

## **Social Work Practice with Arab Families: The Implications of Spirituality vis-à-vis Islam**

**Ronald E. Hall**

**Abstract:** *In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, spiritualism has become apparent as critical to social work practice with Arab families. Regrettably, research on Arab families today is all but non-existent. Their belief in Islam is the fastest growing form of spirituality in Central Asia. Social workers who do not acknowledge this fact will be at a severe disadvantage in their attempts to treat Arab clientele. It is not compulsory that practitioners endorse client belief systems or other aspects of their spirituality, but practitioners should acknowledge said systems as a critical point in the client's frame of reference. In the interest of social justice, social workers are thus challenged to develop creative treatment strategies less confined to Western bias.*

**Keywords:** *Spirituality, Islam, social work, families, Arab*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Post September 11, 2001, spiritualism has become apparent as critical to social work practice with Arab families (Kilpatrick & Holland, 1990). Professional and anecdotal accounts of spiritualism offer considerable evidence to substantiate that claim. Dominating the aftermath of horrendous destruction, political pundits of every tenor find little basis for disagreement in the wake of renewed patriotism, stern warnings, and calls to military action. Within the midst of such fervor, social work will require a more informed response if it is to remain viable and loyal to its Code of Ethics (Gabbrill, 2001). Furthermore, despite the events in New York and Washington, D.C., which ended in commercial aircraft being used as missiles to assault non-military targets, America will prevail. No doubt, these most recent and past instances of Arab terrorism suggest concern for America's ability to prevail, but any call to action must be tempered with patience. Patience will accommodate informed practice methods with Arab families, despite episodes of terrorism perpetrated by a few among their population. Failure on the part of family social workers to comprehend the circumstances will facilitate ignorance exacerbated by political repercussions.

Repercussions have the potential to dampen enthusiasm for the incorporation of spirituality into social work practice. Such a dampening effect extends to practice

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with Arab families who may find themselves subjected to the auspices of Western service providers. Without exception, spiritualism is a necessity of practice with Arab families that could impede the ability of well-meaning social workers who lack either the knowledge or motivation to apply it (Hodge, 2000). Furthermore, in an effort to divert attention from the issue of spirituality, activists have expanded the rhetoric of social justice to include age, sexual orientation, gender, and disability (Sam, 2000). Yet, within society—and in spite of rhetoric to the contrary—spiritualism for many remains pertinent. Although the literature acknowledges spiritualism among the list of treatment resources, amidst the augmentation of social issues, it has been all but trivialized (Solomon, 1992). Greater focus on ethnic and cultural diversity will enable social workers to assist Arab clientele without incident. Instead, discussions pertaining to Arab families rely too heavily upon circumventing controversy and/or discussion of terrorist acts. In the outcome, rather than asking how they might incorporate spiritualism, social workers pose nebulous questions, such as: “What are the deficits of Arab families?” “In what ways can Arab families adjust to the American cultural ideal?”

Regrettably, most social work research on Arab families today continues to be all but non-existent (Schiele, 1997). In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, such oversight has loomed conspicuous in social work practice. While American diversity has experienced a significant increase in recent years, mainstream studies invariably focus on Western/Eurocentric resource models, which do not account for non-Western criteria or cultural variations in family clientele. Any attempt on the part of practitioners to stray from standard models encourages invitation to ostracism in journal publication and ridicule by mainstream professionals (Schiele, 1996).

Fortunately, in recent decades, increasing numbers of family studies have begun to focus on spirituality not addressed by the mainstream (Phan, 2000). These studies seek the incorporation of religion and other manifestations of spirituality that have been heretofore dismissed as inappropriate for practice settings. In fact, spirituality has been proven invaluable to Arab families and the social workers who incorporate it into their practice. Furthermore, spirituality utilized by social workers and other helping professionals assists community-based groups and policymakers. Spirituality allows for the development of comprehensive program interventions that fortify and give voice to non-Western families or families otherwise not identified with the Western mainstream of society.

Conscientious social workers would be remiss to exclude a critical aspect of life from practice with families. Spirituality may facilitate access to family values, family belief systems, and family practices otherwise inaccessible by traditional methods. Furthermore, spirituality for Arab families may contain coping mechanisms that enable them to confront and overcome the many challenges of daily life. In an effort to educate and contribute to the effectiveness of social work practice, this paper will have four objectives: 1) provide a beginning introduction to the history of the Arab population, including spirituality as per the religion of Islam; 2) illustrate the importance of spiritualism vis-à-vis Arab families; 3) provide implications for social work practice; and 4) make available a resource to assist social workers and policymakers in the design and development of treatments that incorporate spirituality.

## ARAB/ISLAMIC HISTORY

Despite their growth among America's population, Arab families who follow Islam represent an unfamiliar component of society (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). Their numbers have caused concern among Judeo-Christian scholars for the mounting tension that has accompanied their growth. As Islam continues to become a more significant aspect of Western society, it will necessitate portrayal of its followers fairly, objectively, and accurately. Suffice it to say that, in Western countries, American families who follow Islam may eventually outnumber the followers of Judaism. Given the continued Middle-East unrest, recognition of this fact will be critical to maintaining civil order and governmental stability.

The potential for tension brought about by Arab families who follow Islam is a consequence of their relocation to Western societies. In the United States, there are now more than 1,000 mosques and Islamic centers, where followers may worship their faith (Shuja, 2001). These Arab families are respected and productive members of society who are engineers, attorneys, social workers, etc. Their numbers are calculated to be in the millions and still growing. In fact, Dearborn, Michigan, ranks as home to one of the largest Arab and/or Islamic populations outside the Middle-East (Goodstein, 2001). No doubt, such a large population has given America cause to anticipate cultural tensions between Islamic factions and its citizens, which extends throughout the Western world. What is more, America is not alone in receiving those who follow Islam. Among European nations in toto, there are currently 20,000,000 followers of the Islamic faith. Nearly half—8,000,000—reside in Western Europe. When the Republic of Turkey is calculated among this number, it increases dramatically to at least 50,000,000 (Shuja, 2001).

While most Americans and other Westerners know very little about the religion of Islam, it is the fastest growing form of spirituality in Central Asia. Following the collapse of Communism in the U.S.S.R., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, by official decree, became Islamic nations. Among the French, Islam rivals Catholicism in the number of individuals who follow the traditions of an established faith. Among the British, followers of Islam exist in numbers large enough to advocate for state subsidies in the funding of Islamic schools (Shuja, 2001). Among Germans, similar efforts were introduced by Turkish immigrants in the 1970s. Even in Australia, Islam has become a mainstay of the population, given its being situated adjacent to the largest Islamic country in the world, i.e., Indonesia.

Families who follow Islam are a diverse population, but repercussions from September 11, 2001 have been directed primarily at Arab members of the faith and Arab Christians (Kennedy, 2001). The origin of the Arab population is associated with Semitic peoples on what is referred to as the Arabian Peninsula. The term "Arab" in America more often includes those who regard their mother language as Arabic. Arab countries consist of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the West Bank, and Yemen.

There is disagreement as to how the term "Arab" came to be. Scholars on more than one occasion have redefined its meaning. Some, in particular, have associat-

ed the origin of the term with an ancient patriarch, Qahtan, whose tribal group was thought to have originated in Saudi Arabia (Glubb, 1969). Others equate the origin of Arabs with nomadic peoples who resided in parts of the Arabian Peninsula (Glubb, 1969). Subsequently, the local population in the same area was not considered Arab. Still, others applied the term to residents of the entire Arabian Peninsula and the desert areas of the Middle-East.

Arab people may form significant communities elsewhere in the world, including U.S. non-Arab immigrants who are often assumed to be Arab, but, in fact, are separate and apart from the true Arab population. They include Jews in North Africa who speak Arabic, Kurds, Berbers, Copts, and Druze. Christians who speak Arabic and reside in countries, such as Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan, are counted among the number of those regarded as Arab (Glubb, 1969).

There has been an ongoing effort on the part of Arab leaders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to form an Arab nation. It would consist of Morocco on the west and across the Middle-East to the borders of Iran and Turkey. That not being possible, the various Arab nations have joined to form the Arab League. The purpose of the Arab League is to garner unity around issues of Arab interest, such as oil prices, Colonialism, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Today, the Arab League is composed of 22 member-states. Their ownership of two-thirds of the world's oil reserves has made them a formidable social, economic, and political force. In the aftermath of WW II, much of their energy and resources have been devoted to their relations with Israel. Their belief that the State of Israel was brought about by confiscation of Arab land resulted in four Arab-Israeli wars. Violence associated with that issue has remained a primary factor in the perpetration of terrorism not irrelevant to social work practice (Kulwicki & Miller, 1999).

### **ARAB SPIRITUALITY**

Islam is by far the prevailing manifestation of spirituality among families of Arab descent. In Middle-Eastern villages, individuals are born into the Islam faith and are expected to remain committed to it for life. Their commitment to Islam is so old and deep-rooted that it has permeated all aspects of family life (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). It is most evident in the belief system held by persons dedicated to the faith. These beliefs are considered canons and are not subject to debate. Perhaps foremost in importance among such canons is a belief in the oneness of Allah (God). That belief is associated with the prophet Mohammed. According to Arab tradition, Mohammed is the Messenger of Allah. While the Koran regards Allah as an ordinary human being, in the Arab belief system, Mohammed has been accorded the status of a divine entity (Wasfi, 1964).

Akin to Mohammed in status is the canon that takes the Koran to be the literal word of Allah. The Koran is the holy literature that exemplifies the final revelations of mankind. It holds the directives for life to which all Arabs must submit. Not to be minimized in context is its recognition of Gabriel. Gabriel is the most prominent among angels and is considered to be the bearer of the revelation and spirit of holiness. Belief in angels is essential, because it enables the last Arab canon, which is life after death. Dependent upon how one lives, reward or punishment will await him or her in the hereafter (Siegel, 1980).

Despite fundamental differences between various Arab factions, Arab families place a high value on spirituality in the form of Islam. The patriarchal arrangement is its traditional family structure. Both recent and not-so-recent Arab immigrants who follow Islam conform to a hierarchical organization of authority that extends to roles, obligations, and status. The welfare of the family supersedes the welfare of the individual, making it the basis of identity (Wasfi, 1964). Family is furthermore a reference point for behavior and spiritual directives. Its union all but completely negates individuality and/or independence—a concept that is foreign to Western mores.

Especially among Arab families where Islam is the spiritual tradition, reverence for the patriarch, as well as concern for the family's status, provides a strong sense of solidarity and loyalty (p. 44). Hence, the individual family member is not free to live independently but must consider family in each of his or her life decisions as prescribed by the Koran. The Koran, being the direct instruction from Allah, means that family members are expected to fulfill rules of behavior, family roles, such as husband, wife, child, etc., without the opportunity for personal input or preference. An individual's ability to adhere to spiritual directives reflects not so much upon him or her personally, but upon the family and its kinship network. In the Islamic tradition, males are then more valued than females, which may cause conflict in Western practice settings. However, unless influenced by Western norms, anxiety levels from this secondary status may not increase for women of traditional Arab families.

The importance of religious spiritualism among Arab families is evident in the extreme reluctance of individuals to yield to conversion (p. 49). Christian missionaries of the last century are well aware of this reluctance. The number of Arab believers who have converted from Islam to Christianity is very small. For the individual Arab, family is not irrelevant to that small number, as the family role in the existence of the community is crucial. Thus, those families who migrate to the U.S. more often send for their relatives who are in the "old country." Once abroad, there are few who do not have blood ties with the "old country." Those who do stand out, due to their difficulty in finding jobs or otherwise sustaining themselves. Frustrated, such Arabs without family frequently return to the "old country," where normal family ties are a way of life. This significance to family is evident by the fact that whole Arab communities may contain a small number of patrilineages (p. 22). Consequently, there is considerable overlap between family and spirituality within the Arab community. However, while family is an important social structure, spirituality, *vis-à-vis* Islam, guides life and the family belief system. Social workers who do not acknowledge this fact will be at a severe disadvantage in their attempts to treat Arab clientele. Those who do will consider the values extended from spirituality when working with such families. Values recognized by the Koran include the following:

- Respect for elders and parents,
- Wealth and male children,
- Subordination of women to men,
- Modesty,

Intensive religiosity,  
Equality of all human beings, and  
Health and strength (p. 61-62).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

The implications of spirituality for social work practice in the U.S. extend from the Colonial era (Farber, 1977-78). During this time, various Christian sects took part in an effort to ensure the new nation would not validate, by official decree, any one religion, philosophy, or other manifestation of spirituality. That notion was put forth by Roger Williams and others who felt imposed upon by any religious doctrine to which they did not aspire. The preferred separation of church and state also accommodated the emerging diversity that characterized the flow of immigrant and native people who occupied American shores. Consequently, religious movements in both the New England North and the Protestant South failed in their attempts to institutionalize religion (Levine, 1994). That concept enabled complete separation of church and state contained in the U.S. Constitution.

In comparison with other nations today, there is relatively less confrontation between church and state in America. However, existing lines of demarcation have not eliminated problems completely. School systems on occasion have sought to solicit federal tax dollars to fund religious curriculums (Midgley, 1990). At the turn of the century, federal courts still continue to grapple with various religious factions that construct creative mechanisms to obtain federal funds. Social workers have not been isolated from the efforts of such activists, who many see as violating the Constitution in their attempts to federally-fund religious education. In the aftermath, family practitioners have been less inclined to utilize spiritual resources for fear that spirituality is not only biased but unconstitutional, as well.

The implications of spirituality for practice with Arab families include the need for practitioners to acknowledge, and when appropriate, apply values, belief systems, and other culture-specific criteria. This will provide the practitioner with alternatives to bringing about the desired change or coping-mechanism. It is not compulsory that practitioners endorse client belief systems or other aspects of spirituality, but they should acknowledge said systems as a critical point in the client's frame of reference.

Social workers who serve Arab communities would be advised to cultivate working relationships with Islamic clergy. These relationships might prove useful in the clarification of Arab norms, the facilitation of referrals, and the effective application of treatment strategies. Such relationships are mutually beneficial to the extent that both community and service provider is enabled by the information that is exchanged. While some Arab families may prefer assistance from Islamic personnel, others may be uncomfortable or self-conscious about expressing family concerns to Islamic members of a tight-knit community. Under such circumstances, the availability of professional social work practitioners might prove invaluable. What is more, the availability of social workers will be particularly helpful if, in fact, the spiritual system, i.e., Islam, is the focus of the client's

dysfunction. The professional social worker will allow the client to explore spiritual alternatives within the context of a spiritually-neutral environment.

From the perspective of the social worker, there are several reasons why practitioners might consider the incorporation of spirituality into their practice. First, the effects of spiritualism are well known and are likely to enable practice with Arab families (de la Rosa, 1988). Second, the term "spiritualism," for most social work practitioners, conjures images of legal conflicts, with the potential to charge emotions; when it is associated with stereotypes, it encourages knee-jerk condemnation of an entire race of people, their social structure, lifestyle, and other aspects of their being (Bar-Tal & Labin, 2001). The outcome will impair the ability of such groups to sustain themselves in the human social environment unless more rational social work factions prevail. Third, spiritualism must be viewed as being separate and apart from the legal process. To do otherwise will bias practice with Arab families, rendering social work as being less potent in its ability to accommodate them.

Beyond legal conflicts, the most efficient means of enabling practice with Arab families is for social workers to become more educated about Arab spirituality. Education pertaining to spirituality and Arab populations, together, will enable practice (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). Social workers who are so enabled will be in a better position to learn and assist Arab families in sustaining themselves. Furthermore, social workers who help to reinforce respect for Arab populations build the self-esteem of their younger family members, which will assist the group's ability to survive in toto. Equally important is the impact of education upon the society at-large. One approach to this method is for social workers to create tolerant environments by building bridges to Arab communities beyond what is professionally necessary. The focus on such communities should be their language, history, cultures, etc., rather than the terrorist acts associated with any one member(s). Community action groups and youth projects, which familiarize the otherwise unfamiliar, have the potential to validate social work as a helpful profession among Arab families who might not otherwise seek social work services (Edmond, 1990).

### CONCLUSION

Due to the potential for harm and legal repercussions brought about by spirituality, it is critical that practitioners exercise caution when incorporating spirituality into their practice. Some aspects of Islamic and other manifestations of spirituality might appear abnormal and indeed dysfunctional from a Western perspective. For example, among certain Christian sects is the phenomenon of "speaking in tongues," where church-goers slip into a trance-like state and begin to verbalize in an unfamiliar language (Gilbert, 2000, p. 79). In the not too distant past, such persons may have been diagnosed as psychotic and prescribed psychotropic medication. In fact, among said Christian sects, "speaking in tongues" is not regarded as psychotic or abnormal. Indeed, it is perceived by these sects as a gift from God. Thus, for legal as well as practice reasons, social workers must resist the inclination to label spiritual phenomena simply because it is unfamiliar and/or not Western. This necessitates worth in the much-heralded emphasis upon diversity. Social workers who fail to value diversity not only impair client progress, but

they may also alienate spiritual resources in the community, which could prove invaluable to client treatment.

The Western assessment of spiritual phenomena should not suggest that pathology is non-existent. Some aspects of spirituality may, in fact, represent psychotic or other mental impairments. The Diagnostic Statistical Manual lists symptoms that include "bizarre" religious behaviors, delusions, obsessions, and rituals (p. 79). Subsequently, spiritual phenomena may indeed extend from psychosis and other mental disorders, which would otherwise require professional attention. When legitimate psychotic symptoms are evident, social workers must exercise the wherewithal to differentiate between what is normal spiritual phenomena and what is not in an effort to accurately assess and diagnose Arab clientele.

Professional social workers engaged in family practice with Arabs must also be cognizant of their own spiritual belief systems and what these spiritual belief systems convey to the client (p. 80). The practitioners' position on spirituality is relevant to setting the tone of the practice environment (p. 80). From those who endorse spirituality, to those who reject it, the practitioners' position on spirituality will have an impact on the practice setting in a myriad of ways but they will impact it, nonetheless. Hence, the practitioner who endorses spirituality may be inclined to overlook dysfunction in certain beliefs and practices, particularly if there is spiritual commonality between practitioner and client. Conversely, the practitioner who rejects spirituality will view the same beliefs and practices as dysfunctional when they are not. Social workers who reject spirituality may further unintentionally minimize its role in practice with Arab families for whom it is essential. Subconsciously, by their behavior, such social workers suggest that spirituality is irrelevant or otherwise not appropriate as a treatment resource. Therefore, those who both endorse or reject spirituality must be vigilant that their personal belief systems do not cause injury or harm to family practice clientele.

Finally, the ability to accurately perceive, conceptualize, and interact with Arab families is a necessity in a rapidly changing and complex world. In order to enhance harmony and reduce the threats of terrorism by any aspect of the world's complex population, social workers and other concerned citizens must acknowledge that all groups have assets, capacities, and strengths that should be reinforced despite the heinous acts committed by a relative few (Sontag, 2001). Since many of these assets, such as cultural technologies, are derived from cultural legacies, social workers must increase their knowledge base considerably. Otherwise, their lack of education could contribute to the extinction of an irreplaceable component of mankind that might prove antidotal to violence and terrorism. Furthermore, at a time of increased contact among the world's various populations, social workers are confronted by issues and perspectives that did not require intellectual consideration in the past (Shatz, 2001). They are thus challenged to develop creative treatment strategies that are less confined to Western bias. Additionally, journal editors, book publishers, and other affiliates of the "fact" manufacturing industry must be actively receptive to the consideration of alternative views. That consideration must remain consistent and viable without interruption from unpredictable events to sustain the integrity and prestige of the social work profession.



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