

# Social Work and Religious Diversity Problems and Possibilities

Columbia School of Social Work

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# I. Social Workers and Religious Dialogue

## A. Politically: Politicians have to deal with religions

1. Especially after 9/11.
2. The Muslims are right: religion and politics do mix!
3. The United Nations is now formally engaging religions.
4. What is true for politicians is also true for social workers.

# I. Social Workers and Religious Dialogue

## B. Psychologically: Social workers have to deal with religions

- Religious faith affects, often determines, how people and communities feel about themselves, view their world, and act in their world
- There is an intimate link between “behavior” and “beliefs.”

# I. Social Workers and Religious Dialogue

## C. Ours is a religious pluralistic and diverse society.

- “We are surprised to find that there are more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians, more Muslims than members of the Presbyterian Church USA, and as many Muslims as there are Jews – that is, about six million. We are astonished to learn that Los Angeles is the most complex Buddhist city in the world ... Nationwide, the whole spectrum of Buddhists may number about four million.” (Diana Eck, [A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation](#), 2001.

# I. Social Workers and Religious Dialogue

## D. The Social Worker called to “interreligious dialogue”

1. The relationship of the social worker with his/her clients must include a relationship with the client’s religion.
2. This means that as social workers, you have to know how to carry on what in my trade is called “religious dialogue.”

# I. Social Workers and Religious Dialogue

## E. The pre-requisites or virtues of dialogue

1. Humility
2. Commitment
3. Trust in our common humanity
4. Empathy
5. Openness to change

## II. Problems

### A. Problems on the part of the social worker

#### 1. Inadequate preparation for “religious dialogue” with clients.

- A baffling diversity of religions.
- Do social work programs prepare social workers to deal with religious reality and diversity? Can they?

## II. Problems

### A. Problems on the part of the social worker

#### 2. If the social worker is a religious believer him/herself

- Religions, including Christianity, tend to look down on and devalue other religions.

#### 3. If the social worker is a “secular humanist”

- Secular humanists tend to look on religion as “strange,” or “silly,” or “dangerous.”



## II. Problems

### B. Problems on the part of the client

#### 1. Religion can be as psychologically/socially harmful as it might be helpful.

- Has religion done more harm to humanity than it has done good?
- Much of the harm is caused by religious leaders.
- People do use religion as a “crutch” or as an “opium.”
  - One reason for the misuse of religion: people turn off their brains when they open their hearts to God.

## II. Problems

### B. Problems on the part of the client

2. Examples of religious attitudes that the social worker may have to deal with.

- Our true home is in heaven: So don't worry about this earthly home.
- God's will – or Karma: fatalism
- Human sinfulness: Self-esteem.
- Attitudes towards gender and sexuality: patriarchy and homophobia

## II. Possibilities

### A. Religious resources for the client.

#### 1. Religion as a source of self-worth

- Religious experience, whether it is described as the experience of a personal God or of an enlightened state, communicates to the individual a sense and assurance that they are “part of something larger.” They are not alone

#### 2. Religion as a source of strength to overcome helplessness.

- Religious faith assures a person that there is a resource of strength and creativity that he/she can count on. If their own resources and strength are depleted, there’s a reserve that is always available.

#### 3. Religion as a source of liberation and social transformation

- Religion can be social “opium.” But it can also be revolutionary “dynamite.”

## II. Possibilities

### B. For the social worker

- All the religions, in many different ways and for many different reasons, affirm the need to regularly take time out in order to reconnect, or recharge. They speak about the necessity of “withdrawing” from time to time in order to “find strength” or to “balance” or to “center” oneself.
- Theistic religions make this reminder in terms of putting oneself in the presence of God or finding that presence within oneself. Non-theistic religions speak of the need to be aware of the energy or the inter-being of the universe.
- We all need to step back, sit down, and shut up.