Exploring the Sacred-Secular Dialect in Everyday Social Work Practice: An Analysis of Religious Responses to Managerialism among Outreach Social Workers in Hong Kong

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Abstract

We examine the recent proliferation of religious discourses among front line social workers in the former British Colony of Hong Kong in order to explore the nature of 're-enchantment' in modern social work practice. In-depth qualitative interviews with twenty social workers who identify as 'Christian social workers' in a variety of social work organisations (both religious and secular) reveal the adoption of religious identities and discourses to navigate the encroachment of managerialism. A systematic analysis of these narratives suggests that Christian social workers evoke religion to reclaim feelings of authenticity in their work, to facilitate more personalised relationships with their clients, and to empower themselves following the introduction of managerialist policies. We illuminate the dialectical relationship between religious discourses and managerialism to critique claims in the literature about a 're-enchantment' in social work, and to understand the essence of religion in modern social work practice.

Keywords: Social work, religion, Hong Kong, managerialism, Christian social worker

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Introduction

A defining feature of the provision of human services in the last ten years has been the proliferation of managerialism: the belief that social services can be improved by management-led initiatives towards calculability, standardisation and administrative control. The process of managerialism was initially described by Max Weber in his portrayal of Western capitalism in the late nineteenth century as an 'Iron Cage'. It subsequently became synonymous with factory production under the rubric of 'scientific management' or Fordism. George Ritzer (1993) revived the concept in the late twentieth century by arguing that the standardised production methods used in the fast-food industry were a powerful metaphor to understand the organisation of modern life. Fields as diverse as journalism, cultural production, university education and health care are, he argued, becoming 'McDonaldized'. By all accounts, managerialism has become the *modus operandi* of modern social work in a variety of settings in the UK (Harlow *et al.*, 2012; Rogowski, 2011), Sweden (Harlow *et al.*, 2012), Australia (Rees, 1999) and, indeed, Hong Kong (Leung, 2002).

Many scholars and practitioners argue that managerialism and social work make for uneasy bedfellows (see e.g. Rogowski, 2011). Practitioners in the caring professions pride themselves on providing personalised care over uniform services, putting their clients' needs before organisational efficiency, and the production of intangible benefits to society that are not as easily measured as economic profits. Garrett (2014) argues that, as a response to managerialism, social workers, like workers in the capitalist economy, are being lured with the possibility of a 're-enchantment' or a 'new spirit' in their profession. This new spirit provides social workers with greater moral justification for their participation in the profession. Recruitment campaigns in the UK, for instance, offer prospective social workers the possibility of 'making a difference'. Promotional literature on social work champions 'creativity' and 'inspiration'. Smaller, autonomous, social worker-led organisations are now favoured over larger impersonal ones.

As with the literature on the new spirit of capitalism, the new spirit of social work has been examined at the managerial level (Garrett, 2014). In this empirical paper, however, we examine the ways in which some frontline social workers are adopting this new spirit by embracing a Christian identity and a set of religious discourses in the former British Colony of Hong Kong, where managerialism has proliferated. We also go further in examining the extent to which this new religious identity significantly departs from managerial trends and, more broadly, in describing its dialectical relationship with managerialism.

There has, in the last ten years, been a vigorous debate about the role of religion in modern social work. As a profession rooted in modernity, social work has tried to shake off its religious and moralistic beginnings in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gray, 2008). The constitutional separation of church and state in the USA and the commitment to secular

states elsewhere (Crisp, 2008; Loewenberg, 1988) have intensified this secularisation.

More recently, however, some scholars and practitioners have found room for religion in modern social work. Both the Bush and Clinton administrations in the USA supported faith-based initiatives in social work throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Canda 2005). Canda and Furman (1999) argue for 'spiritually sensitive' social work that draws on commonalities found in Christianity, Buddhism and Shamanism. Religion is widely discussed in the context of social work education. Hemert (1994), for example, argues that social workers should receive religious training in order to understand their clients' attitudes towards clinical practice. Practitioners, she argues, should also be aware of various support networks provided by religious communities, such as soup kitchens and homeless shelters.

Proponents of religious involvement in social work sometimes moderate the role of specific religions in social work by calling for a 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' approach. 'Spirituality' is associated with universal themes, such as a search for meaning, and is not specifically tied to any single religious tradition. 'Religion' is associated with being more formal, ritualised and denominational (see e.g. Canda and Furman, 1999; Carroll, 1998). Spirituality, it is argued, transcends individual religions, organisations and even nations in its universality (see e.g. Canda, 2005).

Wong and Vinsky (2009), however, deconstruct this 'spiritual-but-not-religious' discourse by arguing that, far from being universalistic, social workers use the term 'spirituality' to promote a highly individualistic 'Euro-Christian' world view. They use the term 'religion' to exoticise the practices of ethnic minorities and thereby label them as traditional or conservative.

Such debates have either been at a theoretical level (see e.g. Gray, 2008), or they have focused on providing appropriate religious services for clients. They ask, for example, in which areas of social work are religious services most required (Furman *et al.*, 2004)? Should social workers receive more training in religious matters (Furness and Gilligan, 2014)? What form should that training take in a multicultural society (Crisp, 2008)? How can social workers be more respectful of their clients' faiths (Wong and Vinsky, 2009)?

These are, of course, important practical considerations. In this paper, however, we focus on how social workers actually practise and experience religion in their everyday work in order to raise a different but related set of questions that also have an important bearing on the practice of social work, namely the morale of social workers themselves. Interviews with outreach social workers who identify as Christian social workers reveal that their faith is tied to professional dilemmas surrounding managerial policies. Indeed, most of our informants reported becoming *more* religious after encountering managerialism. We therefore ask: how do social workers use their faith therapeutically to deal with the recent changes in their own profession, and what form does this faith take?

We use our interview data to understand the essence of religion in modern social work practice and to ask: what are its limits and its relationship with managerialism? Specifically, we show that religion in modern social work can only be seen in relationship to secularisation and disenchantment in what Chan (2000) calls ‘the sacred-secular dialectic’. As in other cases in which religion has emerged in the workplace (Chan, 2000), we argue that re-enchantment in social work is not a linear process, but a dialectical one in which both enchantment and re-enchantment are not only reinforcing, but also validating one another.

Context

Hong Kong provides a particularly appropriate setting to study religion and the impacts of managerialism in social work, since the provision of social services in the territory has moved from religious and philanthropic organisations to secular bureaucracies in a relatively short period of time. Colonial administrators adopted a policy of ‘minimal intervention’ in their early governance of the territory. Concerns about the cost of running the colony meant that social welfare was left to private philanthropic institutions, which were usually church-based. These organisations assisted with Hong Kong’s post-war recovery by providing housing and schooling for new immigrants who crossed the border during China’s Communist Revolution.

A turning point in the development of social work in the territory came during the 1960s and early 1970s when riots erupted in response to poor labour conditions and allegations of corruption in the colonial civil service. To restore order, the colonial government instituted a number of welfare reforms, including public housing and free secondary school education. Social work began to develop as a profession, with the expansion of tertiary education and the establishment of social work departments in universities. Such universities eschewed religious affiliations, following the red-brick universities in the UK (Ho and Kvan, 2008).

This ‘Golden Age’ in the development of the profession came to an abrupt ending during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, when the HKSAR Government reined in social welfare spending. It was around this time that social work academics began to report the encroachment of managerialism on their profession, citing the introduction of a policy referred to by practitioners as the *lump sum funding scheme*. The details of this policy have been described in detail elsewhere (see Chan and Chu, 2002; Leung, 2002). It is suffice to say here that the policy was interpreted by our informants and local academics to have had three undesirable consequences.

First, prior to the lump sum funding scheme, social work organisations were guaranteed funding based on their number of staff and their salary ranks. Under the new lump sum system, the HKSAR Government awarded service providers a sum of money that was based on standardised performance

criteria and which was to be divided up at the discretion of the organisation's director. This elevated a class of programme administrators whose interests were thought to be more pecuniary (meeting targets and economising) than concerned with the long-term needs of staff and clients. Social work scholars reported increasing conflicts and divisions between front line social workers and administrators, in favour of whom the balance of power was now tipped (Chan and Chu, 2002).

Second, our informants talked about the introduction of short-term contracts and the loss of tenure in their organisations. Several also pointed out that the uncertainty of resources meant that their organisations would now have to spend more time bidding for grants, often from sources that violated their moral and professional values, such as the Hong Kong Jockey Club, which promoted gambling.

Finally, our informants worried that the inter-changeability of personnel in social work organisations endangered stable and enduring relationships with clients. They reported a mission drift from providing personalised care to cost-cutting and efficiency. Writing at the time, Chang pointed out:

It seems that 'value for money', 'efficiency', and cost-effectiveness have overridden 'human concerns' and 'welfare rights' as the criteria of quality services. In one sense, even the whole welfare sector is on the verge of being uprooted (Chang, 2002, p. 87).

Religious discourses are, of course, not the only ones that have confronted managerialism. In the 1990s and early 2000s, academic articles began to appear in international social work journals that were highly critical about managerialism, urging social workers to develop a 'new professionalism' that would include more political engagement (see e.g. Lymbery, 2001).

In his book, *Reclaiming Social Work*, Iain Ferguson (2008) describes various responses to managerialism in the UK in the wake of New Labour's policies. Reflecting on how social work has been affected by its contact with social movements, Ferguson describes how social workers were mobilised by the critiques of neo-liberalism appearing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as the failure of 'trickle-down theory', protests against the policies of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and against Western foreign policy in Iraq. The protests, he suggests, encouraged among social workers a discourse on 'core values' resulting in conferences and political manifestos.

Social work in Hong Kong has similarly been affected by local social movements. The years following Hong Kong's return to China have witnessed a steady stream of protests directed at the HKSAR Government over political reform, freedom of speech, economic inequalities, environmental and heritage destruction, and large numbers of visitors to the territory, principally from the Chinese mainland. Chan and Chu (2002) describe how, in 1999, the Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union (an umbrella organisation of seven social welfare staff unions) and a student union formed the Alliance for the Protection of Welfare. At the end of 1999, more than 2,000 members

gathered at Government House and called for the lump sum grant proposal to be retracted. Debates appeared in the *Hong Kong Journal of Social Work* in which Alliance members and scholars articulated the pros and cons of the new reforms (see [Chan and Chu, 2002](#)).

In contrast to this focus on the political activism and academic interest among social workers, we examine a previously neglected aspect of the controversy, namely the embracing of religious identities and discourses by those who identify as ‘Christian social workers’, undertaken mostly by young outreach social workers who felt particularly vulnerable to the exigencies of managerial policies.

Methodology

Under the Hong Kong Basic Law, residents are guaranteed the freedom of religion. There is, indeed, a large variety of faith communities in Hong Kong including Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism. Enabled by British colonialism, the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches began their missions in 1841 ([Chan, 2010](#); [Lo, 2011](#)). Since then, there has been a steady growth of the Christian population in the territory ([Bouma and Singleton, 2004](#)). In 2013, the Christian population in Hong Kong reached 860,000, comprising 11.9 per cent of Hong Kong’s entire population ([HKSAR Government Information Services Department, 2013](#)).

Despite the rhetoric of religious pluralism in Hong Kong, the educated elite have inherited a tradition of opposition to local religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism. Some of this opposition is a remnant from the Cultural Revolution in China. The school curriculum also contributes to this bias, since a large number of Hong Kong schools are run by volunteer associations with the government subsidising their operational costs; many of these organisations are Protestant or Roman Catholic and are not eager to promote local religions ([Liu, 2003](#)).

Unfortunately, there are no longitudinal surveys on the religious affiliation of social workers in Hong Kong. Some social work scholars suggested to us that the number of Christians entering social work training may actually be in decline due to the declining proportion of church-run high schools in the past few decades. The focus of our research, however, is not on the number of Christian social workers per se, but on the everyday contents and practices of their faith.

Using an interactionist framework, we wanted to understand religion as something people *do*, rather than have (see e.g. [Kleinman and Kolb, 2011](#)). Thus, rather than trying to impose theoretical classifications found in the academic literature of ‘secular’, ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ on our informants (see e.g. [Canda and Furman, 1999](#); [Carroll, 1998](#); [Gray, 2008](#)), we conducted ethnographic interviews with social workers who identify themselves as ‘Christian social workers’ and asked them to describe practices that *they*

considered to be religious. We thus use the term *Christian social worker* throughout this paper as a folk construct that our informants use to identify themselves. It does not refer to all social workers who happen to be Christian.

Upon approval from the first author's Institutional Human Subjects Review Board, along with the informants' explicit consent, we conducted and recorded these interviews with twenty social workers from a variety of social work organisations. We identified some of these informants while conducting fieldwork for another project on 'non-engaged youth' (see Groves *et al.*, 2012, 2014). These informants then helped us identify Christian social workers in other settings. The majority were relatively young, front line staff, a few were more senior, and two were directors of major social work organisations. All had, at one time in their careers, been front line social workers. Although this sample was initially one of convenience, it was also a highly appropriate one to study responses to managerialism because outreach social workers in their early career are particularly vulnerable to the exigencies of the lump sum grant, namely job insecurity and disrupted relationships with clients.

We interviewed informants in organisations that identified themselves as secular and religious, so as not to exclude the possibility that religious practices went on in secular organisations. This distinction, however, between religious and secular social work organisations is not always easy to draw in Hong Kong because religious organisations usually receive subsidies from the government to undertake specific programmes, and secular organisations often have religious origins. Both, however, as recipients of public funds, are to some extent subject to the pressures of managerialism. The organisations were involved with services that ranged from homes for delinquent boys, a sheltered workshop for developmentally challenged persons, youth outreach work to drug rehabilitation centres (see Table 1).

In the interviews, we asked the informants to identify the practices that they considered to be 'religious' in their everyday work, and the situations in which these practices occurred. We also asked informants how they distinguished themselves from social workers who did not identify as Christian social workers. We further asked informants to reflect upon how their colleagues reacted to their religious identities, as well as situations in which they felt uncomfortable bringing up their Christianity at work. About half of the interviews were conducted in Cantonese or Cantonese mixed with English, as is common in Hong Kong. They were then translated into English, transcribed and coded thematically with the assistance of the text analysis software program NVivo.

Findings

Initially, we found what appeared to be a considerable re-enchantment of social work practice among the social workers that we interviewed. Practices that social workers considered to be religious included praying, singing hymns, holding prayer groups, bible study and family support groups. Christian

Table 1 List of informants (all names are pseudonyms)

Number	Name ²	Job title	Sector	Religious affiliation or organisation
1	Emily	Registered social worker	Youth outreach/drug counselling	Secular
2	Raymond	Case worker	Youth outreach	Secular
3	James	Case manager	Residential boys' home	Secular
4	Henry	Board of directors Legislative councillor	Youth centre	Lutheran Church
5	Paul	Director	Youth outreach	Secular
6	Amy	Case worker	Residential boys' home	Secular
7	Joan	Case worker	Residential boys' home	Secular
8	Markus	Case worker Group worker	Drug counselling	Lutheran
9	Thomas	Chief executive	Elderly care Youth Family	Various Christian denominations
10	Candy	Workshop manager	Workshop for intellectually challenged persons	Secular
11	Mike	Case worker	Drug rehab	Various Christian denominations
12	Ka Ho	Centre in charge	Youth outreach Victim and offender mediation	Lutheran
13	Deborah	Case worker	Secondary school	Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong
14	Jeremy	Social work supervisor	Youth outreach	Secular
15	Jenny	Project supervisor	Youth outreach	Secular
16	Siu Wai	Registered social worker	Youth outreach	Secular
17	Josephine	Registered social worker	Youth outreach	Secular
18	Austin	Principal	Drug rehab	Various Christian denominations
19	Carol	Case worker	Secondary school	Lutheran
20	Jane	Registered social worker	Youth outreach	Secular

social workers evoked their religious identity and faith to present themselves as authentic, as offering personalised services and as empowered in the context of managerialism. Almost all reported that they had become *more* religious as a result of their experiences in social work. Two-thirds of them specifically mentioned their faith in the context of professional issues encountered by managerial policies. In this section, we illustrate these findings and, in a final section, we outline the relationship between these beliefs and practices and managerial thinking and policies.

The Christian social worker as authentic

As has been noted in other contexts, under modern systems of production, the care industry has commodified human feelings and created anxieties about authenticity in the provision of services (Hochschild, 1983). Several of our

informants highlighted their religious faith to underscore their refusal to separate what they considered to be their own values (caring for clients) from the values that they thought they had to emulate to satisfy the institutional needs of their organisations (efficiency). For instance, they presented themselves as primarily 'Christian social workers', as opposed to 'social workers that happen to be Christian'. Christian social workers, they explained, put their personal values before their professional values:

Ka Ho: Many [Non-Christian] social workers, they think that as a professional, they put their profession first rather than their belief. They think that professionals should be doing things in this way or that way. They act as a professional.

Adopting a Christian approach meant aligning personal values with the profession, as opposed to simply acquiring and applying a set of institutional procedures, 'like a suit of clothing', in the words of one informant. Such an approach allowed social workers to feel a congruity between their 'true' selves and their institutional selves, providing them with a sense of integrity, or 'naturalness':

Paul: According to me social work values are Christian values and vice versa. Well they *should* be A lot of social workers seem to think of social work values like a suit of clothing you put on when you go to work. It's something you learn from a book, it's not something endogenous So they're really doing this because that's what the book says social workers do, but they don't apply that to their own lives. And it doesn't mesh with common sense. I mean some of the really ridiculous things I've heard social workers say and do are: 'oh I can't impose my values on other people'. Of course you can! That's a value that you're imposing whether you know it or not!

The Christian social worker as provider of personalised services

Of all the aspects of their work, our informants consider establishing close relationships with their clients to be the most important. Many chose to work in residential settings in which they shared their living quarters with clients, rather than day centres that provided them with less contact. Some told us that they had been trained in the British style of 'case work' that, they explained, deals with a small number of clients. The reality of social work in Hong Kong, particularly under the recent managerial policies, is that a small number of service providers are responsible for entire geographical districts that contain several hundred or even several thousand clients.

Christian social workers again evoked their faith when dealing with the discrepancy between their expectations of enjoying close relations with their clients and what they saw as the increasingly impersonal 'one-size-fits-all' relationships resulting from managerialism. They used their Christianity to draw attention to the fact that they, unlike their non-Christian counterparts, established closer and enduring bonds with their clients.

Informants constructed their faith as an essential part of their identity outside of work. They used their religion to bare their 'true selves' to their clients. Thus, Raymond described what he was doing when talking about religion as 'self-disclosure' or 'sharing' his own personal problems. This, he believed, established a more egalitarian and informal relationship with his clients that went beyond what he saw as standard social work protocol. Ka Ho told us, 'I'm not preaching, I'm sharing a life', and that:

As a Christian social worker I will just tell them I am a Christian and how this has changed me or helped guide me so they can experience me as a social worker in a very humanistic way. I'm not a professional social worker only. I also have my own problems, I have my own challenges.

Christian social workers described their approach as being more flexible than that of their secular counterparts. They cited the rigid flexibility of working hours and rigid job specifications in the bureaucratic world of managerialism to draw boundaries between themselves and non-Christian social workers. They emphasised the extra hours (often late into the night) that they worked, beyond those required in their contracts, to accommodate their clients' schedules. And this further humanised their relationships with their clients:

Paul: We don't have clients here, we have young people. We don't empathize with our clients. We love the young people. Now that to me seems common sense but it's very important. We don't have rules and regulations here because you have to be with the young people all the time. We respond to their needs.

The Christian social worker as empowered

Much of the recent academic literature on religion in modernity connects religion with increasing uncertainty and risk resulting from the individualism inherent in neo-liberal economies. Religion in these accounts mediates uncertainty in this individualist age (Beck, 2010). Our informants' anxieties resonated with this in the context of the introduction of the lump sum grant scheme. They evoked their Christianity when they spoke of their fears of redundancies and having to meet unrealistic performance targets.

James, a case manager in a residential care home, formed a prayer group upon the hiring of his new director, since he and his colleagues were anxious that the director might reorganise his programme to create redundancies or reassign job duties. The 'fellowship' or 'cell group', as it was referred to, met weekly in a small pantry during the lunch hour. The prayer meetings provided a safe space for staff to talk about their insecurities at work, unlike the regular staff meetings which were mostly about administration and clients. In Amy's words, the prayer group was predominantly 'supportive' of the staff. For this reason, the boss, himself a Christian, could not be invited since, as James put it, 'the boss never wants to hear about things that their employees can't achieve'.

As professionals, social workers are expected to be agents in helping their clients change. This, of course, rests on an assumption that clients are malleable and that social workers are empowered to help them. But our informants experience pressures to resolve problems that are not easily resolvable, and to control situations that are beyond their control. Christian social workers, like participants in therapeutic self-help programmes (Rudy and Greil, 1989), speak about relinquishing themselves to a higher authority in order to perform their duties. They distinguished themselves from their secular counterparts by being able to 'turn' to God when expectations failed.

Christian social workers frequently positioned themselves as 'humble' in contrast to the professional identities. They positioned their relationship with clients as non-judgemental. Non-Christian social workers, according to our informants, are likely to judge their clients. Christian social workers advocate 'acceptance':

Like our boys. They all have behavioural and emotional problems and they have problems at home and at their school. But once they come to know our school, they won't change much immediately. They still have emotional problems. They face many accusations. The first thing I want to give them is acceptance. No matter what they do. No matter how they behave, I would just like to show them that they are beloved. ... Even though some boys are naughty or breaking the rules, we can accept them truly. I think we have a calling to serve them.

Informants thus evoked their Christianity in the management of disappointments and failures in the competitive environment of the managerial policies.

A return to religion in social work?

What is the significance of the religious identities and discourse that we found among our interviewees for the practice of social work and its relationship with religion? It might be tempting to conclude that social work has not abandoned its religious roots, or, even more strongly, that there has been a religious revival or re-enchantment in the profession, in which spirituality, as Canda (2005) prophesises, will 'transcend' academic disciplines, government and religious institutions, and provide clear universal ethical principles.

These conclusions would, however, be premature. The religious discourses and practices that our informants engage in are different from those found in formal traditional religious organisations, such as the churches to which some of our informants belong. This is because the emergence of the Christian social worker identity and practices are largely adaptive responses to the pressures of managerialism, rather than driven by purely religious ideals. Our data suggest several directions in which our informants' Christian identities and discourses have been shaped by managerialism and, in some cases, even support it.

Private rather than public beliefs

Christian social workers hold highly compartmentalised and, some would argue, secularised notions about religion (see e.g. [Casanova, 1986](#)); they view their faith as deeply private or personal to them. All but a few of our informants agreed that it is not entirely appropriate to be openly discussing their faith at work. Prayer groups are confined to non-working hours and to non-working spaces. It was rare to find social workers treating drug addiction with religious faith alone. Rather, the organisations that our informants were recruited from compartmentalised their services into, for example, the physical, emotional, social and spiritual.

Informants say that they do not initiate religious conversations with their clients. Rather, they wait for clients to initiate these conversations with them. They achieve this by leaving clues that stimulate curiosity about religion, such as wearing a crucifix, praying before meals in front of clients or leaving religious items in their offices such as prayer books and religious paintings. Using an ironically business metaphor, Paul thus told us:

I'm not the kind of missionary that goes around banging the drum. I keep telling people, 'I'm not in the sales department [for the Church]. I work for customer services'.

Christian social workers are thus not openly proselytising. They are creating what [Engleke \(2012\)](#) calls a religious 'ambience'. [Engleke \(2012\)](#) uses the metaphor of 'ambience' to show how evangelical Christians in the UK create a religious mood or 'sensory environment' much like the ambient background music played in airport lounges. This music is played largely in the background, but still manages to arouse interest and engage people. It is 'intentionally non-intentional', relying on the listener to register and make sense of it. When religion is presented in this way, such as the placing religious decorations in public places, [Engleke \(2012, p. 185\)](#) argues, the normally 'private conversation' about personal faith can be 'overheard' by the public, thereby giving private faith an opportunity to come to the foreground.

As with ambient music, Christian social workers rely very heavily on the maintenance of boundaries between the private and the institutional self (i.e. the background and the foreground), since it is precisely the careful revealing of their private selves that gives the social workers' spirituality its authenticity.

Experiential rather than theological authority

The Christian social workers interviewed do not draw their authority strictly from theology, and few have ambitions to work in religious organisations. They actually take pride in the fact that they have no formal theological

training. While many are regular church-goers, they do not hold prominent positions in their religious communities and all of them consider themselves to be social workers rather than preachers.

Christian social workers are what [Grant *et al.* \(2003\)](#) would call ‘clergy surrogates’ in that they are taking it upon themselves to administer spiritual services in the absence of professional clergy. The source of their authority is not theological but experiential, and based on disclosure of personal struggles. Ka Ho, for example, used a medical metaphor to explain the difference:

We can share our experience. But with issues relating to theology, we are not in a position to be preachers. Just like a medical issue. We can experience a sickness, for instance, we can experience a hearing problem. But we’re not medical practitioners who are able to tell you what is best for dealing with your illness.

Restricted rather than pervasive practice

Opportunities for religious expression are bounded by organisation and rank, as well as religious affiliation. Ironically, few informants wanted to work in formally religious social work agencies. They reported that such agencies would be under greater scrutiny from the government when applying for public funds under the lump sum scheme. This meant that openly religious organisations had to carefully disentangle their religious programmes from secular ones in order to obtain public funding. Secular organisations were held to less accountability in this regards, and informants reported greater flexibility to informally introduce religion.

Further, one informant reported that the entitlement of baring one’s religious soul is granted more to those social workers who hold senior positions. As in traditionally hierarchical workplaces, those workers who are higher up in the organisation’s bureaucracy are granted more autonomy and discretion in their work than their subordinates. ‘Ka Ho can do anything he wants,’ one informant said, referring to the religious programmes organised by his senior colleague, ‘because he’s the head position. He’s in the senior position.’

Religious expression also appears to be restricted to Christianity rather than Buddhism and Taoism, which are also widely practised in Hong Kong. While there are organisations in Hong Kong that incorporate Buddhist philosophy into the treatment of drug addiction, it did not occur to our informants to do so. Indeed, they had little knowledge or trust of other faiths. Ka Ho likened Christianity to a reliable ‘brand name’. Paul described Christianity as ‘plain congee’ (rice soup—a generic food often served to young children and the sick) assuming that it would be easier for his clients to understand than other religions:

Better to eat plain congee than nothing at all. You can argue that a 12 ounce black pepper steak has more nutrition than plain congee, yes. But if you ain’t got steak and you’ve got broken teeth or a bad stomach, then you’re better off with plain congee. It may not be the best. But it’s better than nothing.

Such a view, as noted above, reflects a bias among the educated elites in Hong Kong against local faiths, such as Buddhism and Taoism, which the government defines as ‘traditional Chinese religions’.

Instrumental rather than spiritual goals

Finally, the incorporation of religious practices was often used to fulfil managerial or instrumental rather than spiritual goals. Some of the accounts given by Christian social workers suggest that, rather than stifling creativity, the competitive environment created by the lump sum scheme actually encouraged social workers to innovate to meet their targets. And this could include the incorporation of religious activities and organisations.

For example, one Christian social worker expanded her organisation’s outreach by collaborating with a church situated in the same building as her centre that counselled drug addicts. This gave her access not only to new clients, but also to the clients’ families. It provided her with an opportunity to set up a parents’ support group and thereby help her agency meet its outreach targets. The government subsequently started to include such parents’ groups as one of the organisation’s targets. What had begun as a creative attempt to overcome a hurdle of the lump sum scheme thus actually became an extension of the scheme.

Conclusions

Interviews with front line social workers who identify as Christian social workers reveal a growing religious discourse surrounding managerialism. Christian social workers evoke Christianity to position themselves as authentic, caring and empowered in response to the encroachment of managerial philosophies that, they argue, require them to increasingly be more concerned with efficiency, competitiveness and targets. Following [Garrett \(2014\)](#), this might suggest a new emerging ‘spirit’ of social work or a re-enchantment of the profession, mirroring the apparent re-enchantment of workers in the capitalist economy. But, as studies of re-enchantment in the capitalist economy have shown, re-enchantment is not a linear process, and often what appears as re-enchantment of the workplace is, ironically, disenchanted values and consciousness ([Chan, 2001](#)).

Our informants’ religious discourses and identities do not necessarily mean that social workers are returning to the religious roots of their profession or that there is a unifying connective spirituality emerging in the profession as hypothesised by [Canda \(2005\)](#). Social workers evoke religion to deal with their own professional dilemmas and the instrumental goals of their work, not only the spiritual needs of clients. Our informants’ affiliation was still very much with their profession, rather than with their churches.

Our informants compartmentalise their Christian identities and reveal them judiciously. It is precisely the boundary that social workers maintain between their personal faith and their professional identities that gives their religious identities and discourses power and meaning in modern social work. Once religion is kept in the background, it can be used as a marker for the authentic in order to achieve intimacy with clients. When Christian social workers talk about religion in their work, they are not only articulating anxieties over managerialism, but they are also constructing and reproducing it—or at least a version of it—in order to authenticate themselves, personalise their relationships and reclaim control in the workplace. They thus rely heavily on rigid interpretations of managerial philosophies to carve out their own religious identities and practices. It makes sense that social workers are able to do this more in secular organisations than in religious ones, since a secular environment can be used to support their religious convictions.

Christian social work does not necessarily break down the dualisms created by managerial philosophies; old dualisms re-emerge between management and staff, creative and routine work, and public and private identities. Our informants report that it is those in more senior positions (and thus subject to less supervision) who are able to bare their souls and their religious identities and exercise their creativity. The prayer groups do not so much inform managerial decisions, but are largely a response to them. They are held during non-working times in non-working spaces. Religion was kept at an ambient rather than revivalist intensity. And religious discourses and practices conform to those of the educated elite, rather than those considered ‘traditional Chinese religions’ such as Buddhism and Taoism.

Christian social workers may feel personally ‘empowered’ by their faith but, when looked at in the broader context, this does not necessarily indicate that they have been liberated from managerial philosophies and practice. It may simply mean that they have found more creative ways to advance them. In this respect, managerialism remains resilient *not* due to its rigid philosophy of efficiency and target setting, but rather, it is precisely the response to managerialism, namely the religious discourses and identities that Christian social workers adopt, that make managerialism so workable.

It has been noted that the much touted new creative Post-Fordist means of production has been formed in the shadow of the Fordist tradition from which it traces its descent (Vallas, 1999). Our study makes a similar claim with respect to managerialism and its re-enchanted counterpart in modern social work practice. Listening to the accounts given by Christian social workers allows us to see that, in everyday practice, neither pure forms of managerialism nor enchantment are operating in social work organisations. Whereas managerialism, with its relentless focus on targets and goals, has actually encouraged social workers to be more creative in their outreach strategies, Christian social workers have fashioned a religious practice that places

a high premium on relegating religious beliefs to the personal, maintaining divisions of labour in the workplace, and the advancement of managerial goals.

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