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As U.S. Grows More Spiritually Diverse, the Debate About Faith in Workplace Rages

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Imagine a prayer or meditation room at your workplace. Imagine feeling comfortable having a Bible or Quran on your desk. Imagine your job as a place where your spirit was fulfilled. As our workplaces become more ethnically diverse and more Americans look for spiritual meaning in their lives and jobs, religion at the office has become an important social issue.

In our predominantly Christian nation, Muslim employees may not appreciate an invitation to the annual company Christmas party. Jewish employees may struggle to attend High Holy Days services while their Christian co-workers have Dec. 24-Jan. 2 off without having to make a special request. Others may question why they can only be spiritual after work.

Various individuals and organizations are seizing the challenge to address the complications and effects religion has on the workplace.

Organizations like the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, in New York City, help companies reduce religious bias in the workplace. Companies might do this by providing a room for Muslims to pray five times a day, or having speakers give informative talks about different religions, said Joyce Dubensky, the executive director of the center.

The Renaissance Lawyer Society supports a "more visionary, humanistic approach to the law" that is not specifically spiritual, but is supportive of attorneys who want to practice a more holistic form of law. Donna Boris, a holistic lawyer and a former president of the group, discusses spiritual practices and beliefs with her clients.

Martin Rutte, an author and management consultant in Santa Fe, believes that spirituality and work are not mutually exclusive.

Rutte's agenda is not to proselytize, but to make a conversation about spirituality "as normal as paper clips at work." He plans to publish his book, "The Work of Humanity," later this year.

The changing demographics of our country are helping to drive the small yet growing movement of addressing religious and spiritual issues in the workplace.

Changing immigration patterns and an aging, largely Christian workforce have changed the makeup of the American labor pool, said Georgette Bennett, the president of the Tanenbaum Center. In recent years, more immigrants are entering the United States from countries whose primary religion is not Christianity, she said.

"Religious bias and accommodation is the next big civil-rights issue," Bennett said. "And it's going to get bigger and bigger because it is demographically driven."

'A bottom-line issue'

A nationwide study conducted by the group showed that 66 percent of the employed persons surveyed felt there was some kind of religious bias or discrimination at their job. Nearly half of those said the bias affected their performance and 45 percent of those reporting discrimination said they had thought about changing jobs.

By allowing religious diversity on the job, companies will have more satisfied and

more productive employees, Dubensky said.

"This really is a bottom-line issue for companies. Our work is really much more concrete" than just making employees happy, Dubensky said.

Rutte believes that companies should allow their employees to express themselves spiritually, whatever their religion.

Rutte is the best-selling co-author of "Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work," and the impetus behind the new Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace at the Sobey School of Business at St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The center's goal is to nourish and foster spirituality in the workplace, and to address the "very real ethical and spiritual problems for organizations and their employees."

Rutte's philosophy on work and spirituality is one that caters to both individuals and corporations: both employees and employers will be more successful and generally more satisfied if their souls or spirits are nourished at work.

'Profound epiphany'

Rutte's drive to bring a sense of soul into the hard world of business stems from his own experience.

In 1986, he was a successful management consultant in Toronto with his own business. His life was good on all counts, but he fell into a "funk" that seemed causeless. He decided to visit an Augustinian monastery where he had a "profound epiphany experience." He heard a voice that told him that the issue was about God, he said in an interview at his home in Eldorado.

At first, most of his close associates, friends and clients who he shared his experience with told him he would lose his reputation and business if he brought up the topic of spirituality with business clients who consulted him. They encouraged him to use terms like "ethics" or "integrity." But Rutte didn't want to hide behind "code words," he said.

Instead, he offered his clients the option of discussing their spirituality and how it might fit into their work. Rutte is Jewish but in no way pushes his own personal faith or any other. Many people, he said, are terrified of proselytizers, and fear conversations about religion or spirituality.

His only agenda is to make a conversation about faith topics "OK to talk about," he said.

'Feed the soul' at work

For Rutte, spirituality at work could be a prayer group, or it could be someone building a small altar on their desk. Spiritual or religious symbols, like having a Bible next to one's Yellow Pages, should not be offensive, he said. Allowing people to be "authentic" at work, whether they are Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu or any other faith makes for happier and more productive employees, which in turn makes for a more profitably company, Rutte said.

"People are desperate for something to feed the soul," Rutte said. "People are looking for a sense of fulfillment," they want to say, "This is a part of me that can be fulfilled at work."

Rutte points to the 1990s as the beginning of a "spiritual hunger" on the part of the American worker. Corporate downsizing, the great leaps of technology that made many jobs obsolete, and an aging baby boomer population facing mortality, all accelerated a need for a greater inner or spiritual security, he said.

Find a higher meaning

For some, job dissatisfaction is the catalyst for bringing higher meaning to the job.

For years, Boris, a civil lawyer in San Diego, felt like she had to live two lives, one as a lawyer, and one as a spiritual human being. But her increasing dissatisfaction with law practice led her to try to apply universal spiritual principals to her work. Boris is now on the board of directors of the popular Renaissance Lawyer Society, formed in 2000, which has a large networking Web site at www.renaissancelawyer.com.

Like Rutte, Boris doesn't subscribe to a particular type of spirituality with her clients and does not proselytize. But if her client is willing, Boris will attempt to deal with their case in a holistic way. She does this by explaining how various legal options like litigation might impact the client's family life and lifestyle. Boris tries to be in touch with her own emotions, something many lawyers are taught not to do, she said.

Not all of her clients are open to the topic, so she tailors her language to their comfort level. In some cases, she teaches her clients breathing techniques to help calm them before they testify in court, she said.

Overall, Boris believes that lawyers and other professionals need reminders of why they are doing their jobs in the first place. A picture, a statue, a poem in the office might be sufficient, she said. For her, spirituality helps her to "look for the meaning and connection, what is common to all people."

That doesn't mean "that you just roll over," Boris said. "There are times when litigation may be the best course."

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