



**Departement Maatskaplike Werk  
Department of Social Work**

---

**AN ECO-SPIRITUAL SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE ON  
POVERTY**

**Dr Sandra B Ferreira  
Department of Social Work  
Free State University  
South Africa**

*We, as social workers, have come to a turning point; a critical apex of self-examination. The looming environmental crisis in which we find our clients and ourselves and the transformation of peoples and societies toward sustainable, just and earth-friendly orientations must inspire us to attempt to discover more refined alternatives to prevailing social work theory and practice that would better correspond to the life-affirming richness of the Earth-Community. We must be willing to think and act differently and to come together to launch a reorientation of our professional ethos.*

Dr Fred Besthorn University of Northern Iowa

The phenomenon of poverty is probably expedited by the dominant worldview of modernity and the profession of social work unknowingly but willingly contributes to this phenomenon. The profession faces the challenge to address the above aspects by means of redefining roles.

In short, I want to challenge you by saying that Africa is partly poor because they have bought into a worldview that dangles criteria for wealth and poverty in front of the continent's nose that are not inherent to Africa's worldview and that this dominant worldview has led us down the wrong path in our reflections about wealth and poverty.

Although the era of postmodernism dawned in the 1950s and is still flourishing, the spirit of modernism as dominant worldview is still alive and active in various spheres of life.

Modernity as a philosophy of life (from approximately 1500 to 1950) dominated, in particular, the era of Enlightenment when man's struggle to break away from the church's power and control of knowledge was manifested in rationalism, positivism, individualism, linear thought and absolute truths. The basic starting points around which man's life and existence are organised, is that Reason applies and that the individual self is singled out. The onset of humanism probably has its roots in this worldview in which the individual is exalted above others and the environment. Deeds of human rights worldwide were a further consequence of the uplifting of man as an

individual. It may even be reasoned that the individual self is still emphasised in post-modernity with its focus on the individual who creates his own reality.

The majority of helping professions, among which social work (early 1800s and 1900s), was conceptualised during the era of modernity. These professions, according to Coates & Leahy (2006:4), developed within a modern society, which aimed to address the needs for progress and industrial (and technological) development. It can thus be reasonably accepted that social work will to a lesser or greater extent share the starting points of modernity as worldview. This state of affairs may give rise to the fact that in service rendering the profession of social work does not question the growth-orientated, acquisitive, man-centred, dual basis of modernity. The potential result is that social work facilitates social injustice, while the mission of the profession is aimed at the opposite!

Furthermore, social work models that emphasise rationalism and individualist approaches do not fit into the context of non-Western cultures. Although some of these models (for example, anti-oppressive and cross-cultural models) are used in the discourse on the empowerment of indigenous cultures, and question existing social work practices, these models are formulated from the perspective of the dominant worldview (Coates, *et al.* 2006:382-384).

In order to understand the above argument, one needs to understand what is meant by a dominant worldview or ideology of modernity.

### **1. The dominant worldview: influence of the ideology of modernity, globalisation and development**

Like any culture, Western society's attitude is embedded in a specific set of values, convictions and suppositions and a socio-cultural structure which, according to Coates en Leahy (2006:1-2) forms the basis for public and individual action. This system of convictions, in the case of Western modernity, trusts technology and science, as well as consumer-orientated and market-driven growth and development. The dark side of the above is that modernity has developed an all-important consumer culture, which believes that resources and social inequalities can be solved by means of development, discovery,

vast amounts of finance, and growth – always growth (Spretnak 1993:5). Exploitation and destruction, together with development, is the result of modern society, its values, convictions and political structure. These outcomes are ultimately evident in environmental and social injustice.

Western economy is an extractive economy which, according to Berry (1997) as quoted by Coates (2006:1), can lead to a terminal economy.

An analysis of the “dominant western worldview” or the “ideology of modernity” by Catton & Dunlap (1980), as quoted by Coates & Leahy (2006:2), shows the following characteristic:

- Human beings fundamentally differ and are superior to all other creatures.
- Human beings are masters of their fate and can use nature in any way as they choose.
- The world is an inexhaustible resource with unlimited possibilities.
- Human ingenuity can solve all problems and progress continues.

Anthropocentrism, or the utilitarian value of plants, animals, agricultural and industrial practices for man, contributes to a short-sighted exploitation and unsustainable criterion for progress (Coates & Leahy 2006:2). Earth is viewed as an abundant and endless source of consumer goods, while progress blindly focuses on the transformation of natural materials into commodities and ultimately waste products.

On the basis of Spretnak's (1997:40-41) research the following characteristics relating to the description of modernity can be highlighted:

- Homo economicus: Economic well-being is primary and leads to well-being in other aspects of life. A healthy economy is, according to Clark (1989:30), described as an expanding economy in which more material goods are produced, consumed and thrown away.

- Progress: technology will solve all problems and the human state will in time improve on account of abundance.
- Industrialism: Mass production leads to abundance, which, in turn, leads to consumerism and ultimate happiness.
- Consumerism: Material goods are the source of happiness, and well-being is achieved through abundance and consumption.
- Individualism: Competition for individual benefit in which individual interests have priority over social interests.

The strong focus on economy and economic growth eventually influences, according to Coates & Leahy (2006:3), political decision making. The economy is now no longer a means to an end but an end in itself. Money thus becomes the primary aim and with it an abundant standard of living characterised by an uncontrollable consumerism. The incidence of poverty is an insult to the above starting points because it is the opposite of what modern ideology stands for, namely a situation of less or a little money and little or no possessions or resources. The phenomenon of poverty is thus conceptualised by the dominant worldview.

According to modern ideology, man strives towards being in control not only of man himself but also of other resources and nature. Man uses himself, others and the environment to the benefit of himself in his endeavour towards growth and progress in various life domains. This self-centred and selfish behaviour eventually destroys the self, others and the environment.

The above is possibly driven by the assumptions seated in modernity (Coates & Leahy 2006:3-4):

- Dualism: Nature remains in the background and is viewed as merely a resource for human needs. According to this, man and nature are separate parts and man, nature and God exist separately from one another. According to this, compartmentalising thought is facilitated and finds expression in a specific way of

life – a way of life which does not echo a sense of belonging to, interconnection, interdependence and caring.

- Dominance: Values are mainly human orientated. Socialised passivity exists on account of learned powerlessness in its relation with large businesses. “*Higher ups control those below.*” The earth is a biological machine, a collection of loose bits and entities. This validates the existence and use of status, power and wealth. In relationships rational evaluation is superior to emotional, the male superior to the female, man superior to plants and animals.
- Determinism of objects: The earth is fixed and cannot change. The focus is outcomes- or work performance-orientated with respect to intervention. The earth, society and men form a collection of objects with the emphasis on science, objectivity, management and efficiency. The individual is of the opinion that his species is the “*master[s] of the universe*”.

Coates (2004:1-3) reasons, among others, that the values and convictions of modernism have shaped social problems. Modernism places a high premium on a worldview of dualism, anthropocentrism and materials in which technology, consumerism and materialism often becomes an aim in themselves. Both man and nature are primarily viewed as trade articles – resources with financial value. This entails that unity and nature are opposed while a conviction of superiority over nature is supported. Critical perspectives on globalisation, modernisation and development consider social work’s participation in so-called less developed contexts in a negative light, since the profession has contributed, to a large extent, to attempts to convey Western technology and practices to the rest of the world, often with disastrous consequences for the environment and local cultures (Coates *et al.* 2006:386).

In the light of the above arguments, it thus appears that, due to the period within which the history of the development of social work has started, it can happen that the profession does not question the period’s fundamental values. This in itself can lead to a situation where ecological and social justice, towards which social work strives, is opposed by the profession and that the profession works against the self as far as the ease and relief of the influence of poverty is concerned.

The outcome of the ideology of modernity contributes, according to Chossudovsky (1998), to an increase in the gap between rich and poor, an increase in low-income work opportunities and a reduction in the state's compassion with those who are less privileged. Sacco (1998/1999:6) remarks rightly that "[g]lobally people are facing increasing challenges related to poverty, unemployment, dislocation, war and violence, racial and ethnic conflict, oppression and abuse of power, wealth and greed, environmental destruction and all the results of the dark side of nature." However, one must bear in mind that the investigation into facts concerning a communist approach to industrialisation has also contributed to the ecological crisis and resulted in the destruction of the environment (Hoff & Polack 1993:2).

Social work as a profession can address the environmental and spiritual crisis because the well-being of man within his context is important for the profession – this well-being is interwoven with the well-being of nature. It is thus necessary to create the desire in social workers to light the fire of interconnection and inter-dependence (in other words, a spiritual starting point) if social work is committed to ease suffering in its many forms.

## **2. The environmental and spiritual crisis and social work**

An environmental crisis is unfolding as man causes often irreparable damage to the environment by means of air, water and soil pollution and the depletion of renewable and non-renewable resources. According to Coates (2006:1), the environmental crisis can worsen if the small privileged minority of the world (Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA), with their growth-dominated ideology, do not seriously attempt to reduce the impact of man's activities on earth. The refusal by large powers, such as the USA to sign the Kyoto Protocol, whereby industrial countries bind themselves to fight global warming, raises questions as to the future sustainability of societies and life as such.

According to Knight (2004:39), the natural environment refers to Mother Earth as she makes herself accessible to life in the form of water, air, soil (flora and fauna) and the relationship of man with these elements. Man's primitive instinct for survival and his intellectual and spiritual endeavours develop from this longstanding relationship with the natural world. The result is that if life is destroyed, man is ultimately also destroyed.

The focus on spirituality supports and encourages interdependence, not only of man but also his belonging to a society and the environment. Man's survival and development depend on others and nature; through them I become man and thus empowered. Empowerment lies in the discovery of power in the person – the so-called inner wisdom within the self. These inner and unconventional resources entail, according to Sacco (1998/1999:11), compassion, peace and interconnection.

The profession of social work is generally absent from the discourse on environment. Social workers tend to view social problems separate from environmental problems and only a few social workers are in the front lines of environmental education, protest or research. Furthermore, they focus on human nature and social interaction, which is viewed as separate from nature. Social work is a “domesticated profession”, dependent on modern society for its existence, and in exchange for this it receives roles and definitions (Coates 2004:5).

Environmental poverty and destruction lead to, among other things, material and spiritual poverty if one works and reasons exclusively from a Western economic ideology. This spiritual alienation requires, according to Glendinning (1994), as quoted by Canda (1998/1999:10), that recovery is necessary for the destructive aspects of western civilisation.

Sustainability is not about the finding of solutions, but it deals with interaction, relating with the self, communities and nature. Sustainability can only exist if one acts in agreement with the orders of nature. In the process of individuality we become aware of ourselves. This does not presuppose an alienation in which the soul of our society is destroyed. Our call is to find out who we are, and with this discovered uniqueness contribute towards society and the world around us. When the responsibility is removed for what we create, we develop the ability to respect the present and the right to existence of everything that surrounds us.

### **3. Paradigm transformation: Eco-spiritual social work**



Although it is not within social work's power to change the worldview, the profession should be mindful of the influence of such worldview on service rendering. Social workers must ask how to address the needs of millions of poor and disadvantaged people throughout the world without destroying the world and creating a sustainable economic system dependent on continuous, increasing corporate profits and endless consumer goods.

By using an eco-spiritual perspective, the profession can assist to approach man in totality from a holistic perspective. At present the concept of holism is not practised during service rendering. In this case holism refers to man in his various relations, among which the relation with the environment is important. The relation with the environment is, however, not supposed to be a serious interpretation of the person in the environment where the environment exclusively refers to the **social** environment (Coates *et al.* 2005:389), but also includes the relationship between man and the natural environment (Coates 2004:1).

Increasing focus on, concern for and involvement in protecting the environment lead to a shift in philosophy of life, which can in effect be viewed as spiritual (Coates 2004:4). Spirituality refers to man's longing for a sense of meaning by means of moral responsible relationships between individuals, families, societies, cultures, religions (Behrman s.a.:1) and the natural environment within which man must live. The concepts *natural environment* or *ecology* refers, according to Coates *et al.* (2006:389), to sustainability. The indifferent use and abuse of the natural environment which leads to pollution, habitat destruction and the exploitation of reclaimable and non-reclaimable resources and thus the destruction of the natural environment must necessarily exert an influence on the quality of life as it takes shape in daily social interaction. Gore (1992:98) rightly states: "the more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I'm convinced that it is the outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for the lack of a better word, spiritual."

This paradigm transformation is a transition whereby man is freed from his feeling of superiority and separates from nature and all living entities within it (Coates 2004:1 & 3). If the shift takes place, it entails among other things that values and convictions are

questioned, thus questioning the relationship of man with nature, the role of man on the planet and what the ultimate value is. This search for meaning and significance can be defined as a spiritual journey. Spirituality is, according to Hodge (2001:204), described as a relationship with God [...]“whatever is held to be the Ultimate ... that fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and mission in life. In turn, this relationship produces fruit (altruism, love, or forgiveness) that has a discernible effect on an individual’s relationship to self, nature, others, and the Ultimate.” A complex definition is probably that of the concept of ecology “... the study of interaction between organisms and their environment” (Miller 2006:1).

The paradigm transformation presupposes that social work will focus on both the environment and the spiritual dimension. Deep ecological social work helps the practitioner to make a connection between the person and the environment. This involves more than a strong environmental and ecological discourse, in other words, it requires a deep ecological awareness. Social workers increasingly ask the question how one’s own needs and those of millions of poor and disadvantaged persons throughout the world can be met without destroying the world and a sustainable global economic system which depends on continuous corporate profit and in which consumer goods are created.

According to Besthorn (2006:2-3), one must focus in particular on three dimensions in ecological social work:

- ◆ Environmental awareness:

Deep ecological social work recognises that i) nature is an irreplaceable source of humanity’s physical life maintenance and that it should serve as the “pivotal point” for social work’s theoretical orientations and practical strategies; ii) natural disasters and environmental crises have negative consequences for the poor and the marginalised, and iii) the profession has a moral and ethical obligation to become actively involved in addressing environmental problems.

- ◆ Spiritual sensitivity:

Deep ecological social work is aware of the complex relationship between spirituality and ecology. Besthorn (2006:2) states: "... spirituality is inherently ecological and ecology is inherently spirituality." Spirituality emphasises our awareness of the interconnection and interdependence of all things and the right place of man in the cosmic order. This predisposition recognises and acknowledges that people share a common fate with the earth. Self-interest is thus identical with the interest of the whole. The planetary ecosystem of which man forms part is a whole: soil and water, atmosphere and land, plants and minerals, animals and human beings, which are interacting in a dynamic, mutual supportive way.

Most of the Western worldview, the secular and the religious, view man as the top of the created order. This creates the attitude that other things and beings exist for our purpose, benefit and convenience. This gives rise to a situation in which beings are left to the grace of the spirit of human enterprise and subjected to our plans, exploitation and domination. This supposed superiority and yearning for fighting is reproduced in aggression towards women, minority groups, military, and minor societies (Besthorn 2006:3).

Eco-spirituality thus requires that man moves away from an anthropocentric or man-centred orientation towards reality, where wisdom, resources and traditions are used, to a life of cherished commonness, respect, gratitude and compassion for the natural world and all the inhabitants of Mother Earth.

♦ Political involvement:

Deep ecological social work requires that human historic-socio-political systems be studied in interaction with environmental systems. Human patterns of collective organisations are inseparable from those in the natural world. Social and ecological injustices are interwoven in a dynamic interplay of mutual involvement. Poverty thus refers not only to a lack of financial support and social support systems, but also to polluted water supplies, poisonous air and unhealthy life circumstances.

From a deep ecological social work perspective, this means that i) there is a preparedness to constantly question social, political, and economic structures, as well as the assumptions of modern, industrialised society, and ii) the capacity to establish a vision for a kind of society and economic wisdom necessary for human and eco-systemic viability.

An alternative vision of the “good life” must be formulated (Besthorn 2006:3). This vision must be reconcilable with a natural environment, which can support the survival of man’s life and well-being. A revolution between man and the environment must take place. The outcome of this revolution will be: interconnection, interdependence, harmony, mindfulness, peace (which is more than the absence of war, but the cherishing of tolerance, imagination and flexibility), totality, care, compassion (respect, understanding and appreciation for diversity), wisdom and traditions, a life of commonness and gratitude for the natural world and all the inhabitants of the earth.

The social worker will have four roles in the new paradigm (Coates 2006:5):

- ◆ The role of prophet

Individuals and communities must be prepared to support the transformation in values and life style which will be required if sustainability and social justice are to be achieved. Humanistic orientation, conversation and social development skills, and sensitivity for the meaning of ideology can help people to understand and embrace the values of the developing paradigm. Attention must be drawn to those who are eco-spiritually and ideologically more prepared for the transformation, as well as those who have experienced anxiety and loss because they have to give up their life style of consumption, materialism and individualism.

- ◆ Bio-psychosocial assessment

Bio-psychosocial assessments must take place where individuals, families and societies are exposed to substances that damage groups and the results thereof at a physical,

emotional and social level, for instance, damage at the neurological level. The value and sanctity of life must be respected.

♦ The expansion of social work activism

Social workers should come forward in the fight for sustainability and social justice. Involvement in societies with an extraordinary incidence of environmentally related issues by researching and documenting the problems and causes and inciting businesses and the government into action. Large international instances such as the World Trade Organisation, The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as corrupt politicians, should be confronted if their behaviour leads to exploitation and injustice.

- Education

Mere criticism of the principles of modernity is not sufficient, but social workers should actively seek creative alternative social structures. Local people should administer resources and opportunities created for them to establish sustainable and fairer practices.

- Spirituality

Issues of spirituality will increasingly become important in social work practice as changes address the values of man. Social Work students must become aware of their own spirituality, its importance for their own development as individuals, and the various ways in which it can be expressed and cherished.

Paradigm transformation means that the profession, when social problems such as poverty are presented, should challenge existing values and norms of modernism in existing intervention models. The opposite of the ideology of modernism is that the awareness of the interdependence between man and the natural environment entails the expansion of the social work practice and that one can reason anew about dilemmas such as poverty. Social work must guard against the strengthening of misplaced trust

that excess, growth and development will benefit poor communities (client systems) and accordingly communicate this to politicians and policy makers.

## Conclusion

As environmental crises, growth and economic and political imbalances increase, social work must adapt. Our present ecological and environmental models are insufficient. It is not apt to think of a human ecology which is mainly directed at human reactions on family, friends, community or social relationships. Environmental awareness is more than conservation and protection which only focuses on the preservation of natural resources or the use of the least damaging scenarios, while the plundering of the earth-bearing capacity continues. It is insufficient to think of an earth ecology that is misanthropic to human presence by reasoning that man is only capable to destroy and exploit. Our first task as social workers is to rightfully and profoundly be concerned about both nature and man and thus design interventions that not only address the symptom in the case of poverty, but also thinks holistically about man and the environment.

Let us take hands and let us make common cause together, recognising the global scope of humankind and nature calling out for healing.

***We are of the Earth, and belong to You. Every step that we take upon You should be done in a sacred manner; each step should be a prayer."***

Black Elk; First Nations Spiritual Leader

## REFERENCES

- Behrman, G. 2007. **Course Title: Spirituality in Social Work Practice**. Saint Louis School of Social Services, Saint Louis, Missouri. <http://www.ihpnet.org/ss1.htm> downloaded on 19 January 2007 at 9:30.
- Besthorn, F.H. 2006. Toward a Deep-Ecological Social Work: Its environmental, spiritual and political dimensions. **A Partnership of Social Workers for Environmental Concerns**, available on line at <http://www.Ecosocialwork.org/prspctvs.html> downloaded on 16 February 2006 at 10:00.
- Canda, E.R. 1998/1999. Spiritually Sensitive Social Work: Key Concepts and Ideals. **Journal of Social Work and Practice, Bemidji State University and Inter-University Centre, Dubrovnik**. Issue 1:1-32. available at <http://cj.bemidji.msus.edu/Journal/> downloaded at 31 March 2007 at 12:08.
- Clark, M. 1989. **Ariadne's thread: The search for new modes of thinking**. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Chossudovsky, M. 1998. **The globalisation of poverty**. Halifax, NS: Fernwood
- Coates, J. 2004. From Ecology to Spirituality and Social Justice. **Currents: New Scholarship in the Human Services**, 3(1):1-11, available on line at <http://fsw.ucalgary.ca/currents/articles/coates/index.htm> downloaded on 7 February 2007 at 7:40.
- Coates, J. 2006. From modernism to sustainability: New roles for social work. **Global Alliance for Deep Ecological Social Work**, available on line at <http://www.ecosocialwork.org/jcoates2.html> downloaded on 16 February 2007 at 10:39.
- Coates, J., Gray, M. & Hetherington, T. 2006. An Eco-spiritual perspective: Finally, a place for Indigenous Approaches. **British Journal of Social Work**, 36(3):381-399.

- Coates, J. & Leahy, T. 2006. Essential factors in the path of Sustainability. **Electronic Green Journal**, Issue 23 (Spring):1-17, available on line at <http://www.egj.lib.uidaho.edu/egj23/coates1.htm> downloaded on 9 January 2007 at 11:05.
- Gore, A. 1992. **Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit**. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Hawken, P.1993. **The Ecology of Commerce**. New York: Harper Business.
- Hodge, D.R. 2001. Spiritual Assessment: A Review of Major Qualitative Methods and a New Framework for Assessing Spirituality. **Social Work**, 46(3):203-214.
- Hoff, M. D. And Polack, R.J. 1993. Social Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis: Challenges for Social Work. **Social Work**, 38 (2):204-211.
- Knight, C. 2004. **Miracles of hope: surviving and thriving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. South Africa: White Rock.
- Miller, R. W. 2006. On my mind: The Ecological Explanation for the Environmental Crisis. **Electronic Green Journal**, Issue 23 (Spring):1-7, available on line at <http://www.egj.lib.uidaho.edu/egj23/miller5.html> downloaded on 14 February 2007.
- Sacco, T. 1998/1999. Social Work and Spirituality in an African Context. **Journal of Social Work and Practice, Bemidji State University and Inter-University Centre, Dubrovnik**. Issue 1:1-20, available on line at <http://cj.bemidji.msus.edu/Journal/> downloaded on 31 March 2007 at 11:56.
- Spretnak, C. 1997. **The Resurgence of the Real**. Don Mills, Ontario: Addison-Wesley.