

# Religion in the workplace: implications for managers essay

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Here it comes again: the annual debate about whether a creche or a decorated evergreen is an appropriate public symbol in December and whether the office party should have a Christmas theme. America has assiduously tried to keep religion off the factory floor and out of the office—even as her citizens have continued to invoke God at baseball games, courtroom trials and sessions of Congress. We removed prayer from our nation's public schools several decades ago; now we are contemplating restoring it.

In fact, some alternative schools exist today to counter the lack of religious expression in the public classroom. In at least one prominent case, religion co-exists effortlessly with public life: President Bill Clinton has become a remarkable National Griever in a nonsectarian way, at ease with religious expression in and out of the White House. He played a role during times of national tragedy recently, comforting families and attending services in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, the TWA Flight 800 tragedy and the plane crash in Eastern Europe that took the lives of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, corporate executives and government workers. America may characterize itself as a religious nation but, if so, it has a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, stiff-upper-lip heritage that tends to be uncomfortable with emotion or religious fervor outside of a prescribed circle.

Public expressions of Bible Belt evangelism and Eastern religions' rituals can cause controversy. Public display of religious symbols has also raised concern over separation of church and state. The workplace is no exception. We still struggle with the role religion and religious observance play in our

everyday work lives. A Denver' Nuggets player was suspended by the National Basketball Association earlier this year after he refused to stand for the national anthem. Among other reasons, he cited his religious beliefs for his actions.

A Wal-Mart employee sued the retailer, charging that he was forced to resign after refusing to work on Sunday, his holy day. Wal-Mart disputed the charge, but agreed to change its human resources policies and to conduct thorough training to prevent religious discrimination in its stores. Consider these two other examples: Two women were fired for refusing to work at a Massachusetts racetrack on Christmas evening because they celebrated it as a religious holiday. The women sued the company on the grounds of religious freedom, citing a recently enacted state law protecting individuals to be free from work on days of religious observance.

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court upheld the firings and ruled the law unconstitutional. The court said it required government to make theological judgments about religious law and practice, which violated the concept of separation of church and state. The Massachusetts Legislature is reworking the statute. Three executives at Briggs ; Stratton Corp.

, a small-engine manufacturer in Wisconsin, have sued The National Catholic Reporter for \$30 million. The men have charged the leading religious newsweekly with libel and invasion of privacy because it had written in 1994 that, as Roman Catholics, the managers exhibited " either denial or moral blindness" when they went ahead with a planned move to shift 2, 000

unionized jobs from the Milwaukee area to nonunion plants in the South. Legal experts have said the lawsuit has little merit. But the executives have asserted they will pursue the action because it is a matter of principle, not a matter of corporate intimidation against a critic. Diversity Dilemma Religion is emerging as a workplace issue because it is another aspect of diversity, say organizational experts. As managers deal with differences and similarities involving gender, race, age, sexual preference and country of origin, it is logical that belief systems will be a component.

Moreover, employees themselves are becoming more insistent these days that their employers accommodate their religious observances. In fact, religious discrimination claims filed against employers have increased by more than 30 percent in the past six years, according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Understandably, this creates consternation in business. “Secular organizations get very nervous about religion,” says Terrence E. Deal, professor of organizational development at Vanderbilt University and co-author of *Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit* (Jossey-Bass, 1994). “But people do not hang up their humanity when they walk through the [company’s] door.

“Religion is most certainly a factor in shaping values and ethics, professionals agree. “If someone has religious beliefs, chances are they are a good worker,” says Laurie Beth Jones, business consultant and author of *Jesus, CEO and The Path: Creating Your Mission Statement for Work and for Life* (Hyperion, 1995 and 1996). Jones maintains that managers should attempt to learn four key things about each employee: their greatest hope,

deepest fear, secret hope and biggest dream.” If managers take the time to learn that, they’ll be able to motivate their employees and draw valid work experience out of them,” Jones says.

But because most corporations have modeled themselves on rationality–“little Erector Sets that didn’t touch people” as Vanderbilt’s Deal says–they have created employees who give very little of their deepest selves, including their religious convictions, at work. When these expressions occur, most corporations don’t know how to handle them, whether they are manifestations of organized religion or sincerely held unorthodox creed. The latter, according to the EEOC, includes atheism and religions the employer may not be cognizant of or may feel are ill-founded.” By the time you have protected yourself from every conceivable lawsuit in the world,” Deal says, “you have created a very sterile climate. People climb into their silos and stay there until the day is over, then go home” This mentality, he adds, does not make for productivity, motivation, commitment, loyalty or high morale.

It behooves business to understand not only the letter but also the spirit of religion. Many employees regard their jobs as an extension of family. Additionally, explicit in most of the great religions is the sanctity of work. Companies themselves are becoming more responsive these days by dealing with such “softer” issues as empowerment, team building and promotion of women and minorities. Even technology has a role: Techies and others are comfortable with the notion of the “electronic hearth,” a community of interest linked electronically.” The workplace is a middle ground, between specific religious beliefs held by employees and an older view that

everything in the workplace must be purely secular,” says Ronald E Thiemann, dean of the Harvard Divinity School and author of *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (A Twentieth Century Fund Book: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

But if values count, adds Thiemann, it is important to be aware that religion might have an impact on the ability of people to buy into corporate values and missions. In his book, Thiemann says religions should be given a voice in public and business arenas, providing they honor constitutional protections of equality and toleration. He advises employers to “ treat religion like other interests people bring into the workplace. Treat it as important, but one among many. Make sure your policies are consistent.

“ Thiemann’s counsel echoes the EEOC position. Employers should review their policies on religious discrimination with these thoughts in mind: Accommodate employees’ religious beliefs. Make reasonable arrangements so workers can follow their beliefs, practices and observances. Work with your people to handle requests for religious observance holy days off or lunch-break prayer meetings, for instance). Accommodate the few without excluding the many, on a case-by-case basis. Religious clothing or symbols that do not conform to a company’s dress code must be dealt with case by case.

Be aware that you should be extremely careful if you deny a religious accommodation on the basis that it creates undue hardship. Almost certainly, the cost of any litigation will outweigh the cost of the

accommodation itself. Train supervisors about the religious rights of employees. Reinforce the company's commitment to nondiscrimination and respect for diversity. Legal experts recommend that religion be incorporated into a program based on the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, since the laws regarding religion and disability are similar. But don't rush to include religion in diversity training, they advise.

Religious discrimination is forbidden by law; diversity training is a company initiative. Practically Speaking Clearly, religion in the workplace can be dealt with in a variety of ways. Take Texas-based Whitmore Manufacturing Co., a manufacturer of lubricants and coatings. For the past two years, chaplains have been on call for voluntary employee counseling by telephone or in person under the auspices of Marketplace Ministries, an independent nonprofit organization funded by payment from client firms and by donations.

The chaplains are evangelical Christians, but they will put an employee in touch with a spiritual advisor of any desired faith." It works every day here," says Gary L. Martin, Whitmore's president. "As long as it assists what we're doing in business. The emotional side of people's lives—they bring it in and it sits there on the job.

If there's trauma at home, we'll know it by 8:05 a. m." Martin says that while the chaplains have "a definite religious orientation" to the way they approach problems, "a religious connotation may not even be there." In the end, he says, it is the personal contact, the first-name basis and the visibility

that make Whitmore's counselors so invaluable. ServiceMaster, the \$3.2 billion managed-services company with 34,000 full-time employees, has four longtime corporate objectives, the first of which is, "To honor God in all we do."

"We do not regard that as a statement of religious belief," says Claire Buchan, vice president of communications. The company literature explains that the objective is "not an expression of a particular religious belief or a basis for exclusion. Rather, it is a mandate for inclusion and a constant reminder to us to do the right thing in the right way" Stewart Emery, a principal at Human Factors, a management consulting firm based in San Rafael, Calif., puts the idea of religion in the workplace into practical perspective: "Can we realistically expect the corporation as it exists today to be forward enough to regard religious expression to be inclusionary? Business leaders who cannot are destined for irrelevancy." Emery maintains that business leaders are primarily concerned about reducing risk and cost and increasing revenues and profits.

"So, the most practical thing is, if they have no spiritual perspective, they'll say, 'Okay, that'll be fine. Just don't spill anything on the carpet.' The more enlightened leaders will get it."