

## Letter to the Editor: Limits of a Code of Ethics

Dear Editor:

Spano and Koenig's latest response (2009) suggests a need to clarify the distinction embodied in the title of my last contribution to this discussion (Adams, 2009) between the *Code of Ethics* as set of duties and as statement of secular-liberal orthodoxy. The *Code*, I argue, neither does nor should impose any such ideological orthodoxy as the latter, and nothing compels such a restrictive reading of it. The difficulty here is that Spano and Koenig, in their apparent indignation at this view, ignore what I wrote and the arguments I made (Adams, 2009). For the record and with barely even a partial exception, I neither hold, nor did I argue, any of the positions they ascribe to me in their latest response.

For example, the authors say that George (2001) asserts that "only orthodox positions are Christian." What can I say? Read the book! Let me repeat: my argument, like George's analysis of the clash of orthodoxies, has *nothing* to do with the question of who is or is not Christian. George's point, and mine, is that the secular-liberal positions on life, death, sex, and marriage are no less an orthodoxy than those held by those who are--in a definable sense not limited to Christians--orthodox in religion. The orthodox-religious position is more defensible on rational, non-religious grounds than those of the secular-liberal orthodoxy (with whom religious liberals, Jewish and Christian) ally on these questions. In any case, the latter is *no less* an orthodoxy than the former. Neither one is or should be required by the *Code of Ethics*.

Again, I hold none of the views on marriage, abortion, or poverty that Spano and Koenig ascribe to me, and I agree with much of what they say about them. I simply point out the mass of research, some of which I cite, on family structure that shows it matters. Even controlling for the variables they mention, it is simply the case that children do much better when raised by their own two married parents (by birth or adoption) than by parents or others in cohabiting or single-parent arrangements. Both women and men in relationships are happier, healthier, better off financially, longer lived, and less likely to suffer domestic violence when they are married, and they lose those advantages when divorced—again controlling for the variables Spano and Koenig mention.

This is not the place to describe that research, which readers can consult for themselves, and on which there is broad consensus among researchers on marriage and family. But what is alarmingly symptomatic of the social work academy is the substitution of ideology for evidence, the refusal even to look at the evidence, to the great detriment of those we teach and the people with whom they subsequently work. None of which is to say (and I do not say) that strengthening marriage will solve all problems or that those problems do not have other causes.

The real difference between us, I think, has to do with the purpose of a code of ethics. In my view, it is not an ideological litmus test or screen or sieve, but a list of duties, a deontological code as many other European languages call it. It is about what we must do and not do. It mandates actions, not beliefs. The duties, not the accompanying rationale or ideology, are what bind us in a profession. Physicians who took the Hippocratic Oath for well over two thousand years promised not to participate or collude in assisted suicide, euthanasia, or abortion, whatever their view of Hippocrates' reasons, religion, or cosmology. In social work, as I argue, our duties typically include that of working—on a daily basis—with those of whose beliefs and actions we may disapprove. That is not the same as colluding in actions that are harmful to self, others, or society, nor does it mean imposing our own views or terminating the case.

A code of ethics is a very limited tool in the promotion of ethical social work behavior or the education of ethical social workers. (See my forthcoming article on “Ethics with Character” in the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*.) A code will not support the burden these authors place on it, of defining an ideology above ideology to which members of the profession “must” conform. That is why I reject the principle they say I do not discuss— that social workers “must” submit to having their personal worldview “mediated through the *Code of Ethics*.”

Social work, like other professions, has a core set of values that are defined in the *Code of Ethics* and constitute part of the definition of the profession. But these values are accepted across the political spectrum in social work and are not ideologically exclusive. The dignity and worth of the person, for example, though derived from Christianity, is accepted by social workers who see themselves as liberal secularists, even though they may hold beliefs that are incompatible with that value, for example, support for euthanasia of some of the most weak and vulnerable individuals.

Another shared and core value is social justice, a value shared by the profession’s Evangelical founding mothers in the 19th century as by its secularist leaders in the 21st century. Spano and Koenig (2009) acknowledge that there are different conceptions of social justice, but, they say, social workers “must choose the one that is more useful than another to achieve the profession’s stated purpose of promoting the well-being of vulnerable populations” (emphasis added). But which is that? Barry’s (2005) case for social justice takes the term to mean the social-democratic welfare state. The U.K.’s Centre for Social Justice, on the other hand, seeks to address the same problems of poverty as concern Barry, but it “highlights the work of profoundly differing and unique small voluntary organisations and charities” and takes the view that “The war on poverty can be won if government gets off the back of the armies of compassion and helps them to succeed” (<http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageRef=44>).

Again, who will decide what conception of social justice I “must” accept and teach? All major theorists of social justice (and social workers) to my knowledge claim that their conception best promotes the well-being of people in poverty. No one argues for social injustice. I do not want to contend here for or against any particular view of social justice, just to suggest that I would prefer to resolve the question through open argument, evidence, and democratic processes in the public square rather than be told what I must believe and argue on the authority of the current majority interpretation of the *Code of Ethics*.

Spano and Koenig seem to think that I am in favor of imposing my “personal worldview,” whatever that is, on clients. They say the same principle applies across the ideological spectrum. Yet their original essay is a sustained and one-sided attack on a much-maligned ideological minority within social work, Evangelical Christians. That is why I came to their defense—that and my worry about the authoritarian tendencies within liberal “political correctness” and about an accompanying ethical earnestness that tends to sanctimony.

My point is that the positions that Spano and Koenig take for granted and read into the *Code* are *no less* expressions of an ideology or orthodoxy than those of the Evangelicals they take to task. In advancing this argument, I make no religious assumptions. I do say I am not an Evangelical and I do hereby abjure, renounce, and forswear any aspiration to pronounce on who is a true Christian.

As I argue, the greater danger today of professors’ and practitioners’ imposing a worldview on clients and students comes from liberal-secularists (and their religious-liberal allies), whose views on these matters tend to be farther than those of Evangelicals from the views of

their clients. This is particularly dangerous if we ignore clients' beliefs and aspirations about marriage and pretend that single parenthood is as good a family form as marriage, perhaps because, in the words of the old feminist slogan, a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle (which always struck me as an odd view of human reproduction and social life).

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## References

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Dear Editor:

A reading of Ogden Rogers' article regarding "Social Work and the International Humanitarian Law: Rights, Roles, and Responsibilities" in the "Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics," Vol. 5, Number 2 (2008), seems to show that the U.S. made all of the wrong choices going to war in Iraq. What about Afghanistan?

The article sets a sound foundation for understanding the relationship between international law and social work. I would imagine that as a Red Cross member/worker, Dr. Rogers may have pretty strong views on U.S. foreign policy/policies, as well as "in country/U.S." policy/policies when it comes to humanitarian law(s), particularly from the social worker perspective.

I wonder about the differences/similarities between the thinking and actions of the social workers of yore compared with social workers of today. Bringing more discussion and incorporation of the principles of the Geneva Conventions into schools of social work makes sense.

Is there a follow-up article?

Thank you, Dr. Rogers.

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