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How can company leaders and employees negotiate their different religious and spiritual commitments in the workplace? At a time of international debate over religious conflict and tolerance, workforces in various parts of the world are more diverse than ever before. Religion and spirituality are, for many employees, central to their identities. From the perspective of the employer, however, they can be distracting or divisive influences. This book analyzes the current interest in religion and spirituality in US companies. It provides conceptual distinctions and comparative examples (from the pluralistic contexts of India and Singapore) to trace the myriad ways that religion is present at work. It offers a model of respectful pluralism, asserting that the task of effective and ethical leadership in organizations is not to promote a single spiritual or religious framework but to create an environment in which managers and employees can respectfully express their own beliefs and practices.

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Introduction

I am writing this introduction during December. This religiously charged month is a fitting time to contemplate religious diversity in the workplace, especially in the United States. Because a majority of US citizens are Christian, or were at least raised in that tradition, Christianity has enjoyed a culturally privileged status in this country. Christmas is not only a religious holiday but a national and consumeristic one as well. December has become “the holiday season.” More noticeably than at other times of the year, company leaders struggle with whether and how to respect the diverse religious commitments of their employees. The interreligious calendar is full of festivals in December. This year Chanukkah falls during the first week of the month, and Ramadan culminates with the feast of Eid al-Fitr on the 6th. Many Buddhists mark Bodhi Day two days later, and Wiccans celebrate Yule on the 21st. The Christian season of Advent leads up to Christmas on the 25th. Kwanzaa, a cultural festival observed by African Americans, starts the following day and continues until New Year’s Day. Should American companies celebrate them all? What about atheists who do not have a holy day and, like some of their co-workers, believe these holidays have no place at work?

When Christians constitute a majority of employees, some managers find it acceptable – and traditional – for the office to celebrate Christmas. But that reinforces what Jews, Muslims, and others already know: Christianity enjoys preferential status in many companies. When bosses disguise Christmas parties as “holiday” parties but retain the tree and the carols, the practice is not genuinely inclusive. Other managers try an avoidance strategy – no cards, no trees, no parties. This dodges some problems but fails to recognize that faith of one sort or another is essential to many workers. Besides, employees have come to expect some kind of festivity as a perk for their labors. Some company leaders attempt a promising route of displaying diverse symbols in the reception area, but this raises the question of which traditions should be represented.
In this book I suggest a framework called *respectful pluralism* as an approach to challenges such as this “December dilemma.” Respectful pluralism means resisting company-sponsored religion and spirituality while allowing employees to bring their own religions to work. From a moral standpoint, the presence of a Christmas tree in the lobby is markedly different than the display of a crèche, a menorah, or a Buddha on an individual’s desk. Workers can decorate their personal office areas with religious symbols. Company leaders, rather than promote any religious worldview, should create a culture of mutual respect that allows diverse employees to work together constructively. My framework will not solve all problems (especially in December) but it offers guidance for companies that are serious about diversity and respect.

*Religion and the Workplace: Pluralism, Spirituality, Leadership* draws upon scholarship in religion, management, and leadership to tackle the disparate issues of religion and the workplace. At a time of international tension and public debate over the interrelationships of religion, conflict, and discrimination, workforces in various parts of the world are more diverse than ever before. Individual religious beliefs and practices are, for many employees, central to their respective identities. Yet, from the perspective of the employer, workers who wear religious garb, hold on-site Bible studies, or request time off for prayers or holy days can be a divisive or distracting influence.

The standard approaches in leadership studies, organizational culture, and human resource management pay inadequate attention to religious beliefs and practices at work. In models of the secular workplace, religion is clearly a “private” matter and should be excluded from “private” sector workplaces. My analysis argues that labeling either religion or business as private is descriptively inaccurate and morally problematic. The religious commitments of employees find their way into the workplace in one way or another, whether or not managers or scholars acknowledge it. Managers should create conditions under which employees are able to express their religion at work within certain moral constraints.

In contrast, advocates of “spiritual leadership” recognize that the workplace is not properly understood or managed as a secular sphere, but they depend upon an untenable dichotomization of spirituality (which is welcome at work) and religion (which is not welcome). Despite the fact that many practitioners accept such a spiritual–religious distinction, problems with its conceptual and practical applications persist. Most accounts of spiritual leadership disguise genuine differences of perspective and potential conflict behind happy (and often false) commonality. In addition, too
many scholars and corporate leaders portray spirituality as the latest leadership tool to be used in the quest for increased efficiency and profitability.

In recent public discussions about corporate scandals marked by leaders’ deception, greed, and corruption, journalists and scholars have called upon American corporate leaders to demonstrate more social responsibility, exercise servant leadership, and cultivate a moral character. Some commentators assert that bringing more “faith” or “soul” or “values” (and these terms are often thrown about interchangeably) into the workplace is a ready solution. Such perspectives overlook the diversity of moral values – which values? – and they make a facile assumption that people from religious and spiritual backgrounds are more likely than their co-workers to act ethically.

In the United States, a solid majority of citizens claim Christianity as their “religious preference.” (Fewer than half, however, are regular participants in a congregation.1) A voluminous literature of popular and scholarly works advises Christians on how to live out their faith at work. Most of these authors rightly note that Christian theological and moral traditions have a great deal to say about economic life. Few of them, however, pay proper attention to the religious diversity of co-workers or to the problematic nature of culturally established Christian workplaces.

If the respective fields of leadership and management studies have avoided religion, the academic discipline of religious studies has overlooked the workplace. Scholars’ most in-depth examinations of religion in public life have addressed politics or civil society. In the US, these discussions focus on “civil religion” in presidential pronouncements, predominantly legal debates over religious and government institutions (“church and state”), and the potential relationship of religious involvement and social capital. In terms of religion and the economy, religious ethicists have analyzed the “meaning of work,” the social responsibility of corporations, and questions of distributive justice. Scholars of religion have devoted scant direct attention, however, to religion and the workplace. Increasingly, the workplace has become a significant and public sphere in which people of diverse religious perspectives encounter one another; it thus merits scholarly attention.

The structure and size of private-sector workplaces, arguably, are as varied as religious expression by employees. Multinational corporations can be larger than all but the most powerful national economies; small businesses might employ as few as a handful of people. Clearly, the latter companies do not encounter the full array of challenges and opportunities related to

diversity, but in workplaces of all kinds, some issues of leadership, diversity, and religion arise.

Supporters of models such as the secular workplace, spiritual leadership, and Christian preference will encounter challenges in this book. They will take issue with some points of my analysis, because I argue that each of those views is significantly flawed. At the same time, these scholars and practitioners will also find areas of agreement or complementarity with their perspectives. I intend my criticisms to be constructive and hope that the ensuing debates will contribute to workplace policies and cultures that respect, on equal terms, employees of all backgrounds.

I believe it is important to provide a word about my own background. I am a professor with an undergraduate degree and graduate coursework in economics, a Master of Divinity degree, and a Ph.D. in religious studies. My current academic position includes a joint appointment in leadership studies and religious studies. My religious tradition is Presbyterian (Protestant, Christian) and I am a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I have sought not to frame the book in explicitly Christian language. It is my hope that readers of various academic, professional, and religious backgrounds will find the analysis to be accessible and relevant to their work. I discuss the methodological issues of my approach and the nature of my moral argument in chapter 8.

Some of the most vocal critics of my perspective will probably be Christian readers who believe the analysis to be unduly harsh about the preferential status that Christians enjoy in US society and workplaces. Although I do not state my criticism of Christian privilege in theological terms, I believe that faithful Christians should have no interest in imposing their beliefs or practices upon others and they should want to receive no advantage in public life or the workplace because of their religion. As I show in the comparative examination of India and Singapore, persons of the majority tradition often receive official or unofficial privilege in public institutions; my moral argument, based on a view of equal respect owed to all persons, rejects such preferential practices in the workplace, whether they are afforded to Christians, Hindus, adherents of Chinese religions, or anyone else.

**RELIGION AND THE WORKPLACE: WHAT IS AT STAKE AND WHAT LIES AHEAD**

I will use the remainder of the introduction to name the book’s central questions and provide an overview of the analysis and argument. The book
is structured in three parts. Part I (chapters 1 through 4) addresses current realities of religion and spirituality in American society and its workplaces. Part II (chapters 5 through 7) offers distinctions, concepts, and comparative examples in order to delineate more precisely the myriad ways in which religion is present in contemporary workplaces. Finally, Part III (chapters 8 and 9) presents a moral argument for respectful pluralism and discusses how such a framework can constructively address the conflicts that inevitably arise in diverse organizations.

Making sense of religion and spirituality in the workplace requires an understanding of the changes in US society in the post-World War II period that have come to bear on religion in public life and the workplace. Chapter 1 examines how developments in immigration policy, especially in 1965, significantly widened the scope and degree of religious (and racial, ethnic, and cultural) diversity in the United States. More recently, the responses to the events of September 11, 2001, brought the questions of religiously based conflict and religiously based discrimination to the center of public debate. How has the changing American context transformed the relationship of religion and business in the past fifty years?

How has the current interest in religion and, especially, spirituality in the workplace arisen? What factors have contributed to the corporate interest in spirituality? Chapter 2 attributes the recent interest in spirituality to demographic, economic, and religious trends in the US and to transformations in the nature and organization of work. Some of the factors that have led people to embrace spirituality in the workplace are positive, while others are morally troubling. Is it possible to determine how much of the current interest entails genuine respect for workers and their needs and, in contrast, how much reflects companies’ efforts to take advantage of employees?

How can businesses adapt to increasing religious and spiritual diversity? Chapter 3 asserts that the literature on spirituality and work tends to emphasize the sameness or commonality that is supposedly at the root of spirituality – rather than the religious particularity that appears at first glance to be (and often is) divisive. Employees from different religious and spiritual perspectives may well be able to find significant common ground, but commonality should not simply be assumed.

Is religious expression more controversial, difficult, or incomprehensible than other kinds of potential conflict among co-workers? Chapter 4 considers individual-level and institutional-level issues concerning religion in relation to conflicts based on spiritual, political, and cultural expression at work. A variety of recent cases that have received media attention serve
as examples. Are there ways to address conflict without subscribing to a reductionist view of religious difference?

Part II begins with chapter 5, which offers a map of various ways in which individual employees express their religious commitments differently from one another. What does it mean to “be religious at work”? Some persons, coming from minority traditions, wear distinctive garb that sets them apart from most of their co-workers. Other employees, for various reasons, keep their beliefs and practices to themselves and are thus not overtly religious at work, but their commitments still fundamentally influence their actions. Some employees do not identify as religious or spiritual; many (but not all) of these persons would prefer a secular workplace. Chapter 5 traces the variety of religious and spiritual forms, among other kinds of diversity, in the workforce.

Chapter 6 analyzes the institutional roles of religion in the workplace. What happens to religious diversity when an organization supports a religion of the workplace? The chapter draws upon the concepts of civil religion and established religion in the political sphere in order to draw analogies to institutionalized beliefs and practices in the workplace. The case of “corporate chaplains” is considered as a curious and problematic intersection of workplace spirituality and established Christianity.

Chapter 7 explores religion, public life, and the workplace in India and Singapore. These two very different societies experience tremendous degrees of religious diversity, each contrasting explicitly with a neighboring Islamic state. Given their distinct histories, how have India and Singapore shaped a pluralistic identity? My analysis offers neither of these nations as a wholly positive model for addressing diversity in the US society or workplace – indeed there are morally problematic features with each. Yet this cross-national examination informs the examination of the US context.

My constructive proposal for respectful pluralism is developed and applied in Part III, comprised of chapters 8 and 9. Given the complexities detailed in earlier chapters, can a moral framework give adequate guidance to company leaders who wish to respect the diverse religious, spiritual, political, and cultural identities of employees? What can employees expect from their companies and what can companies rightly ask of their employees? This moral framework presupposes the legal minimums of religious expression guaranteed by US laws, and it argues that a level of respect higher than the legal minimum guarantees is due to employees. Chapter 8 outlines the moral argument for respectful pluralism and applies the framework to specific scenarios in the workplace.
Chapter 9 asserts that respectful pluralism connects to various themes of leadership studies, such as organizational culture, ethics, diversity, and critical thinking. What requirements does the framework place on leaders? Is constructing respectful pluralism itself an act of leadership? Chapter 9 concludes with a discussion of some limitations of my perspective and some central implications and areas for future research on religion and the workplace.

How can leaders and followers negotiate religious differences in their workplace? Respectful pluralism is a framework, not a specific blueprint, for addressing inevitable conflicts that result from religious, spiritual, and other differences in the workplace. Pragmatic and moral issues that are context-specific will require that the view be adapted to fit well in any actual organization. Nonetheless, at a time in which Americans have endorsed a vision of a national community in which people of many faiths (and no professed faith) are invited to participate in all spheres of society, this framework of respectful pluralism can contribute to a conversation about religion and spirituality at work and in other spheres of public life. I hope that readers living outside the US may also see applications and insights for understanding diversity in their own contexts.
PART I

Analyzing current realities