

# Religion at Work: The Ethics Connection

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By

Patricia J. Parsons APR, Fellow CPRS

For many people in the world today, their personal value systems, the moral beliefs they hold and their behavior from an ethical perspective stem in large part from their religious views. Indeed, when as adults we look within ourselves to find the genesis of our own moral values, our religious upbringing or lack of one contributes to what we believe and base our ethical decisions on.

Whether you are acting on those religious beliefs of your childhood, or reacting against them, they are a part of you. And in today's society where religious beliefs are fanning the flames of every moral discussion in the news, beliefs from fundamentalist Christianity to Muslim belief systems to name but two persuasions, there is little doubt that our personal religious beliefs are going to be brought into our work-related ethics decisions. The question is simply this: Is there a place for religious beliefs in the work world?

## Spirituality or religion?

Before we can begin any discussion of religion at work, we need to sort out our terminology. There is a great deal of ink and (hot) air devoted to the concept of spirituality and there are those who use the term to mean religion. I'm going to suggest to you that these two concepts are two different things and for many people, not related at all.

Indeed, the concept of spirituality at work is one that has been discussed at length (see web sites such as [www.spiritualityatwork.org](http://www.spiritualityatwork.org), [www.spiritualityatwork.com](http://www.spiritualityatwork.com), [www.spiritatwork.com](http://www.spiritatwork.com), etc.). Whereas most writers stay away from discussing "religion at work," I enter the fray at my peril, I think. As I contemplated discussing this issue in this space, I reviewed a number of ethics books on my own book shelves. I could find

not one reference to “religion” in any of those devoted to ethics in *business*. (There may be some but I don’t own them.)

The concept of spirituality as we have come to know it today refers to some sense of meaning or purpose in one’s life – either associated with religion (a specific, dogmatic belief system) or not. In my own experience, I was brought up in a religious household, but as I look back from the vantage point of an adult who has explored far beyond my traditional religious upbringing, it wasn’t very spiritual in nature (there, now I’ve exposed my own biases).

The notion that one could bring that sense of meaning or purpose – spirituality – into an examination of the kind of work we do seems, then, that it could be useful. It could help to inform discussions on the topic of ethics and developing a culture of ethics at a work place. The idea of applying “religious” principles that are clearly based on a particular set of values, beliefs and even rules is another thing all together. For example, if you have a discussion of keeping your retail outlet open on Sundays, there may be those among your employees who see it as an ethical issue – Sunday may be their day of worship on which they are required by their religious rule to refrain from working. On the other hand, you may have those whose religious beliefs suggest that Saturday is that day. These kinds of religious belief systems can put a moral complexion on a decision that you might otherwise see as an economic one.

## Staying clear of religious discussions

I’m sure you’re familiar with that old saying that the topics of religion and politics ought to be avoided in social situations. Unless you’re working for a political party, as a lobbyist or in government relations, you might want to follow this rule at work as well. There is nothing more likely to get you into an argument than being on a different political side of an issue and you are unlikely to change your opponent’s viewpoint. If it is even possible, religious views are often even more entrenched.

In today’s pluralistic society where moral relativism is the phrase of the moment, it’s become important to understand and respect the cultural and religious beliefs of others. However, this can become problematic when you’re trying to develop that culture of ethics and come up with a code of ethics that everyone in an organization can live with and follow.

Specific discussions of religious belief are not often productive, especially at the work place since they usually end up polarizing groups whose members don’t all follow the same tradition. However, exploring the underlying values of others can lead you to a place where you can respect, if not agree, with your colleagues. These discussions can even help you to see an ethical dilemma from another perspective – one that perhaps you hadn’t considered. Even if it doesn’t change your mind about the outcome, it helps you

to be able to defend your own point of view. And being able to simply defend our ethical decision in any situation is what we strive for.

## **Learning to respect**

The usefulness of religious plurality at a workplace is as I have alluded to above – exposure to different points of view can help you to consider all sides of an ethical issue. The best way to handle these differing opinions is with respect.

On the other hand, you may be involved in a business that in itself polarizes religious groups. For example, if you work for a Women's and Children's hospital that performs abortions, you will find that there are people who should not actually work for you at all because of their religious views. This is a difficult one since you aren't permitted to ask people their religious affiliation during a job interview. However, from your point of view, you can only look after yourself. You as a professional communicator would not permit yourself to work for an organization whose work went against your own personal religious and/or moral views. It is your responsibility to ensure that this does not happen. Further, this allows you to ensure that your own religious views are respected and you are not putting others in an awkward position.

In my view, using the workplace to proselytize about your own religious moral beliefs is unprofessional and inappropriate. What do you think? -30-