

Career Coach

The Separation of Church and Job

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Q. A group of co-workers gathers daily at lunchtime to pray, and you and other colleagues are divided in your response to it. What should you do?

A. Be careful. Dr. Judith Orloff, a psychiatrist in Los Angeles and author of "Positive Energy" (Three Rivers Press, 2005), notes that religion is a delicate issue, and that misunderstandings can easily create hard feelings in the workplace. "When you're dealing with religion, the key is tolerance on both sides," Dr. Orloff said. "Faith is everything to some people, so it's important to treat the issue with respect."

Q. How common is worship in the workplace?

A. It's not clear, but there's some evidence that it is becoming more widespread. Nella G. Barkley, president of Crystal-Barkley, a human resources consulting firm in New York, said she once worked for a company that allowed some Jewish employees to take regular breaks during the workday to congregate and pray. At the Great Physician's Rx, a manufacturer of nutritional supplements based in West Palm Beach, Fla., the owner, Jordan Rubin, encourages employees to partake in Christian prayers before staff meetings.

In 2001, [the Ford Motor Company](#) started the Ford Interfaith Network, an organization for employees that has members in eight major religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. Daniel Dunnigan, a Mormon and the chairman of the group, said the network recently designated areas in Ford workplaces where Muslims could perform ablution, a ritual cleansing, before praying.

"One of our main goals is to help people be comfortable bringing their whole selves to work," Mr. Dunnigan said. "We believe a person doesn't check their faith at the door when they arrive in the morning."

Q. Is the expression of religious faith at work protected by law?

A. Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, employers are obligated to provide "reasonable accommodations" for employees with sincere religious beliefs, as long as doing so does not cause "undue hardship." Over the years, the courts have said that

reasonable accommodations can take the form of anything from a table in the lunchroom to a conference room for prayer.

In 2004, after a member of the Church of Body Modification sued Costco, the discount chain based in Issaquah, Wash., for not letting her wear an eyebrow ring at work, a court ruled that Costco's offer to let her work with her eyebrow ring covered by an adhesive bandage was enough.

The right to express religion in the workplace is not absolute. Employees must notify their employers in advance about the religious customs they wish to practice, for example. Don Schroeder, a lawyer at Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky & Popeo, a Boston law firm, said: "You have to let employers know what they're dealing with. You can't just spring something on them and expect to make out O.K."

Q. When is religion in the workplace illegal?

A. When workers' religious practices begin to interfere with colleagues' ability to complete day-to-day tasks, they may have crossed the line into a form of harassment, which is prohibited under Title VII.

Martin Rutte, president of Livelihood, a management consulting firm in Santa Fe, N.M., and chairman of the board of the Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace at St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, said, "Just as you can invite a colleague to play pool or go to a football game, your colleague can invite you to pray." Mr. Rutte added, "If you decline and the colleague continues to ask, that's when it becomes disruptive."

Q. Should you tell colleagues how you feel about their religious practices at work?

A. If you feel strongly that their practices are adversely affecting your ability to do your job, speak up. Douglas A. Hicks, associate professor of leadership studies and religion at the University of Richmond in Virginia, says that voicing your feelings is better than stewing silently.

"Employees always will have differences of opinions, world views, values and religious identities," said Mr. Hicks, author of "Religion and the Workplace: Pluralism, Spirituality and Leadership" (Cambridge University Press, 2003). "Sweeping faith under the rug won't solve any of the problems that arise from these differences."

Dealing with the issue sensitively may require some forethought. Mr. Hicks said employees should share their concerns in a private meeting.

Vincent P. Branick, professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton in Ohio, added that employees should be honest but calm — and never condescend. He said that it was best to use statements that describe how you feel, not ones that criticize your colleagues' behavior.

**Q. What if you're religious and the behavior of nonreligious colleagues offends you?
Can you do anything about it?**

A. Robbie Blinkoff, principal anthropologist at the Context-Based Research Group, an ethnographic research firm in Baltimore, says that if your faith prohibits you from partaking in common workplace activities — like a basketball tournament betting pool or Friday nights at the local pub — you should let your colleagues know.

"Depending on your perspective, secular things — things many of us wouldn't even think twice about — can be just as exclusionary and uncomfortable as religious ones," he said. "It's important for all of us to think beyond what we've been habituated to understand and remember that religion is a tough issue for everyone."

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