

Understanding Religious Diversity in Management

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Abstract

Can managers afford to be oblivious to the religious commitments of their employees, or is religion an important factor in management? Are all religions the same, or is religion an important form of diversity that managers need to take into account? This article explains why managers need to know about how members of different religions, owing to their different cultural environments and upbringing, come with different motivations, morals, and identities, and makes the case for greater attention in management to the topic of religion.

Managers need to be aware of how cultural diversity has implications in the workplace to manage people effectively and for people to work effectively together. While an early article on management and culture lamented that cultural differences (between countries) in management were more a matter of speculation than fact,¹ nowadays culture and management is a rather mature field, as evidenced by the impressive amount of existing scholarship and nuanced theory.² Indeed, a search for “culture and management and business” in Psycinfo in February of 2017 yielded 5053 scholarly journal hits and 856 books. While the vast majority of those hits concern national and organizational cultures, comparatively attention has been paid to religious cultures and management. Searching for “culture and religion and management and business” results in only 68 scholarly journal hits and 19 books. The word “religion” is not to be found in the *Annual Review of*

Psychology review article on culture and organizational behavior just mentioned.³

Can managers afford to be oblivious to the religious commitments of their employees, or is religion an important factor in management? Certain tendencies that might be associated with religion have been considered in relation to organizational sciences, such as virtuousness or a holier than thou attitude.⁴ But there are other important questions. Are all religions the same, or is religion an important form of diversity that managers need to take into account? This review will explain why managers need to know about how members of different religions, owing to their different cultural environments and upbringing, come with different motivations, morals, and identities.^{5,6} Of particular relevance for management, members of different religious traditions exhibit meaningful differences in domains including workplace motivation (e.g. Protestant work ethic), moral judgment and ethics, motivation and identity, and trust. As such, like prior work on management and culture, managers need to be aware of these cultural identities and differences to be effective.

First, when it comes to workplace identity and Protestant work ethic, Sanchez-Burks has shown that Calvinist protestants take work to be more of a calling than do members of other religion traditions, and are better able to tune out social distractions and focus on their workplace responsibilities.⁷ This classic article indicates that people from different religious traditions should not be managed the same way; while many people may enjoy a certain amount of socializing and camaraderie at work, Calvinist Protestants may see such efforts as distractions and prefer to be task-oriented.

Second, effective managers need to cultivate moral and ethical workplaces and manage ethical dilemmas well. It is thus important for managers to know that people hailing from different religious backgrounds make moral and ethical judgments in certain similar and certain different ways. The domain of forgiveness provides a good example. Forgiveness is an important concept in management and organizational settings.⁸ To give an example, think about the recent scandal at VW concerning their diesel emissions. Moving forward, wronged consumers and employees need to forgive VW for their deceptive behavior if VW is to keep selling cars. It falls upon management to craft a strategy and a message to regain public trust as

well as company-internal trust.

Will consumers and employees of different religions be equally likely to forgive such a violation? Perhaps not. While all major religious traditions highly value forgiveness for everyday offenses, Judaism finds certain offenses to be unforgivable – particularly if they are severe, perpetrated against another person, and if an offender does not repent.⁹ Jews, more so than Christians, do find such offenses less forgivable, and Jews also endorse these theologically derived reasons for nonforgiveness more so than Christians.

As different cultures, religious and otherwise, have different criteria for forgiveness (e.g. Japanese may expect a formal apology and a gift as a signal of contrition), managers might similarly develop different messages to appeal to the forgiving nature of different religious groups. In some instances, or for some types of managerial misconduct, there may be few or no differences in the criteria for forgiveness between religious groups, but there might for other types of managerial misconduct (e.g. if it is perceived as severe or managers are perceived as being unrepentant). Thus, if managers want to court forgiveness from members of different religions, they might be able to expect unconditional forgiveness from Christians, but certain conditions from Jews. On the other hand, managers might therefore tailor their message to satisfy Jewish expectations for forgiveness processes (e.g. issuing an apology and making recompense toward the specific victims), knowing that it will also garner Christian support (who would probably not require these formal actions¹⁰).

Third, when it comes to identity and motivation, management folk of course well know about the basic and far-reaching differences in self-construal between members of different cultures, with some people (like North Americans) being quite individualistic, and members of many other cultures (like East and Southeast Asians) being collectivistic.¹¹ This has been well explored in terms of implications for management. Indeed Hofstede was a major figure who documented cultural differences in dimensions, including in individualism and collectivism, in organizations across the globe.¹²

However, what is probably less well known in management circles is that another important source of variation in individualistic and collectivistic identity is religion. Some religions, such as Catholicism, Judaism, and Hinduism, promote interdependent religious selves, in that they value

religious motivations that relate to community and social integration. Other religions, including many denominations of Protestantism in America, promote private, emotional, “intrinsic” motivations, such as feeling personally connected to God.¹³ Critically, such differences can speak to some of the sources of a critical focus of management scholarship, such as the individualistic or collectivistic self and how it affects identity and motivation. It also has important practical implications, given that managers may want to try to motivate people of different religions in a way that is sensitive to their preferred identities and motivations as relatively individualistic or collectivistic.

With all of these religious differences, one might despair that diverse cultural or religious groups can ever truly trust each other and work well in multicultural workplace environments. We have studied just this issue, how religious diversity relates to trust, leveraging some influential and classic work on trust in organizations.¹⁴ To our delight, some surprising findings have emerged, including that, while Christians find Muslims to be outgroups, Christians trust individual Muslims as much as they trust individual Christians, and displays of greater religiosity on the part of Muslims actually increase trust by Christians.¹⁵ Managers need not tell their employees to leave their religious identities at home to promote a trusting workplace; in contrast, people exhibiting their religious commitments might actually help to promote a trusting environment at work.

This article has briefly tried to make a case for greater attention in management to the topic of religion, both from a practical perspective and as a way of highlighting the need for more research and discussion about management and this important form of cultural diversity.

Authors

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