

RELIGION AND THE WORKPLACE: PLURALISM,
SPIRITUALITY, LEADERSHIP
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Respectful pluralism What is it? Is it possible or even desirable? Douglas Hicks, Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies and Religion at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond, sees it as the answer to addressing religion in the workplace in the 21st century.

In a post-September-eleventh world, Hicks seeks to develop a convincing argument for creating work environments based on respectful pluralism. This framework is built upon a moral justification. The stage is set by identifying the shift toward pluralism that is taking place in our world. This shift has occurred globally, but is also taking place in the United States where a type of Christian privilege exists. This reality creates a tension when seeking to address spirituality within the public sphere in the U.S. In response to these new developments, substantial work has emerged on leadership theory, spirituality (the more generic term that has replaced religion), and the workplace. Yet, according to Hicks, these works leave much to be desired.

Many of these works address how employees need to bring their whole person into the work place, including their spiritual side. But they do not, in Hicks' mind, propose a valid way of living into the reality of our pluralistic world. Spirituality is often watered down in these models to something that is ambivalent, or is based on a common grounding in values that might not actually exist. These models tend to assume harmony, but they are usually not accompanied with the tools required for dealing with the potential conflict that often exists. Leaders are often positioned in these models as spiritual leaders who guide and define the environments in which their employees exist.

Over against this construction, Hicks creates a different line of thinking about religion and the workplace. Shifting from thinking institutionally to thinking individually, he builds on the assumption that employees are diverse, and he reinterprets the First Amendment from a moral, not a legal, point of view. He argues that the free expression of religion is a moral right given by the First

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Amendment, but that living into this moral reality is a difficult venture. Conflict or tension certainly will surface if leaders see the private-sector as a place for allowing this freedom to become a reality. Hence, the role of leadership within an organization is not for the purpose of creating a spiritual environment, but rather to develop an environment which allows healthy interaction between the various individuals in the workplace. This requires for leaders a fundamental shift of focus from trying to craft a spiritual environment, to creating the parameters of an environment which allows for free, open, honest, and diverse spiritual expression.

So, what is *respectful pluralism*? It is built upon three basic assertions about human beings: (a) all people have a right for human dignity; (b) every human being deserves respect; and (c) all humans should be given equal dignity and respect. It also involves the concept that people strive morally to work for a just society. Respectful pluralism has a framework of three limiting norms and a guiding principle. The use of power is important in this model, hence coercion is the first limiting norm with the voluntariness of both parties being the preferred posture. A second limiting norm is non-degradation, an argument for mutual respect which stems from John Rawls argument in *Political Liberalism*, *The John Dewey Essays in Philosophy No 4*. This norm prohibits interaction between employees which is clearly disrespectful. The third limiting norm is non-establishment, which comes from the First Amendment clause that Congress shall make no law establishing or prohibiting religion. This norm limits an organization from endorsing or promoting one particular religion, spirituality, or worldview. The role of an organization's leadership is to encourage communication and to help people with various points of view work together within an organization. Together these norms provide the boundaries for determining what is permissible and what is out of bounds. The guiding principle of respectful pluralism is *presumption of inclusion*. Hicks sums it up, "To the greatest extent, work place organizations should allow employees to express their religious, spiritual, cultural, political, and other commitments at work, subject to the limiting norms of noncoercion, nondegradation, and nonestablishment, and in consideration of the reasonable instrumental demands of the for-profit enterprise" (173).

The argument of this book is well thought out, draws upon a wealth of leadership literature, and challenges many of the cultural mores of Christian leaders. Some may be taken back by

what they perceive to be *liberal* tendencies. But living into this proposal may indeed lead to fruitful, honest dialogue between people of different points of view within the public sphere, be they religious, political, or other wise. The outcomes of such dialogue will be as diverse as the people who engage in it.

Hicks takes three subjects seriously - pluralism, spirituality, and leadership - allowing each to rub up against and intersect with the others. This makes it relevant for any student of contemporary leadership who wishes to dig more deeply into these topics. The thirteen page comprehensive bibliography offers a wealth of resources for scholars who wish to take this subject further. Written by a scholar for other scholars, this book is a fine piece of work for the academy, primarily for professors wrestling with the issues of leadership and religion and it's intersect with the workplace. Yet, *Religion and the Workplace* is fashioned in such a way that any public leader or student of leadership theory would find it worthwhile, for Hicks pushes beyond the current boundaries and suggests a new way of living together in the workplace in a pluralistic work. In a postmodern, post-911, global work, this book is timely.

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