ethical principle integrates social workers' responsibility to resolve conflicts between client's interests and society's interests, by which social workers aid in mediating these competing interests in a socially responsible manner; such behavior establishes the condition by which a client's worth is emphasized through resourcing, networking, and tasking. Establishing respect in relationships requires that an individual perceives others in the same way that an individual perceives themselves. This act elicits a stronger desire to practice fairness, kindness, and compassion toward the feelings, needs, and well-being of others. Matthew 7:12 states, "so in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for

this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Social workers who place emphasis on the healing impact of self-determination are more likely to engage in respectful behavior with clients; God honors those who encourage respect within relationships, as it creates conditions for individuals to practice obedience, submission to Holy authority, and patience.

The major purpose of the present discussion was to examine intersecting elements of Christianity and social work within the context of organizing principles. While most of the presented themes identified parallels between Christianity and social work, including the meaningful interpretations of applied research, there remains a distinct boundary between the two that is suggested to reduce clinical treatment potential. To better understand the current state of Christianity and social work, an examination of the integrative effort must first occur. The following section consolidates current and past trends pertinent to the application and integration of Christianity within social work practice.

METHOD

The research method used in this study is a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. This approach was chosen to explore in depth the subjective experiences of Christian social workers in integrating spiritual and religious values into clinical practice, particularly through an intersubjective framework. The focus of the research is on how practitioners understand and respond to the spiritual gap between Christianity and social work practice, and how an intersubjective framework can help overcome barriers arising from clients' socio-political backgrounds such as race, gender and class. Data will be collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with Christian social workers who have a minimum of three years' experience in clinical practice with clients from diverse spiritual backgrounds. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques are used to obtain suitable participants, while data analysis is done using thematic analysis methods.

In maintaining the validity and validity of the data, this research will apply source triangulation, *member checking*, and researcher reflexivity. Ethical considerations are also highly considered, including obtaining ethical approval, informed consent, and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of participants. The study will also consider different clinical practice contexts, such as serving children, crisis situations, and non-religious clients (agnostic/atheist), to understand the limitations and flexibility of the intersubjective framework. Thus, this study will not only provide theoretical insights, but also make a practical contribution in helping Christian social workers adopt an authentic, ethical and contextualized approach in assisting clients towards deeper spiritual meaning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Christianity and Social Work Practice: Past and Current Trends

The application of Christian beliefs within social work practice have not been without toil. Numerous research has studied this integrative necessity, emphasizing the need for demarcation between Christianity and social work practice. A quantitative study by Oxhandler and Ellor (2017) employed a survey to a national sample of social work practitioners (n = 444) to assess integrative

variables of spiritualty and religion in practice. While findings indicated high levels of self-efficacy with integrating clients' religion and spirituality into practice, behavioral integrations were found to be less reported and thus more ambiguous (Oxhandler & Ellor, 2017). This discrepancy between spiritual and religious perception and behavior was identified in a later study by Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino (2021), to which the authors employed a similar method to analyze respondents' integration of their Christianity; the notable difference being an intentional focus on the religion, spirituality, and faith of social workers (i.e., respondents), rather than their clients. Findings from a large sample (n = 486) indicated that conflicts between social work as a profession and respondents' Christian identities exist and influence related practice behavior (Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino, 2021). In sharing their experiences and related discourse, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino (2021) reported:

> When social work practitioners who identify as Christian talk about "integrating faith and social work practice," they often mean connecting their Christian/biblical principles and values with how they carry out the work they do as social workers (i.e., finding ways to incorporate their faith in social work practice). As a result, there is little or no focus on the practice aspect of faith in the integrative effort (while people assume the combined theory and practice aspects of social work). (p. 69)

Conceivably what seems more important is the diminishing effect of Christianity—manifestations of spiritual and religious awareness and its value on human relationships—within the client-practitioner paradigm. To redefine the above-mentioned effort, the researchers recommended a language alteration: "integrating faith and social work"' rather than "integrating faith and social work practice" (Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino, 2021, p. 70). The distinguishing factor being the absence of faith-based practices. Integrating "faith and social work practice" suggests that an individual identifying as Christian must implement faith-based theory and practice (e.g., biblical interpretations, theology, ministry, worship) into social work practice (e.g., clinical interventions); this is conceivably difficult due to the demand of two practice aspects (Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino, 2021). Conversely, integrating "faith and social work" provides a more dialectical demand, offering individuals identifying as Christian the capacity to acknowledge and identify both faith and social work theoretical and practical aspects as complimentary (Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino, 2021).

Conflicts between Christianity and social work practice have been identified in other studies as well (e.g., see Kwan et al., 2021, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, 2019, Oxhandler, Polson, Moffatt, 2022, and Oxhandler, Canda, Polson, et al., 2024). Earlier works have identified the need for spiritual and religious integration in practice and service provision (e.g., see Cogdell et al., 2014, Furness & Gilligan, 2014, and Hodge, 2013). For instance, Hodge (2013) acknowledged the difficulty in integrating clients' spiritualty in clinical social work practice, judging the effectiveness of traditional approaches, such as

explicitly querying clients on their spiritual or religious beliefs within the context of assessment. In this conceptual study, the author argues that such traditional approaches offer more ambiguity for clients, thereby increasing the likelihood of skewed and unhelpful responses in the context of psychological assessment (Hodge, 2013). To address this gap, the author (Hodge, 2013) presents an implicit spiritual assessment that encourages spiritual and religious connotations that are more nuanced and offer clients more respondent control over the interpretation of such queries, such as "when do you feel most alive?" While this conceptual study fills a linguistic and interpretative gap within the context of spiritual and religious clinical assessment, the implicit nature of the clinical assessment produces a unidirectional exchange of ideas (i.e., practitioner queries and client responds) which can reinforce the present boundaries between Christianity and social work practice. In addition, and in consideration of the impact of human relationships on treatment outcomes (e.g., see NASW, 2021), implicit assessments promote *implicit Christianity*, primarily on the part of the practitioner, which increases the likelihood of dishonesty (e.g., see Dianiska & Meissner, 2023, and Walczyk et al., 2014), limits the utility of forgiveness-based approaches (e.g., see Couden-Hernandez et al., 2012, and Lander, 2016), and diminishes the value of modeling respect among differing perspectives (e.g., see NASW, 2021). From a primary Christian-based perspective, practitioners who deny their Christian identity within clinical practice deny the Father. Matthew 10:33 states, "but whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven," and again in 1 John 2:23, "no one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). It is important to note that the conceptual study by Hodge (2013) did not explicitly mention Christianity in its assessment of spirituality or religion; nonetheless, there is value in analyzing the impact of such an assessment on the nature of human relationships from the perspective of Christianity and its problematic status in social work practice.

From an alternative perspective, a qualitative study by Furness and Gilligan (2014) sought to explore factors that inhibit and promote integrations of spiritualty and religion from the perspective of practitioners within the controlled setting of academia. Semi-structured and self-administered questionnaires were conducted by social work students (n = 57), to which reports of agency and organizational interference were identified (Furness & Gilligan, 2014). Specifically, students reported that few agencies encouraged any opportunity for staff development and training in respect of this area, and individual perspectives on spirituality and experiences of religion in combination with the informal perspectives of colleagues dictate whether and how spiritualty and religion are recognized as significant and relevant (Furness & Gilligan, 2014). Perhaps the most notable in this study are the characteristics of the student sample. In inquiring on the beliefs of the student respondents, 75% reported being brought up within a Christian environment, with more respondents specifying religion as being important in both their lives and their work than specified it as not being important; nevertheless, 37.5% (n = 9) of those who specified religion as not being very important or important at all *in their lives* also

specified it as being important *in their work* (Furness & Gilligan, 2014). However, 36% (n = 12) of those who specified religion as being extremely or very important *in their lives* specified it as not being very important or important at all *in their work* (Furness & Gilligan, 2014). These findings suggest that while the broader context of spiritualty and religion (i.e., beliefs that these are complimentary to clinical work) can be identified as valid aspects of clinical social work practice, such aspects can fluctuate, offering more ambiguity toward its effective and meaningful integration (Furness & Gilligan, 2014). In addition, the level of social acceptance from the environment and the capacity for social work practitioners to effectively manage dual identity in the presence of professional and social conflicts are also identified challenges gleaned from this study. It is important to note that the qualitative study by Furness and Gilligan (2014) was conducted in the U.K., impacting the reliability of the findings; nonetheless, there is value in the identification of practice difficulty in pairing Christianity and social work practice across international jurisdictions. When considering the amount of recent research, both within the United States and internationally on the integrative effort to merge Christianity and social work practice (e.g., see Cogdell et al., 2014, Furness & Gilligan, 2014, Hodge, 2013, Kwan et al., 2021, Oxhandler & Ellor, 2017, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, 2019, Oxhandler, Polson, Moffatt, 2022, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino, 2021, and Oxhandler, Canda, Polson, et al., 2024), it can be suggested that there exists a level of reliability in the challenging nature of integrating Christianity and social work globally.

As aforementioned, Christianity is not an isolated identity by which an individual stores biblical principles and truths selfishly, but one that supersedes all other identities, extending the self sacrificially so that others may too be saved (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 2:1-2). Much research has identified spiritual and religious-based principles and beliefs as beneficial aspects to clinical treatment outcomes (e.g., see Cogdell et al., 2014, Furness & Gilligan, 2014, Hodge, 2013, Kwan et al., 2021, Oxhandler & Ellor, 2017, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, 2019, Oxhandler, Polson, Moffatt, 2022, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino, 2021, and Oxhandler, Canda, Polson, et al., 2024); however, fewer, if none at all, have considered the value of intersubjectivity as a mechanism by which clients may locate and challenge their spiritual and religious beliefs in the context of presenting problems. It can be suggested that spiritual and religious integrative challenges derive from cultural conflicts on the part of the social worker, which reinforce an isolated attempt to marry clients' spiritual and religious beliefs as critical components of perceivable suffering, or otherwise emotional issues. The following section introduces the concept of intersubjectivity within the context of Christianity and the clinical culture. Existential and humanistic theory are integrated to further elucidate the Holy charge of bringing individuals to Christ.

Intersubjectivity: A Component of the Sacred

Marginality, or the process of marginalization (e.g., see Arsel et al., 2022, Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, 2017, and Daftary, 2018), can often occur when an individual in power fails to consider the impact of implicit identities on

subordinate individuals' growth. For instance, and in consideration of the present relationship between Christianity and social work practice, a social worker who identifies as Christian yet fails to self-disclose (i.e., verbally and in the practice sense) encourages the exclusion of biblical principles and values to be actuated (e.g., love, respect, honesty) within the context of client suffering, thereby affecting explicit levels of diversity to be observed within the practice environment (e.g., differing beliefs, spiritual/religious foundations), which in turn reduces the likelihood of development of a multidimensional understanding of client psychological issues and the intercession of spiritual and religious elements. An intersubjective focus assists practitioners in avoiding the essentializing of client psychological issues with rudimentary psychological knowledge; it emphasizes the impact of spiritual and religious conflict amidst psychological pain and promotes individual ownership of related identities, particularly on the part of the social worker. The concept of spiritual and religious conflict is identified biblically. In the biblical story of Moses, the concept of identity was the source of conflict that created a state of reluctance to follow God's orders (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Moses struggled with feelings of *worthlessness* when exposed as Hebrew and not the status of Egyptian; in the wilderness, he struggled with feelings of *responsibility* for the lives of the Israelites. Ultimately, it was Moses' encounters with God that made all the difference (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Moses cultivated a God-fearing identity that was explicitly utilized to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land, while simultaneously addressing tribal issues, guiding with biblical principles, sharing experiences, and mediating on behalf of the Israelites to God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Moses' sponsorship of Israel set a foundation of God-fearing ownership for some of the most renowned in the bible, such as David and Joshua, fulfilling hope in the identity of God.

Similarities can be identified in alternative biblical narratives. For instance, Peter's (i.e., the apostle) struggle with faithfulness, self-doubt, and the interceding healing relationships of the 12 disciples; the transformational sufferings of Paul (i.e., the missionary) amidst unity efforts between church families; and Job's lamentations following significant loss, and the revelations gleaned from critical dialogue with other believers (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Psychological pain has arrived repeatedly within biblical scripture, emphasizing the aggregation of God's authority in identifying clarity and discerning truth. Pertaining to fear, 2 Timothy 1:7 states, "for the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline." (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Pertaining to depression, Psalm 40:1-3 states:

> I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him (*New International Version*, 1978/2011)

Pertaining to anxiety, Philippians 4:6-7 states:

> Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (*New International Version*, 1978/2011).

With respect to these passages and related biblical narratives, the term *intersubjectivity* can be understood as a state of dual-minded consciousness outfitted to reject the passivity of rudimentary knowledge, yet complex enough to integrate critical manifestations to the context of problems, with the goal of co-creating knowledge that nurses dissonance. In consideration of the status of Christianity and social work practice, an intersubjective approach would constitute the practitioner to actively participate in critical dialogue pertaining to spiritual and religious culture (i.e., beliefs, traditions, values, practices), which in turn require a level of self-disclosure and testimonial contributions. While the term intersubjectivity has been generally defined as the relationship between two individuals' cognitive perspectives (e.g., see Hamm et al., 2022, Hepburn et al., 2023, and Terian, 2023), it has less often been defined within the context of integrating faith, spirituality, and religion elements into social work practice, much less from the basis of Christianity itself. For these reasons and for the purposes of this paper, the former definition of intersubjectivity will be utilized. The following section highlights the role of intersubjectivity in the search for the sacred.

The Sacred

As identified in related research (e.g., see Cogdell et al., 2014, Furness & Gilligan, 2014, Hodge, 2013, Kwan et al., 2021, Oxhandler & Ellor, 2017, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, 2019, Oxhandler, Polson, Moffatt, 2022, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino, 2021, and Oxhandler, Canda, Polson, et al., 2024), it is suggested that the combination of faith, spirituality, and religion assists individuals in formulating a relatable cognitive framework. Likewise, no sole concept can grasp the complexity of Christianity. Hill et al. (2000), Pargament et al. (2013), Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005), and Harris et al. (2018) presented working definitions of all three concepts (i.e., faith, spirituality, and religion), including a fourth which encompassed an understanding of religion and spirituality, namely the sacred. Harris et al. (2018) concluded *the sacred*, "a faith concept referring to manifestations of the divine, existential meaningfulness, or an ultimate concern as perceived by an individual" (p. 4; see also Hill et al., 2000, Pargament et al., 2013, Zinnbauer & Pargament 2005). The sacred then, can be understood as a direct reflection of God, manifestations of righteousness, which can be attained through the seeking of God. Humans were created in God's image and thus *are* "the sacred." According to *New International Version* (1978/2011), "then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness…' so God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"' (Genesis 1:26-27). Manifestations of God occur when individuals reconcile to the creator to gain clarity, meaning, and purpose in their lives; when individuals reunite with God, an invitation to observe divine truth is offered

within the context of worldly truths. The transformational nature of the sacred resonates within biblical scripture. Deuteronomy 4:30 states, "when you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage highlights that God notices the suffering experienced by humans in contention with the world; however, He reinforces the plan of reconciliation, to provide hope and a future with Him (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Jeremiah 29:11). Jeremiah 29:12-14 states:

> Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile (*New International Version*, 1978/2011)

No one person is exempt from the love and acceptance of God. God calls us to pursue Him, thereby pursuing existential meaning. This sacred journey toward existential meaningfulness can further be conceptualized through Zinnbauer and Pargament's (2005) construct delineation, which places spirituality "a personal or group search for the sacred," and religion, or religiousness, as "a personal or group search for the sacred that unfolds within a traditional sacred context," e.g., church (p. 35; see also Harris et al., 2018). In this description, spirituality is the broader construct as it lacks restrictions found within a controlled environment. Regardless of the medium, existential achievement within the context of the sacred is fruitless without the inclusion of others (Davis et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2018). In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he emphasized that *reconciliation* is not solely directed to God, but to others as well. Ephesians 4:11-13 states:

> So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (*New International Version*, 1978/2011)

1 Corinthians 1:10 makes similar pleas to avoid seeing others divided into the body and mind, rather, through the wholeness of self:

> I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought (*New International Version*, 1978/2011)

This is a call for criticality. Noticing that "experiences" do not require "agreement," yet "understanding." Naturally, such practice would preface intersubjectivity over theory in the conceptualization of problems. These biblical passages articulate God's intent for unity among all individuals, whereby intersubjective dialogue cultivates a structure of faith. The following sections

employ existential and humanistic theories to further elucidate components of the sacred from the perspective of Christianity and social work practice.

Existential Theory

In clinical practice, there exists a need for clients to function independent of distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, trauma). *Existential theory*, "self-determinism, freedom of choice, personal responsibility, respect for the individual, and the need for each individual to find his or her own unique meaning of existence," coincides with spirituality (Eliason et al., 2010, pp. 89-90). As symptoms of an unpleasant nature occupy client functioning, existential approaches introduce an arguably foreign sense of self awareness, occupying the mind in the self, bridging spiritualty (Eliason et al., 2010; see also Harris et al., 2018). Although "problem solving" through an intersubjective lens is not the primary concern with existential approaches, it lays a foundation of true understanding of the self, which can lead to discourse relative to meaning, life, and personal growth; existential approaches breed faith (Davis et al., 2021; Eliason et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2018). While one can achieve an existential mindset without outwardly claiming the existence of God, the biblical portrayal of God denotes concern with individuals' capacity to construct meaning about life and thus relationships with others, responsibility, and purpose. There existed many scholars and theorists well known for their contributions to existentialism over the past 70 years, such as Victor Frankl, Rollo May, Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, and Irvin Yalom (Eliason et al., 2010; see also Eliason & Samide, 2009; Eliason, Hanley, Leventis, 2001, 2007). Among these theorists, Rollo May identified as holding spiritual and religious connections to Christianity (Eliason et al., 2010). In his work, he invested time in examining the concepts of love and violence, noting differences, and contrasting experiences of meaningfulness, hope, and joy (Corey, 2004; Eliason, Hanley, Leventis, 2001, 2007; Eliason et al., 2010). What he identified was a peace within the confines of knowing the self and its relation to the other (Corey, 2004; Eliason & Samide, 2009; Eliason, Hanley, Leventis, 2001, 2007; Eliason et al., 2010). May (1972) asserted, "the future lies with the man or woman who can live as an individual, conscious within the solidarity of humanity. He then uses the tension between individuality and human solidarity as the source of his ethical creativity" (p. 254). May's (1972) optimism for every individual to comprehend their existence in an abstract way highlights the impact of intersubjective interlude on an individual's spirit and faith. As such, the term "future" dictated by May (1972) can be understood as synonymous with the term "growth." Park (2013) conceptualized this search for existential meaning a human desire for:

> A sense of purpose and direction, a feeling that what they are doing has some ultimate purpose, a view of their daily endeavors in the context of a bigger picture, transcendence; these are the demands placed upon their meaning systems. (p. 357; see also Harris et al., 2018)

Indeed, there is a collective human value to find purpose. Locating "purpose" is not an intrinsically Christian adherence; purpose can be measured in a multitude of ways across varying perspectives, beliefs, and cultures. However, for the Christian practitioner, facilitating space for clients to know themselves,

both individually and in the context of others cultivates a sense of *sacred* purpose that counters the radical individuation principals (e.g., see Berman, 2009) of the world, such that an individual's rights are integrated as no more important than those of others. Biblical scripture directs such self-sacrificial behavior as a form of servant leadership (e.g., see Demeke et al., 2024, and Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Matthew 16:24-26 states:

> Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011)

Forfeiting one's life, as is dictated here, calls for self-crucifixion for a meaningful future. Earlier scripture, Galatians 5:24, calls for the crucifixion of the flesh, or worldly desires. Paul states, "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage emphasizes that the lust of the body (e.g., power, comfort, pleasure, money, fame) can easily become temptation by which sin encroaches, often at the misfortune of others. Therefore, crucifixion of the flesh is done *by* an individual, not *to* an individual; it is a choice that an individual makes through the presence of God. God's presence aids in the supplication of the insufferable conditions of the world whereby purpose generates faith.

When considering the present status of Christianity and social work practice, the belief system, then, cannot rely solely on the *theory* of Christianity, but the *practice* as well. Through intersubjective critical dialogue, clients can explore and challenge their own belief systems in their effort to find existential meaning, thereby mitigating suffering associated with psychological pain, and spiritual and religious conflict. In this way, the heart of the practitioner is seen by God and the desire to love others in the way that God loves is visible to clients. The *New International Version*, (1978/2011) reminds "for we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). Existential theory is utilized as a bridge to harmonize faith and social work practice.

Humanistic Theory

Returning to social work's professional adherence to "the importance of human relationships," humanism, or humanistic theory, finds relativity in Christianity as well, particularly as it relates to bridging the concept of religion (NASW, 2021, ethical principles). Religion has historically been utilized as a weapon of subjugation, pathologizing human need or desire as "deviance" or "disobedience" to the higher power or power maintainers (Domke & Coe, 2010; Kratochvil, 2023; Kugelmann, 2005). Such labels contend poorly with the fluidity and unpredictability of the human condition. Personal experience, self-determination, and the ability to maximize well-being lost through the aggressive consistency to categorize dysfunction with binary intentions (Domke & Coe, 2010; Kratochvil, 2023; Kugelmann, 2005). The complication of religious-based

labeling and subjugation is evident throughout biblical scripture. When Jesus confronted the rule-keeping pharisees (i.e., maintainers of religious law), He made a point to distinguish between religious theory and practice:

> Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." *(New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 23: 1-4)

The impact of religion that relies on tradition, ceremony, and rule-keeping orchestrates a type of disenfranchised faith that produces the appearance of devotion but eventually is soulless; there exists no spiritual relationship with God that serves to afford compassionate understanding to the sufferings of the human condition. The capacity to strictly adhere to the structural truths conveyed via the collective (i.e., the church), require a promising talent to harmonize the two, religion and spirituality, to remain faithful to the tasks given by God. As aforementioned, spirituality, unlike religion, is practiced as "a personal or group search for the sacred," and religion, or religiousness, as "a personal or group search for the sacred that unfolds within a traditional sacred context," e.g., church (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005, p. 35; see also Harris et al., 2018). Religion without attention to humanity is dead; spirituality without action is worthless. Thus, *humanistic theory* within the realm of spirituality is, "a shift from theological to psychological justifications for religious life as undermining the ideological framework of religious orders" (Kugelmann, 2005, p. 362; see also Nygren & Ukeritis, 1993). The *New International Version* (1978/2011) makes distinctions on supplanting one with the other, cautioning "those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless" and emphasizing "what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" (James 1:26, 2:14).

As is dictated in James 1:22-27, *true* religion from the perspective of God makes a difference in who we are *and* what we do *(New International Version*, 1978/2011). It is religion built upon *relationship*: Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commands" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 14:15). In this way, obedience is the proof of love. Christians love God because He first loved humanity (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 John 4:19), and it is such love that accelerates action; thus is the fulfillment of the law (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 13:10). This religion of *relationship* is not formed on what an individual does for God, but on what God has done for that individual through Christ Jesus. In clinical practice, humanistic psychology affirms clients' personal experiences that hold spiritual elements as authoritative, leveling the power religion mimics within institutions. A humanistic psychological understanding of religious life unlocks opportunities and rationales for action that run antithetical to the ecclesiastical status quo (Domke & Coe, 2010;

Kratochvil, 2023; Kugelmann, 2005;). The following section introduces an intersubjective framework designed to support critical thinking and metacognition surrounding topics of religious and spiritual concepts and conflicts with the goal of aiding clients' search for the sacred.

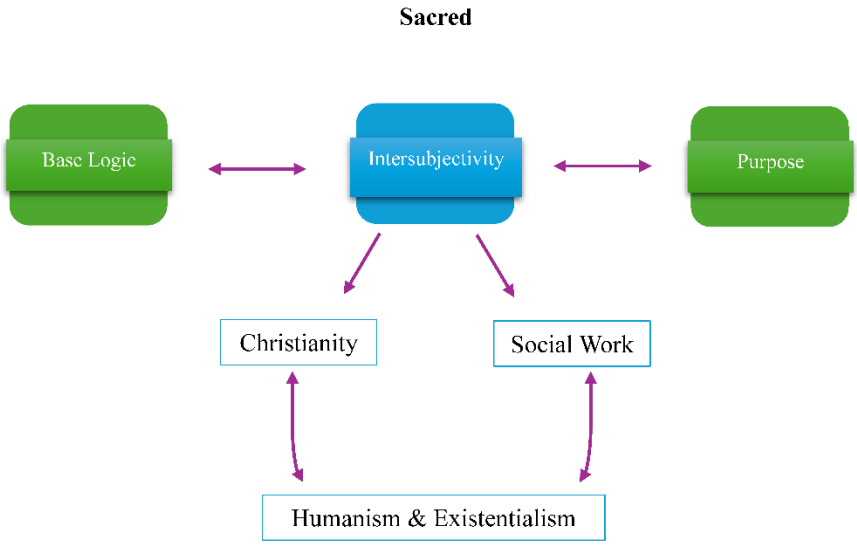
Introducing an Intersubjective Framework to Clients' Search for the Sacred

Intersubjectivity as a practice has aided in the construction of meaningful development of the self for years, including areas such as identity development (e.g., see Cipolletta et al., 2020; Groves, 2020, Kim, 2022), crisis management (e.g., see Denis, 2013, Gardner-McTaggart, 2020, and Yerushalmi, 2010, 2018), and innovative, deep learning (e.g., see French et al., 2009, Gray, 2008, Klein, 2010, and Weiss et al., 2018). Through deep listening and critical bidirectional dialogue, clients' base logic pertaining to topics of religion and spiritualty are isolated from rudimentary cause and effect models, thereby imposing critical analysis to occur, specifically in the context of presenting issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, relationships, self-doubt). A large body of research suggests that human beings develop a cognitive framework from foundations of values, experiences, trauma, conflict, and socialization influences (Adams & Joshi, 2010; Amemiya et al., 2023; Cooper, 2007; Harro, 2010; Lind, 2023; Maccoby, 2015; Piaget, 1954; Roos et al., 2024; Welch, 2017; Weiss, et al., 2018), all of which can impact individuals' ability to manage conflict and problem solve (Nickerson, 1998; Repko et al., 2015; Welch, 2017). A fair amount of empirical research emphasizes the functional impact of an individuals' cognitive framework (Chavez-Baldini et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2023; Niebaum & Munakata, 2022; Smith & Konik, 2022), correlating variables of cognitive function (Chavez-Baldini et al., 2023), social perception (Henry et al., 2023), affective empathy (Henry et al., 2023), life satisfaction (Smith & Konik, 2022), conscientiousness (Smith & Konik, 2022). Emphasizing the engagement of executive functioning through *social* reinforcement and *contextual* relevance (Niebaum & Munakata, 2022) was also recommended. Such tasks require the precision of context clues that permeate an individual's cognitive rigidity.

Intersubjectivity provides an interrelation support system which allows clients appropriate and supportive pathways to study during new learning occurrences; clients can assess their base logic and purpose nonlinearly, rather than in a strict linear framework. When considering the status of Christianity and social work practice, adhering to the process of gathering *objective* information regarding clients' religious and spiritual lives arguably situates these factors as *solely* objective. As such, the concern of their relation to psychological issues is diminished. The DEI (e.g., see Arsel et al., 2022, and Dyer & Gushwa, 2023) tenet of equity reminds that access to *all* information, not solely "need-based" information, is part of liberation. For a graphical representation of this process, please refer to Figure 1.

Figure 1

Alternative Viewpoint



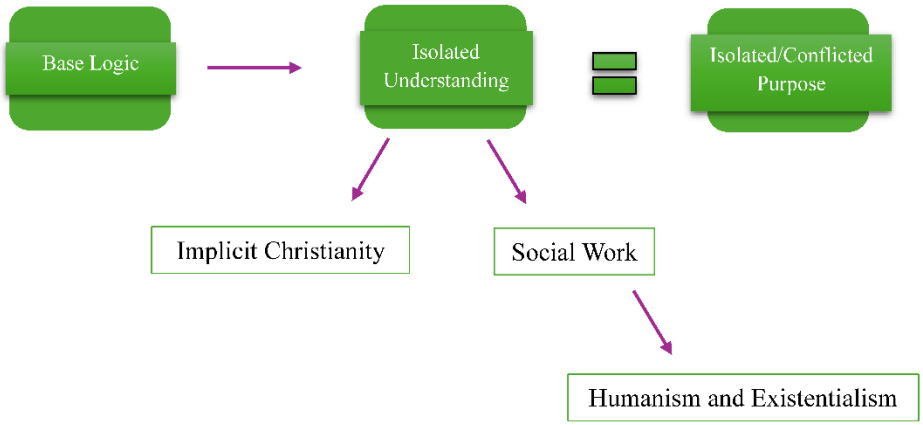
a. Intersubjectivity isolates components (base logic and purpose) for critical analysis, forming a new identity through God.
b. Intersubjectivity incorporates Christianity and social work harmoniously (e.g., intersections of love, forgiveness, respect, communication, honesty), with testimonials and Christian practices (e.g., prayer).
c. Bidirectional effects of intersubjectivity allow clients to be challenged in the context of presenting and relatable issues.

Implicit Christianity is arguably an ineffective way for Christian practitioners to elevate God's will and purpose for humanity within social work practice. This is because there is little to no emphasis on the *ultimate* identity of Christian; Christian practitioners who fail to publicly disclose their identity are less likely to adhere to and incorporate Christian principals into social work practice, including the sharing of testimony and biblical scripture. In this way, the heart of the practitioner is seen as a conduit to social work practice and values solely, deemphasizing God's heart and holiness. Biblical scripture emphasizes *identity* as followers of Christ. John 1:12 and Galatians 3:26 states that those who choose Christ and believe "are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). In addition, biblical scripture (*New International Version*, 1978/2011) states that Christians are God's messengers (Acts 1:8), greatly loved (Romans 5:8), God's temple (1 Corinthians 6:19), God's masterpiece (Ephesians 2:10), chosen (1 Thessalonians 1:1-4), free (John 8:36), a friend of God (John 15:15), and a brand-new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

An intersubjective framework re-emphasizes the practitioner's ultimate identity as Christian, mitigating incidents of identity conflict. In addition, God's holiness and heart are realigned to social work practice harmoniously, rather than in a hierarchical manner. Without intersubjectivity, clients are not challenged to assess base logic, and thus are more likely to confirm such logic, leading to conflict, cognitive dissonance, and dissatisfaction in the context of presenting and relatable issues (i.e., spirituality and religion). Consequently, Christianity is eclipsed by social work, leading to cultural conflicts on the part of the practitioner. Unidirectional effects of implicit Christianity do not allow clients to be challenged in the context of presenting and relatable issues (i.e., spirituality and religion); if an individual's beliefs are not challenged, why then, would an individual confront their own beliefs? For a graphical representation of this process, please refer to Figure 2.

Figure 2

Contrasted Viewpoint



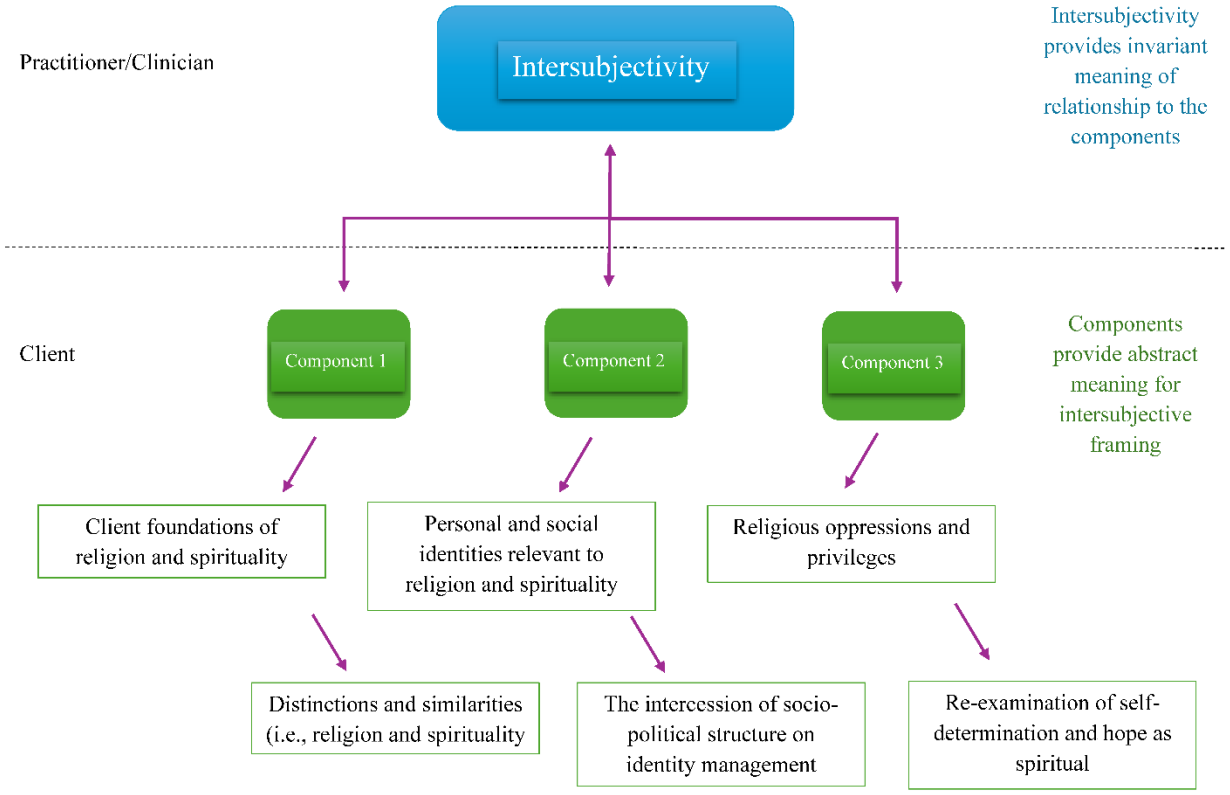
a. Without intersubjectivity, clients are not challenged to assess base logic, and thus confirm such logic (i.e., isolated understanding), leading to conflict, cognitive dissonance, and dissatisfaction in the context of presenting and relatable issues (i.e., spirituality and religion).
b. Christianity is eclipsed by social work, leading to cultural conflicts on the part of the practitioner/clinician.
c. Unidirectional effects of implicit Christianity do not allow clients to be challenged in the context of presenting and relatable issues (i.e., spirituality and religion).

The following sections describe critical concepts/topics that are most frequently aligned with individuals' spiritual and religious cognitive framework. The critical concepts/topics presented are divided into components designed to assist practitioners and scholars on best practices for incorporating

intersubjective, critical dialogue on spiritual and religious conflict into clinical social work practice. While the concepts/topics presented are based on relevant research, they are not intended to be all inclusive and thus should not be interpreted as such. Rather, they are meant to be a guiding framework of thought to encourage additional discourse and research on the criticality of seeking God formed from trusting, loving relationships between client and practitioner. For a graphical representation of this framework, please refer to Figure 3.

Figure 3

Intersubjective Framework for Clients' Search for the Sacred



Component 1: Client Foundations of Religion and Spirituality

The separatist ideology of religion and spirituality can create a separatist movement that locks individuals within a duality of faith (e.g., see Del Rio & White, 2012, and Roane & Harirforoosh, 2019); individuals may adopt a spiritual or religious cognitive framework that diminishes comprehension of the other. As aforementioned, religion and spirituality are two distinct, yet equally integral concepts to the life of the Christian. It is biblically cautioned to supplant one with the other, or otherwise adopt a singular perspective on their relevance. (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 1:26, 2:17).

From the perspective of higher education, learning is a revolving process. Individuals reenter the same doors, yet something has changed; there exists a new perspective of those doors that tolerates the ambiguity. Raw learning is

arguably unapologetic; it lacks the empathy to attend to our discomforts surrounding inexactness. Thus, it is the instructor who inevitably serves as mediator for this necessary relationship between stagnancy and growth. Fink (2013) encapsulated this powerful interlude between instructor and student by exposing learning categories from Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning that resisted specific realms of value and relationality of the learner. These include learning categories such as foundational knowledge (i.e., what students know informationally), human dimension (i.e., students' self-image and empathic understanding), and learning how to learn (i.e., students' ability and capacity to adopt multiple learning methodologies), including self-motivated learning (Fink, 2013). Why is this important to the relationship between religion and spirituality? Because similar to higher education, the therapeutic environment is also a setting of learning, and as observed through current research (e.g., see Cogdell et al., 2014, Furness & Gilligan, 2014, Hodge, 2013, Kwan et al., 2021, Oxhandler & Ellor, 2017, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, 2019, Oxhandler, Polson, Moffatt, 2022, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino, 2021, and Oxhandler, Canda, Polson, et al., 2024), the concepts of religion and spirituality are tightly regulated by clients' foundations of knowledge and thus treatment relevancy. As a result, clients' foundational knowledge of religion and spirituality rarely become factors for critical inquiry in clinical practice.

Miller and Garran (2017) remind that institutions of higher education are considered *mainstream* organizations, "established to offer social, educational, and health services, which may serve people of color but were not established for this purpose" (Chapter 10, pp. 258-259). Thus, higher education has a choice, not necessarily a responsibility, to educate people of color. Similarly, the clinical environment has a choice, not necessarily a responsibility, to educate clients on the differences and similarities between religion and spirituality. However, for the Christian practitioner, the clinical environment cannot strive to be authentic until there exists a cultural understanding of how "religion" perpetuates "religiousness," and how "spirituality" eclipses religion.

Cultural humility is the counteraction to the cultural competence dilemma (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Betancourt, 2003; Drisko, 2017; Romana, 2006). Cultural humility is a practice approach to working with clients from diverse backgrounds, both culturally and socially (Betancourt, 2003; Drisko, 2017; Romana, 2006). Clients' knowledge and power (e.g., worldview meaning, narrative, ideology), are leveled with those of the practitioner, creating a space that encourages "co-learning" within the contextual issues of their presenting problem; this two-way knowledge sharing elicits a structure that focuses less on attributing social and cultural norms learned through *study* and more on contributing to clients' incomplete *stories* (Drisko, 2017; see also Adichie, 2009).

When considering the earlier assertion by Miller and Garran (2017) regarding the purpose of mainstream organizations as "established to offer social, educational, and health services, which may serve people of color but were not established for this purpose," (Chapter 10, pp. 258-259) it becomes clear that systems of health, like mental health care, focus on access and not necessarily on the congruency of care. What implications does this have for

treatment outcomes? Retreating to the cultural competence dilemma (e.g., see Abrams & Moio, 2009), the tendency for practitioners to use dominant Eurocentric ideology to categorize and further conceptualize religion and spirituality equalizes their oppressions under what Abrams and Moio (2009) describe as the "multicultural umbrella." Moreover, as this often occurs implicitly and within the practice setting, there exists an institutionalization effect that perpetuates systemic issues, such as classism, racism, and ableism, within the context of religion and spirituality (Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Caldwell, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, 2017). Practitioners must consider adopting the practice approach of cultural humility when assisting clients in the self-organization of religion and spirituality, facilitating critical dialogue and sharing testimony within the context of client storytelling and foundational knowledge. Such work may re-power clients to integrate new learnings surrounding religion and spirituality and improve treatment outcomes (Drisko, 2017; Romana, 2006). The reinforcement of religion and religious practices can be implicit, resulting in poor self-awareness and associated action; most providers would report themselves as "religiously and spiritually inclusive" relative to their character, consequently, their practices so become discriminated as well. Practitioners assessment of clients' religious and spiritual cognitive frameworks should be designed to be stable in its frame of questioning; however, not in the content of definition; in other words, as we are met with conflicting definitions that evoke social justice concerns, we must be ready to learn in parallel to the subjective definition, both practitioners and clients alike (e.g., see Arsel et al., 2021, and Dyer & Gushwa, 2023).

Component 2: Personal and Social Identities Relevant to Religion and Spirituality

Because many of our identities are socially prescribed (e.g., Black, White, Female, Male), their relevant value is indicative of a shared perspective, one that fuels policy and opportunity (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw 1989, 1991, 2017; Miller & Garran, 2017). In contrast, our personal identities are those that we rarely elevate unless we are encouraged to, either in a perceived safe or privileged context (Miller & Garran, 2017; Moya, 2006; see also Alcoff et al., 2006). As a result, we tend to appraise the value of our identities as commensurate with the social order or condition (Miller & Garran, 2017). For instance, and from the perspective of the Christian practitioner, three adjectives that may be utilized to describe their personal identity may be loyalty, joyfulness, and compassion, chosen for the following reasons: (a) loyalty is a somewhat sacrificial attribute, particularly if we are framing the adjective within biblical terms (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, e.g., see Proverbs 17:17, and 1 Corinthians 4:2); (b) joyfulness is a distinct part of Christianity, and is often described as a good feeling brought out by the Holy Spirit (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, e.g., see Romans 14:17-18, 15:13); and (c) compassion is another biblical virtue (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, e.g., see Ephesians 4:32, and Colossians 3:12). In this case, the personal identity that can be argued as most salient is the Christian identity. It is imperative to note that the personal identity of Christian may precede other personal identities, particularly as it

relates to level of importance. Therefore, clients and practitioners alike should consider this concept of personal identity hierarchy within the context of religion and spirituality. Because God loves all people and desires personal attributes to bring civil harmony, He utilizes personal identity to liberate souls; such is the act of compassion and love during times of turmoil, relatedness, freedom to be joyful, and an overarching faith to believe in people. Practitioners should work in tandem with clients to discern the difference between their social and personal identities within the context of religion and spirituality, and the intercession of socio-political structure on identity management.

As aforementioned, our social identities fuel our opportunities (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw 1989, 1991, 2017; Miller & Garran, 2017) and can shift depending on the social context or condition (Miller & Garran, 2017). Additionally, as is elucidated by Moya (2006), Alcoff et al. (2006), Abrams and Moio (2009), Carniol (2005), and Yee (2005), left unchallenged, our social identities can become covert and nuanced, thereby extending unearned privileges to the self and others; both conditions are harmful and counterproductive to the goal of racial justice, diversity, and intersectionality (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw 1989, 1991, 2017; see also Dyer & Gushwa, 2023). For instance, and from the perspective of a client, a client may present with identities that tend to invade their thoughts most often, which in turn affect action/behavior (e.g., see Collins, 2019; Crenshaw 1989, 1991, 2017), such as the identity of Black. The Black identity is a visible descriptor of "what that client is" because it symbolizes status, class, and power; however, it does little to denote "who that client is." This can be better understood when we analyze the effects colonialism has had on systems of knowledge (e.g., see Quijano, 2000, 2007). While academic institutions certainly hold and distribute systems of knowledge, it is the privileging and preference of Eurocentric knowledge that override subjective truths or identities as epistemic resources (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Almeida et al., 2019); in other words, a client's "Blackness" as persistent social truth (i.e., thought provoking topic), is a consequence of long standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, defining the overall value of this identity (Almeida et al., 2019; see also Quijano, 2000, 2007). From a biblical perspective, there is little conflict in justifying "Blackness" as invaluable because true value arrives from God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Proverbs 3:26 highlights the true meaning of the term *confidence*, describing God's confidence as transferrable and formidable during times of identity conflict (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). 1 Corinthians 12:27 states, "now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it," emphasizing that while the term "Christian" can be wholly defined, there is also an equal individuation from the whole that organizes identity (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Romans 12:2 states, "do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, and pleasing and perfect will." (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage can be interpreted in multiple ways; however, when considering identity, the passage highlights the

social structure of the world in what is valuable and encourages the identity of Christ to restructure this measure, thereby allowing individuals to reject the world's social identification as persistently true. Practitioners must consider the *persistent social identities* of clients in the context of spiritual and religious conflict and incorporate intersubjective dialogue to promote appropriate identity management.

Lastly, the identities that have the greatest effect on how an individual is perceived by others, not solely by the client themselves, should also be critically examined and discussed. For instance, being a woman can be examined using the same colonial concept; being a woman is "ascribed" (e.g., see Alcoff et al., 2006, and Moya, 2006) with general expectations and role assumptions, thereby making it difficult to have a divergent sense of understanding or experience relative to "womanhood." A practitioner or client's experience being a woman may not align with the Western ideal. For instance, independence and dependence; submissiveness and assertiveness; and masculine and feminine. As a result, individuals who stray from the status quo may be perceived as "difficult," "disagreeable," or "gay." Indeed, there is great harm in discrediting the story of womanhood from a woman; have they not experienced womanhood simply because their story did not match their social category? Likewise, and from a biblical perspective, individuals who are perceived through ascribed identities can often assume such perception as reality. Philippians 4:8 states, "finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage suggests that what an individual thinks, also believe of themselves. Therefore, individuals should aspire to perceive not with the naked eye, but with all things that are good and worthy of God's praise. Practitioners should assist clients in reorganizing the goodness of the stories behind their identities, and not solely the identity itself. Such work echoes Moya's (2006) work toward moving individuals from holding an *essentialist* concept of identity to a *realist* concept; the former perceives ascribed and subjective identities as absolute, while the later understands that these are not absolute, but always in dynamic relationship with each other.

Treatment for social categorization maladaptive effects is the self-organization of individuals' social and personal identities, whereby cycles of socialization (e.g., see Harro, 2010), including their political and cultural histories, are introduced; such work allows the individual to reestablish power behind their social identities, merging them appropriately with *who they are* (Moya, 2006; see also Alcoff et al., 2006; Abrams & Moio, 2009; Carniol, 2005; Yee, 2005). As Moya (2006) suggests, this "approach effectively registers the dialectical nature of identity construction— an adequate understanding of which is essential to our ability to work toward the transformation of socially significant identities" (p. 97; see also Alcoff et al., 2006).

Component 3: Religious Oppressions and Privileges

The manifestations of religious oppressions are not invariably explicit. Often, the outward distress is predicated upon the systemic nature of religious oppression, which can be arduous to notice; religious oppression is structural, built into institutional rules and a collective understanding (Adams & Joshi, 2010; see also Adams et al., 2010). These relative truths of religious oppression can arrive implicitly within the clinical environment. Clients may be unable to recognize the connections between their suffering and religious oppression, particularly if it remains uncontested in alternate contexts, e.g., schools, neighborhoods, workplaces (Adams & Joshi, 2010; see also Adams et al., 2010). Religious oppressions have instigated the eradication of religious freedoms in the United States for centuries, from the 17th century to the present, upheld by Protestant U.S. Christianity (Adams & Joshi, 2010; see also Adams et al., 2010). Adams and Joshi (2010) remind that "the individual, institutional, and societal-cultural levels of oppression have been normalized by (mainly) Protestant U.S. Christianity, as exemplified by efforts to erase Native American Indian religious traditions through federal or state military and legal interventions" (p. 228; see also Adams et al., 2010). The intersections of race and religion organized colonizing projects in Africa, Asia, and the Americas (Adams & Joshi, 2010; see also Adams et al., 2010). Practitioners and clients must become aware of the historic cultural genocide perpetuated by claimants of "Christianity" in pursuit of hegemony and colonialism.

The contention of the disintegration of religion requires a critical analysis of the spiritual, religious, and faith-based orientations that support clients' cognitive frameworks. Clients who struggle to respond to existential inquiry and the exploration of subjective interlude require a reframe; there exists no agency in spirituality, religion, or faith if the dominant voice is uniform. *Christian privilege*, "the view that Christian beliefs, language, practices do not require any special effort to be recognized, as they are embedded into the U.S. American culture" must be used as a medium to expose society's blind adherence to its rule (Adams & Joshi, 2010, p. 228; see also Adams et al., 2010). Integrating existential and humanistic approaches, critical discourse surrounding the diversity of Christianity, multicultural unity, and the historical reprisal of religiously oppressed communities can assist clients in religious liberation (Adams & Joshi, 2010; see also Adams et al., 2010).

Liberation health theory, a combination of radical social work, liberation psychology, and Paulo Freire and popular education, focuses on expanding "traditional case work" into actionable practices that serve to disrupt the interplay of dominant socio-political forces (Belkin-Martinez, 2014, pp. 15-16). In a participatory sense, clients become "subjects," developing a new "consciousness" that rejects the "passive sense of self," allowing for meaningful progress to occur in the context of their problem (Belkin-Martinez, 2014). Through this practice adjustment, practitioners need not abandon the power of individual work (i.e., existential meaning), yet apply the power of socio-political order in the employment of spiritual-religious practice approaches. Belkin-Martinez (2014) asserted the following best practices:

> Social work interventions that involved talking directly with clients about the socio-political factors affecting their lives and identified the concept of "active citizenship" as a method to engage individuals and families around more collective approaches to problems that beset individuals and communities. (p. 16; see also Joseph, 1986; McQuaide, 1987; Reynolds, 1973)

Permitting the influence of religious-spiritual methods to be experienced *implicitly* in social work practice bereft of critical analysis would be problematic (Kwan et al., 2021), as it suggests a *stagnant-based faith perspective*. Belkin-Martinez (2014) reiterates the "role" of the social worker when aspiring to the liberation of clients, in that social workers become "co-producers" in a partnership for change (p. 21; see also Beresford, 2015). As aforementioned, true religion arrives from a *relationship* with God by which compulsions to follow and obey manifest. Religion becomes oppressive when individuals orchestrate power and authority over others based on redeemable works; religion so becomes a practice of following and obeying *man*, not God. When orchestrated through a relationship with God, the concept of self-determination and hope manifest, allowing for individuals to self-organize living for Christ sacrificially and *actively*. Acts 20:24 states, "however, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). This passage considers the works pertaining to following God superseding the self, which can be identified as religious; however, through the "good news of God's grace" there is a hope identified that promotes a determined heart; such is the concept of faith. Psalm 40:8 describes the law of God, which is religious; however, it also mentions the heart of the believer as the law of God, which suggests a transformed mind that finds pleasure in active instruction by God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Practitioners who encourage clients to reject passivity as it relates to religion and spirituality are promoting a new consciousness that enables clients the confidence and curiosity to become active in their communities, socially, and in biblical and spiritual literature, thereby inviting God's mystery to be accessed and the sacred to be found (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Corinthians 13:5-7; Colossians 1:9-11, 2:6-7; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; James 1:17; 2 Peter 3:18)

Future Research

Considering the magnitude of research on the effectiveness of existential and humanistic theories and approaches to addressing challenges related to meaning-making, accountability, reality of control, identifying purpose, and developing authenticity and identity (e.g., see Castillo et al., 2020, Challenger et al., 2022, Daei Jafari, et al., 2020, Eppel-Meichlinger et al., 2024, Holliday et al., 2022, Stare & Fernando, 2020, and Wilkinson, 2021), it becomes clear that "integrating faith and social work" requires authentic dedication on the part of the client *and* the social worker; Christianity cannot be eclipsed by social work practice and effectively be integrated. Furthermore, the relationship between Christianity and existentialism and humanism are quite analogous, thereby

increasing the harmonization of utilizing said approaches within the Christian clinical environment. Future empirical research should incorporate variables of intersubjectivity, including their predictive power, within the context of Christian-based practitioner-client relationships, religion and spiritual topics, and associated clinical outcomes. For instance, does socio-cognitive openness in the clinical relationship on concepts and topics specific to Christianity, religion and spirituality predict response efficacy in client's relationship with God?

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, there exists a spiritual gap between Christianity and social work practice. Although the importance of discussing religion and spirituality in social work practice is not new (e.g., see Cogdell et al., 2014, Furness & Gilligan, 2014, Hodge, 2013, Kwan et al., 2021, Oxhandler & Ellor, 2017, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, 2019, Oxhandler, Polson, Moffatt, 2022, Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, Wolfer, Marraccino, 2021, and Oxhandler, Canda, Polson, et al., 2024), the practice of applying critical discourse surrounding topics pertaining to religion and spiritualty is. Social work practice must depart from religious and spiritual assessment approaches that solely focus on clients' individual-level knowledge and accelerate co-learning methods that are designed to critique and build knowledge unknown to clients. Adopting an intersubjective method is critical for addressing the many challenges facing clients attempting to self-organize spiritual and religious placement in the context of psychological issues or problems. In addition, the socio-political effects (e.g., race, gender, class) of identities (e.g., Black, male, female, low income) can create barriers to access to new learnings pertinent to Christianity that engage positive effects to wellbeing (e.g., love, respect, forgiveness, communication). Therefore, utilizing an intersubjective framework can counter the isolated method of religious and spiritual organization to prepare clients for *sacred-focused* experiences that are spiritually and religiously observable and more of an accurate picture of the complex social and personal forces that may be affecting their health and wellbeing.

Although clinical social work as a profession shares commonalities of principles, values, and beliefs, practical implications for integrating faith and social work from an intersubjective lens must also be measured to adhere to ethics. Practitioners should practice clinical judgment, factoring in (a) client population, (b) clinical setting, and (c) client positionality when considering incorporating an intersubjective framework. For instance, practitioners working with children may find it difficult to adhere to the intersubjective framework presented due to developmental barriers; practitioners working in crisis settings may find it difficult to fully replicate such a framework due to setting structures and standards of care; and practitioners working with clients who self-identify as atheist or agnostic may find it difficult to build rapport, or otherwise trust sufficient to treat. In this last case, a referral may be appropriate. Nonetheless, in all cases, Christian practitioners should avoid inauthenticity and consider alternative ways to aid clients in the search for the sacred.

The Holy Charge of servant leadership commands Christians to share the gospel so that others may too be saved (*New International Version*, 1978/2011,

Matthew 9:37-38, 10:7-14, 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; 1 Corinthians 1:17; 2 Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 2:10; 2 Timothy 2:1-15, 4:5; 1 Peter 3:15). Biblical scripture describes such action as "justifiable" under God's law (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 2:13), particularly for those who have never heard: "for it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 2:13). This passage suggests that an individual who has heard and believed, but has not *done*, is not justified under the law of God. What implications does this have for clients who have not yet heard? Romans 2:12 states, "all who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011). Without the gospel, individuals cannot be saved. Christian practitioners should consider the impact of implicit Christianity within the clinical practice setting, and accelerate authentic, intersubjective methods to aiding clients search for the sacred.

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