



**SWG 580 SOCIAL WORK APPLICATION: THE AKRA TAPINOSIS AND
HOSPICE SOCIAL WORK**

By: Emmett B. Cartinhour

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Emmett B. Cartinhour
Asbury University

Abstract

This examination seeks to apply the personal theological model derived from the *Akra Tapinosis* icon to the field of hospice social work. Specifically, it focuses on how a Christian social worker can fulfill both their professional and Christian vocation in their services to terminally ill patients and their families. At the heart of this endeavor is the virtue of humility, as the *Akra Tapinosis* demonstrates from its theology on the Incarnation. First, there is an overview of the issue of death in the context Christian theology and of post-modernity. Secondly, the setting of hospice care is analyzed in three sections in conjunction with the categories of Exile, Synergism, and Self-Sacrifice.

Outline

- **The Last Enemy (1 Cor. 15:26)**
 - Brief overview of how Christianity theologically views death
 - The challenge of death and dying for the post-modern world
 - The role of the hospice social worker

- **PART I: Hospice Social Work as Exile**
 - How care for the dying is informed by the Incarnational model of humility
 - Philippians 2:5-8
 - Dignity and Worth of the Person (NASW)

- **PART II: Hospice Social Work as Synergism**
 - How care for the dying demonstrates “being as communion” (Zizioulas, 1985)
 - The role of the interdisciplinary team in hospice care
 - Importance of Human Relationships (NASW)

- **Part III: Hospice Social Work as Self-Sacrifice**
 - How care for the dying is informed by the Incarnational mystery and Resurrection
 - How Christianity and social work in the hospice field are complimentary
 - Service (NASW)

Social Work Application:

The Akra Tapinosis and Hospice Social Work

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, St. Paul proclaims, “the last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26 NRSV). Schmemmann (2003) recalls, “these are the words of the apostle Paul, writing at the dawn of Christianity following the relentless persecution and death of Christ, in a time of a general, passionate hatred of Christians” (p. 21). Despite this fact, paradoxically, for the Christ-followers of the first-century up until the present day, it is recognized that death no longer has dominion over the world.

With the Incarnation, as the *Akra Tapinosis* reveals, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5 NRSV). During the midnight Pascha service in the Eastern Orthodox Church it is triumphantly sung repeatedly, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and bestowing life upon those in the graves!” Additionally, in the same pastoral letter to the church in Corinth, St. Paul writes about the great mystery:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ (1 Cor. 15:20-22 NRSV).

However, while it is right that through the ‘New Adam’ death has been defeated; each person must still endure the physical passage of death in the world.

Death and Christian Theology

Physical death, according to the Christian tradition, is a consequence of the introduction of sin into the world. This raises the anthropological and theologically

complex question of whether or not man's original immortality included the physical body or not. (Larchet, 2002). While it can be asserted with confidence that sin is the consequence of misdirection of free will away from unity with God, it is a more difficult task to attempt to diagnose the purpose of the corruption of the body.

One commonly held position is found in the words of St. Maximus the Confessor, who shares, "the first man, receiving his being from God, came into existence free of sin and corruption, for neither sin nor corruption were created with him" (Larchet, 2002, p.19). Likewise, according to St. Gregory Palamas, "God created neither death, nor illnesses, nor infirmaries" (Larchet, p.18). If this is the case, as Christian tradition affirms, then Larchet (2002) concludes that, "This double affirmation, that God did not create death and that man in his primordial condition was incorruptible, implies logically that man in the original state of his nature was also immortal"(p.20).

However, this is not the only position held by the great Church Fathers of early Christendom. Larchet (2002) shares:

Basing their reflection on the scriptural affirmation that 'God fashioned man from the dust of the earth' (Gen 2:7), a number of them, concerned to preserve a clear distinction between the created and uncreated, did not hesitate to insist that the human body at its creation and according to its very nature was unstable, corruptible, and mortal (p.20).

For example, Church Fathers who firmly taught this were St Athanasius of Alexandria, St. Augustine of Hippo, and St. John Chrysostom (Larchet, 2002).

And then there is a third additional position that would claim the body was neither mortal or immortal in its origin (Larchet, 2002). A remarkable writing from St Theophilus of Antioch offers:

Yet someone will say to us, ‘But wasn’t death a natural function of human nature?’ Not at all! ‘Was man therefore immortal?’ We do not say that either. They will then reply, ‘Do you mean man was nothing at all?’ No, that is not at all what we mean. Rather, by his nature man was no more mortal than immortal. If he had been created immortal from the beginning, he would have been created divine. On the other hand, if he had been created mortal, it would have appeared that God was the cause of his death. Thus he was created neither mortal nor immortal; rather he was capable of both mortality and immortality (Larchet, p. 24-25).

All three positions on the original corruptibility of the body are thought provoking and multifaceted, and together carry elements of the Divine purpose of creation. Ultimately, the act of the Incarnation, by assuming corruptibility, affirms the originate goodness the body, while the Resurrection proclaims the incorruptible and eternal destiny it has over death.

Christian Social Work in the Post-Modern World

The current era of post-modernity offers a particularly interesting sociological climate for Christian social workers. Post-modernity has a tendency to value cultural relativity and the autonomy of the ‘individual’ above all. This is especially pronounced in American culture, where a consumerist mentality intersects with cultural relativity with striking profundity. Unsurprisingly, the post-modern insistence that all truths should be

considered equally valid; that subjective experience and personal preference trump the wisdom of institutionalism does not easily conform to the Gospel. Whether or not one chooses to critique the Church as an ‘institution’ negatively (which is quite popular currently), Christians across denominational lines, whom strive to uphold orthodox teaching and custom, can agree that they are participating in a uniquely historical ‘truth event,’ as the *Akra Tapinosis* reveals.

Moreover, whether one is comfortable with the notion of the Church as an institution or not, the ‘truth event’ of the Incarnation and all subsequent theological developments affirmed by Christianity today have been protected and kept by the Body of Christ for two millennia. Broadly, one can claim that there is no such thing as a ‘de-institutionalized’ Church, lest one begins to drift into the spiritualism of Gnosticism. The Incarnation, as revealed in the *Akra Tapinosis* refutes any notion that ‘spirituality’ alone is sufficient for the acquisition of truth. Truth is not a belief system, but a *person*.

This is a radical departure from the secular and post-modern sensibilities. As a result, Christian social workers increasingly will be found to have a minority worldview when they refuse to renounce that absolute truth can be known and partaken of, when the more common, and far more comforting dogma of relativity is insisted upon. However, does that mean that a Christian social worker cannot fulfill his or her vocation within a secular society, or amongst the spiritualities of post-modernity? Reassuringly, the answer is a no, as the model derived from the *Akra Tapinosis* demonstrates. Expressly, when the Incarnation and Resurrection is considered in correlation with the characteristics of Exile, Self-Sacrifice, and Service.

Death and Dying in the Post-Modern World

The flourishing of the hospice movement in present times should be understood as a natural outcropping of post-modern values. As this author has described in earlier works, the return in popularity of a hospice alternative can be viewed as the natural response to the scientism of modernity. Cohen (1979) asserts this in writing:

Care of the dying represents a significant gap in our health care system. The void exists partly because acute-care hospitals are ill-suited to meet the physical and emotional needs of the dying, who must watch their own deterioration and the slow approach to death over a period of weeks or months. Such institutions are geared, instead, to cure patients and send them home as quickly as possible, to give efficient rather than individually optimized care (p.3).

The option of choice and self-determination, which hospice organizations provide for the terminally ill and their families, fits both social work and post-modern values. Also, for the Christian social worker engaging in hospice care, there is the historical point that early hospices were a product of the Church, though they were also found in earlier societies as well (Cohen, 1979).

The Hospice Social Worker

The role of the hospice social worker, and how the Incarnational humility of *Akra Tapinosis* icon can aid a Christian social worker in their vocation is the present question under examination. First, it must be defined as to what it is that the hospice social worker hopes to accomplish. Foremost, it is a necessity to recognize that social workers in the hospice setting do not work alone, despite the fact that they may see patients and their

families on an on-on-one basis. Social workers in this discipline are part of an *interdisciplinary team*. This feature alone is a testimony to the complex care that all individuals and families need across social justice initiatives. One of the primary advantages of interdisciplinary work is that it nullifies the myopic interpretation of one view. This fact has a direct link with how the Body of Christ function as well as it seeks to minister to the world, and work towards the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the hospice movement, “This kind of team has regular communications, the ability to use one another for mutual support, and a strong sense of egalitarianism among teams members” (Parry, 2001, p. 12). Consisting of not only social workers, the interdisciplinary team also includes the primary hospice doctors, nurses, chaplains, nurse aids, and volunteers; not to mention all of the staff that operates the day-to-day business functions. Such a network of partnerships is needed because “dying patients and their families have multifaceted problems with physical, psychological, legal, social, spiritual, economic, and interpersonal ramifications” (Parry, p. 12).

As for the social workers; “by virtue of their training in self-awareness, are best able to assist other team members to admit and accept emotional disequilibrium, not only in patients and families but also among the staff members themselves” (Parry, 2001, p.12-13). It is this role in engaging with the emotional and psychological, in the context of death and dying, where the social worker has the most importance. And although hospice teams have chaplains on staff to engage in spiritual matters with patients and their families, often social workers in this particular situation are also needed for spiritual consultation, and perhaps, even prayer.

For the Christian social worker, and also as acknowledged by the hospice philosophy; the spiritual component to one's identity is an intractable part to 'being-ness.' Pain is not only felt physically and emotionally, but also *spiritually*. Whereas secularism has very little to explicitly offer in terms of an answer to this circumstance, and spiritualism may only offer vague comforts, the Christian narrative is well prepared to engage the inevitable process of death and grief.

Hospice Social Work as Exile

According to the theological model as inspired from the *Akra Tapinosis*, the first component of effective social work in the hospice setting is the virtue of humility, as exemplified in the Incarnation event. Precisely, it is the *memory of exile* as the definitive act of humility performed by the Son of God in taking on human likeness that can enlighten a hospice social worker. Recalling St. Paul:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross (Phili. 2:5-8 NRSV).

Additionally, if one also takes into account the theological assertion that death is not a natural occurrence (whether the body was incorruptible before the fall or not), then one can see the double application that the principle of exile demonstrates. Just as the Incarnation of the Son of God took place in the world; it can be said that with humbleness, the Author and Giver of Life dwelt among a world living in a state of

cyclical death. This is further expounded upon by St. Paul in his letter to the Roman Church when he highlights that not only humanity, but all of creation awaits to be free from the illness of degeneration:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:19-23 NRSV).

And faithfully, it is the humility that is central to this live-giving restoration of all things in the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ. And as the source of life amongst fallen creation, the Son of Man was truly an exile in the first century in a Roman province as he remains by the standards of worldly philosophy today.

How can this apply to how the Christian social worker views his or her vocation in the hospice field? *With the acknowledgement that they themselves are exiles, unto themselves, regarding their original and future beauty*; subject to the decay of death as equally as their patients and families, regardless of their religious or non-religious orientation. The Christian social worker should acknowledge that their work between the dying and their families is a microcosm of the ministry performed by Jesus of Nazareth. It is not through theological discourse and argumentative proofs that the Son of Man

impacted the world around him (and on a cosmic scale), but through praxis, even to the point of death; paradoxically the most unnatural occurrence for the Author of Life.

Rooted in this praxis, is the core conviction that even in the context of death and dying, the Christian social worker understands that there is inherent dignity and worth in each patient as uniquely created in the *Imago Dei*. It should also be recalled that this principle is a core conviction to the NASW Code of Ethics, which states that, “Social workers promote clients’ socially responsible self-determination. Social workers seek to enhance clients’ capacity and opportunity to change and address their own needs. Social workers are cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and the broader society” (p. 5-6). Christian social workers honor the *Imago Dei* in the hospice setting by working with the patients and their families to face the long exile of death, in the manner they wish; and in doing so, honor the divine exercise of free will.

Hospice Social Work as Synergism

The attempt to apply the concept of synergism to the hospice patient presents a challenge insofar as the hospice patient is physically going through the dying process in a solitary mode. However, the model of ‘identity,’ and ‘personhood,’ even when facing physical death, is never an isolated event. Biologically, anthropologically, and spiritually; all that transpired to form the ‘individual’ is a product of the communal. This recalls the conviction, which Christianity affirms, that the notion of ‘individuality’ cannot be isolated from society. As Zizioulas (1985) writes, “there is no true being without communion. Nothing exists as an ‘individual,’ conceivable in itself. Communion is an ontological category” (p.18). This synergistic relationship with the ‘other’ is what defines *being-ness*. It is reflective of the Triune God.

Furthermore, for the hospice social worker, the dying event occasions more than the patient. Often it is the entire family that is treated. Quite simply, “The patient and family are the unit of care” (Parry, 2001, p. 14). The synergism of the Triune is the archetypal from which all social interaction is grounded, and the Christian social worker can honor this absolute truth in the way in which he or she engages with patients and families. Recalling the synergism of the Incarnation demonstrated in the *Akra Tapinosis*, both in relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit; as well as the relationships which the Son of Man established on earth, it can be demonstrated that meaning is found in death, within the context of loving communion; in relationship.

This Christian truth is easily applied to the social work profession according to its belief that, “social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process” (NASW Code of Ethics, 1996, p. 6). This change for the hospice patient and their family may be in the manner in which they are able to die peacefully, or how the social worker can help aid in the resolution of family conflicts before the time of death arrives. Regardless, care for the dying is a holy endeavor that cannot be accomplished without implementing an open and synergistic praxis.

Hospice Social Work as Self-Sacrifice

Inherent in social work practice, especially for the Christian social worker, is the exercise of self-sacrifice. Again, the very act of the Begotten taking on human form to endure death in order to restore creation is self-sacrifice *par excellence*. And it can only be truly self-sacrificial if it is freely offered. Furthermore, it should be highlighted that synergistic relationality as has been discussed above, must manifest in servitude.

Accordingly for the profession, “Social workers elevate service to others above self-interests” (NASW Code of Ethics, 1996, p. 5).

For a Christian social worker caring for the dying, their self-sacrifice is exercised in the emptying of themselves to allow the hopes, fears, pains, and all the factors that may encompass the patients experience to find *communion*. The service offered to patients and their families through self-sacrifice is a synergistic relationship that can only be fulfilled when there is the consent; between the social worker and their clients. It is through loving servitude to each other that hope shines a light on the darkness of death. Still, it is the awareness of the Resurrection; that it is through exile, synergism, and self-sacrifice that death is conquered which can inspire the Christian social worker to model their conduct with the dying in the manner in which Christ manifested His truth and glory to the world.

Conclusion

The social work vocation is not an easy one by any standards of the world, and those social workers who journey alongside terminally ill patients and their families throughout the dying process face unique challenges. Death, despite all the narratives offered throughout history considering its meaning and purpose remains a mystery; however, the Christian faith offers a specific answer to the dilemma of death. For the social worker who also faithfully embraces their Christian identity, their actions in light of the call to become Christ-like greatly aid individuals, families, and communities with confronting the significance of death and dying. Specifically, as this overview has proposed, the model of humility as exemplified by the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of the Christ is the model for all truth, beauty, and hope in the face of the grieving process. Specifically, a Christian social worker may make a positive impact as a Christian and professional by implementing into their practice with the terminally ill the categories of Exile, Synergism, and Self-Sacrifice as inspired from the *Akra Tapinosis* icon.

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