

Religious Expression in the American Workplace: Practical Ideas for Winning Outcomes

Religious expression is an increasingly important issue in the workplace. Highlighting the growing significance of this aspect of diversity, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission registered a 43% increase in complaints of religious discrimination in the period of 1990 – 2000. Well formed diversity initiatives which include informed and balanced approaches to religious workplace issues can substantially reduce the risk of litigation while creating workplaces where employees are more content and fully engaged - a winning approach for all.

This article will address the fundamental concepts and supporting laws and policies which guide religious expression in the American workplace. It will also look at religious pluralism in greater Dallas - both from the historic commitment by city planners (begun more than 30 years ago) and modern religious trends impacting Dallas workplaces today. Lastly, it will offer practical perspectives, strategies, and resources for addressing this important component of diversity.

Americans are a deeply religious people.

The majority of Americans are deeply religious people. Approximately 90% of US citizens express a religious belief, with the other 10% reporting no religious preference or conviction.¹ The American experience now includes not only Christians, Jews and followers of traditional Native American religions but also Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and adherents of many other religions and denominations. About 82% of Americans are Christian.² The growing presence of other groups is felt across the country, where, for example, there are now more American Muslims than there are American Episcopalians, or American Jews.³ Over 3,000 separate religious groups are identified in the U.S., approximately half of which are various Christian denominations.

Dallas is religiously diverse with a historic commitment to religious pluralism

¹ [Americans Struggle with Religion's Role at Home and Abroad](#)

Pew Forum and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press March 2002

² [Americans Struggle with Religion's Role at Home and Abroad](#)

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³ [A New Religious America](#), Diane Eck - Harper Collins, 2001.

Dallas has a historic commitment to religious pluralism. Over 30 years ago The City Planning Council of Dallas established Thanks-Giving Square in the heart of downtown Dallas with a mission

To offer a place for all people to give thanks to God. To witness, to celebrate, and to promote the value and spirit of thanksgiving for both sacred and secular cultures throughout the world.

The Greater Dallas area has over 750 Christian churches, 19 synagogues, 20 mosques, and a number of Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh and Bahai temples.⁴

Roy Harrell, Vice President and Chaplain of Thanks-Giving Square offered this perspective on religious diversity:

At Thanksgiving Square, we encourage respect and understanding of diverse religious beliefs and perspectives as vital to our civic life. We know that regard for others' beliefs, does not mean agreement, nor does it weaken our own deeply held convictions. Rather, affirming the beliefs of others with respect and understanding deepens our own personal journeys and creates a world of thanks giving in which the beauty of difference enriches us all.

Roy Harrell Vice President and Chaplain
Thanksgiving Square, Dallas, TX
www.thanksgiving.org

Foundation of religious liberty: The First Amendment

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

With these famous words, the first amendment establishes the foundation of American religious liberty. A host of laws and regulations define, guide and support this important freedom.

What are the three fundamental concepts that define American religious liberty?

- **Freedom of conscience** Full freedom of conscience is given for people of all faiths or none.
- **Religious liberty** Religious liberty is considered to be a natural or inalienable right that must always be beyond the power of the state to confer or remove.

⁴ Information on religious communities in the Metroplex provided by Thanks-Giving Square Interfaith Council members, the Greater Dallas Community of Churches, Dr. Paul Geisel, University of Texas at Arlington and Dallas International.

- **Right to any or no religion religious expression and practice**
Religious liberty includes the right to freely practice any religion or no religion without governmental coercion or control.

What are the three main ways religious issues commonly arise in the workplace?

- Scheduling conflicts for religious observances
- Conflicts in standards for appearance / attire
- Religious conduct and other expressions of faith in the workplace

What are two essential concepts to take into consideration when accommodating religious expression in the workplace?

1. The employer has a duty to accommodate the employee when he/she becomes aware of a conflict between a work requirement and an employee's sincerely held religious beliefs.
2. The accommodation should eliminate the conflict between employment requirements and the employee's actual religious beliefs or practices, but must do so without causing "undue hardship" to the employer's business.

"I recognize that my freedom is not in opposition to yours but that each of us together is free insofar as we sustain respect and recognition for others."

Jean Bethke Elshtain, University of Chicago Divinity School

Religion in American Public Life: Living with Our Deepest Differences

How can accommodation of religious freedom in the workplace occur in a fair and balanced manner?

1. **Title VII requires a reasonable accommodation that meets the needs of the employer and the employee.** These accommodations need not necessarily be ones the employee prefers or has requested. i.e. the employer has a duty to accommodate the employee's religious beliefs but does not have a duty to accommodate an employee's religious preferences.
2. **An employer is not required to make an accommodation that constitutes "undue hardship" to the employer.** e.g. Lost production, increased overtime, decreased efficiency or employee morale.

3. **An accommodation need not be cost-free to the employee.** e.g. – Employee’s may be required to use their vacation time for religious holiday observances.
4. **Other employees matter.** The employer is obliged to take into consideration the costs and effects of religious accommodation on co-workers so as not to create a form of “reverse” religious discrimination.

What are some practical accommodations already in use in some workplaces?

- **Time off / Scheduling** - Flexible scheduling to accommodate religious observances / holidays.
- **Attire:** Dress code regulations can provide clarity for modifications to accommodate religious attire such as beards, long skirts or head coverings.
- **Food** Both cafeteria offerings and food for special events or holiday parties can take into account religious dietary practices.
- **Serenity rooms** A quiet room, set aside for religious practices or simply as a place for quiet reflection.
- **Religious Affinity /Focus Groups** Religious affinity/focus groups provide a “place at the table” on diversity councils. They also function as channels for expression and connection with other employee and other affinity groups.
- **Acknowledgement of Religious / Cultural Differences** – Many companies now include religious and cultural information through newsletters, seasonal posters and diversity calendars.

Resources

Web sites:

- Beliefnet www.beliefnet.org
- Dallas International www.dallasinternational.com
- The Freedom Forum <http://www.freedomforum>
- Thanks-Giving Square www.thanksgiving.org
- National Conference for Community and Justice <http://www.nccj.org>
- The Pluralism Project <http://www.pluralism.org/>

Books & Calendars:

- A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation – Diane Eck, Pluralism Project, Harvard Univ. http://www.pluralism.org/publications/new_religious_america/index.php

- Honoring Differences Calendar - <http://www.diversitycalendar.com> Lists religious holidays and observances from all major religions (among other diversity related topics)

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