

RELIGION TO SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

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The world today is filled with diversity in various aspects, ranging from our family ties, to our schools and to our workplaces. There is no country that is the same size as it was a decade ago. According to the United States Census Bureau, a comparison of the 1998-2000 censuses shows that the “non-white” groups have been increasing in numbers more than the white groups. This shows that there is an increase in the number of immigrants who have been coming into the United States which is made up of a multitude of immigrants, some very anxious to be integrated and others more willing to keep their ties to their origin (Garcia-Zamar, 2003).

The gradual increase in the number of immigrants in the country contributes to the diversity existent within the country. The immigrants come into America with their own culture, traditions and religious beliefs. An example of this new religious practice that is currently found in the United States today is seen in the practice of the religion of Santa Muerte (Holy Death) which is found in Los Angeles, California. According to an article in the L.A Times by Leovy (2009) Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint which was popular amongst those who are assumed to be living their life on the edge in Mexico. Today that religion and belief in Santa Muerte, has crossed the borders of Mexico into the United States and the devotees are drawn from a broad cross section of people in immigrant neighborhoods. Thus the practice and existence of this religion in The United States supports the 2000 Census results and as a result contributes to the diversity existent within the country. The presence of the Santa Muerte religion in the United States has helped to serve as a bridge that brings together the

different peoples from the different walks of life who are linked as a result of their similarity in spirituality. As a result, the opportunity is created to come together and identify with those who share in the same spirituality.

The various qualities brought in by immigrants automatically contribute to the already existent diversity within the United States. The situation of religious diversity has changed in companies with the influx of many immigrants into many Western countries during the last 3 to 4 decades. As a result of this massive change, religion has become a much wider issue that must be addressed in the course of creating an effective workplace that is in line with the company objective.

The expression of aspects of faith at work may be quite natural for employees following immigrant religions because many of these workers come from societies where expressions of religious beliefs are public, common and uniformly held. Seifert (2005) asserts that, since individuals spend a considerable portion of their lifetime in the workplace, the new religious diversity is becoming a much wider issue because the more time spent at the workplace the more one wishes to enjoy that time spent. The issue created by religious diversity is becoming more complex because the more time one spends with people the more opportunities there are to interact and create new ideas, or in worst case scenarios create conflict and misunderstandings. Religious diversity evident in the workplace must be addressed in the present day and we must view certain ways that religion can affect the status quo of the lives of individuals and how it affects their workplace.

As a result there is a need to focus on religious diversity and the possible ways through which religion can still exist within an organization without causing havoc. Some schools of thought would rather prefer to have spirituality in the workplace than religion. This is because most people view religion as a facilitator of diversity which will eventually lead to conflict while spirituality, by being none specific and not categorizing possesses a greater sense of inclusion and togetherness automatically projected by the presence of spirituality in the workplace.

The purpose of this paper is to show how religion can serve as a source of diversity and conflict in the workplace, and how spirituality while being linked to religion-because of the similar belief in a supreme power- can serve as a ready alternative to religious diversity within the workplace. Today as we live through each day the workplace is no longer void of indices of faith, thus both employees and employers are increasingly ignoring the traditional wall which prohibits religion from entering the workplace (Morgan, 2005). The question then arises as to what religion is and how does religion affect the daily running of activity in the workplace?

### **What is religion?**

Bruce (1996) defines religion as consisting of beliefs, actions, and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose. This in effect states that the individual is influenced and governed by these supernatural

entities which stipulate the moral goals that they must arrive at in the bid to be viewed as the loyal and faithful believers.

The United States Court of law defined religion under the amendment as including all aspects of religious observance and practice, as well as belief. This definition was further narrowed down by the court in *Walsh v United States* as a sincere and meaningful belief which occupies in the life of its possessor a place parallel to that filled by the God of those admittedly qualifying for the exemption comes within the statutory definition (Cash and Gray, 2000; Morgan, 2005).

These definitions of religion by the law gives religion a broadened scope which in effect leads to the inclusion of much more than formalized religious practice. Thus, any strongly held beliefs and values that mainstream would not immediately recognize as religious are also included in this definition of religion by the law. The guidelines of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), further weakens the link between belief and a specific religion. The guideline is quoted in both Cash & Gray (2000) and Morgan (2005) articles and the guideline states that the fact that no religious group espouses such beliefs or the fact that the religious group to which the individual professes to belong may not accept such belief will not determine whether the belief is a religious belief of the employee or prospective employee.

Through this definition of religion by the EEOC, we see that there is no clear cut definition of what the term religion means hence there is no specific act of belief that can be said to be or not be a form of religion for an individual. This definition by EEOC therefore implies that even strict adherence to Veganism can

also be identified as a system of moral or ethical beliefs under the view of EEOC. This broad all encompassing definition of religion also leads to some form of challenge for the employer who ensures that the employee is well accommodated, not discriminated against or harassed within the organization irrespective of whatever religious affiliation the individual may belong. Management is thus thrust into an untenable position of balancing accommodation law with anti-harassment law.

### **Religion and Identity**

Religion possesses the ability to create a form of identity for an individual which can lead to the inclusion of those of the same religious belief and create an automatic exclusion of other employees who do not belong to their religious affiliation. The inclusion and exclusion within the workplace can lead to religious diversity which will inadvertently affect the overall work atmosphere of the organization. Dickson, Hargie and Wilson (2008) re-affirm that religion is one of a number of potential bases of difference within workforces.

Seul (1999) believes that religious groups often demand a high level of commitment from their members, so that it may be extremely difficult to shed one's religious identity once it is established. This factor contributes to the prevalence of religious conflict as is seen in the research carried out by Dickson, Hargie and Wilson, (2008). The focus of the research was to determine the effects of religion in intergroup relationships in the workplace, and how religion affects the flow and distribution of functional information within the organization. The focus group was Northern Ireland where work is affected by the deep fault-

line of cross-community division that pervades much of social life. These cross-communities have religious labels that are either Catholic or Protestant.

The result showed that there was a desire from both groups for a more significant engagement than what was already taking place. Although the desire to improve quality intergroup relationships varied in regards to whether it was a public or private sector, the major observation was that both the Protestant and Catholics in the different sectors acknowledged that there was a need to better improve their existing intergroup relationships. This shows how religion can serve as a source of exclusion in the workplace, affect the work relationship and atmosphere and inadvertently affect the organizations production.

Concerning the effect of religion on the communication patterns, Dickson, Hargie and Wilson (2008) discovered that there was no religious difference in relation to any of the aspects of day-to-day communication within the organizations. This result is understandable seeing as both groups believe in God. The question then arises as to what would happen in a situation where the parties involved are from two completely different camps? For instance in a situation where the two groups involved are Muslim and Christian respectively, what then can we hope to expect in terms of the day-to-day communication within that particular organization. Each employee, irrespective of the fact that they all share the same organizational identity by virtue of the fact that they work in that same organization, have their own separate identities which in most cases are birthed by their religious social and political relations.

The two groups involved in the study by Dickson, Hargie and Wilson (2008) which consisted of Protestants and Christians, brought the identity of their separate religions along with them into the workplace and this identity affected the intergroup communication between the two different groups in the workplace. An example of a religious conflict is taken from a case in Nigeria when in 2002, the Miss World riot was sprung to life by an article written by a journalist who lightheartedly suggested that the Prophet Muhammad would not have objected to the event; rather he most likely would have married one of the beauties (Lacey, 2002; Roer, 2003). This statement led to the outrage of the Muslims in the Northern state of Kaduna, who decided to express their commitment to their belief of Islam and reaffirm the pride in their religious identity by burning copies of the offending publication and the Northern based office of the Newspaper. The Muslims also reacted to the article through violence on fellow Christians living within the same Northern region.

The creation of identity by Religion is buttressed by Seul (1999) who argues that religions help to provide the predictability and continuity that the individual needs to maintain a sense of psychological stability. The Kaduna Muslims took to the streets and began to express their distaste of the article in the form of a riot, while the Muslims in the other parts of the country did not react in the same way.

Although this scenario of the riot identifies how religion and state are related, the different reactions expressed by Muslims within the same country reveals the social identity theory which postulates that people tend to classify

themselves into social categories that have meaning for them and this in effect shapes the way these individuals interact with others from their own identity groups and from other groups (Barak, 2005). Thus religion creates a means for people to create meaning for who they are and what they represent.

The social action media studies theory states that the audience consists of numerous highly differentiated communities, each with its own values, ideas and interests, and media content is interpreted based on the meanings that are worked out socially within the group and individuals are more influenced by peers than media, Littlejohn and Foss (2008). This goes to explain how it is that the same article which the Christians interpreted as harmless was viewed as an insult to the Muslim in the Northern part of Nigeria who viewed the article as an insult to Prophet Mohammed. This insult to Prophet Mohammed indirectly means that their belief in Islam and, social identity as Muslims has been insulted. Automatically the Christians are viewed as the out-group members in the face of this religious conflict generated by the article written by the journalist who happened to be Christian.

An example of a religious diversity situation in a workplace is shown by Mujtaba (2009) in his article on religious diversity in the workplace. He creates a scenario where the employer hosts an employee recognition lunch on a Friday afternoon with all kinds of assorted hams, meat sandwiches and salads. The problem with this situation is that the Christian employees cannot participate because this event is being held during Lent, and they cannot eat meat. The Hindu employees cannot eat meat at all and will not enjoy the meal as much. The

Jewish employees cannot participate because meat and cheese eaten together are not kosher and the Muslims cannot partake because this is the time for their Friday Jummat prayers. Thus this luncheon which sounded like a good idea and a quick and easy way to perform small acts of inclusion within the workplace has gradually become an arena of exclusion. This reveals how religion within the workplace can contribute to the challenges which the employer may face in the course of trying to accommodate various types of religion within the workplace. This could be interpreted as discrimination by the employer and thereby the employer may indirectly offend a number of the diverse employees present at the luncheon.

### **Spirituality in the Workplace**

The challenges and conflicts faced in the course of allowing the existence of religion within the workplace has led to the focus to be on spirituality and not on religion. In our world today, people hunger for a deeper meaning to life, and this hunger may well find expression in people's desire for a stronger integration of their spiritual and work identities (Cash & Gray, 2000; Garcia-Zamar, 2003). Hence the focus today in the workplace is on spirituality and not on religion. The authors believe that while spirituality looks inward to an awareness of universal values, formal religion looks outward, using formal rites. This approach automatically reveals the ability of spirituality to have an inclusive quality because it goes beyond the outward appearance thereby creating the sense of inclusion while religion automatically creates exclusion because of the outward representation which may be contrary to that of the mainstream.

Duchon and Plowman (2005) define spirituality as an inner longing for meaning and community while religion is an organized belief system. Thus, once an individual goes contrary to the expected or mainstream belief system the individual is automatically excluded. The authors define workplace spirituality as including the notions of meaning, purpose and being connected to others. This definition of workplace spirituality reveals the inclusive nature of spirituality in the workplace which can help to create a more effective workplace for employees by reducing conflict. This conflict reduction within the organization affects the performance of the employees within the workplace.

Garcia-Zamar (2003) argues that spirituality is about acknowledging that people come to work with more than their bodies and minds, they come to work with individual talents and unique spirits. In the empirical study conducted by Mitroff and Denton as cited in Garcia-Zamar (2003) focused on the role of spirituality in the workplace, their findings revealed that approximately 60 percent of the individuals surveyed felt positively toward spirituality, yet negatively toward religion. They define workplace spirituality as involving the effort to find one's ultimate purpose in life, to develop a strong connection to coworkers and other people associated with work, and to have consistency (or alignment) between one's core beliefs and the value of their organization.

This is the new trend of thought in most organizations today as shown in some organizations like Tom's of Maine, Hewlett-Packard HP, Ford Motor Company, Bank of Montreal, just to mention a few, according to (Burack, 1999; Wagner-Marsh & Conley, 1999). All these organizations communicate and

reinforce spirituality in the workplace through the leaders of the institution, the organizational culture, policies and work design among other factors. There is interest in the employee who is valued as a unique entity in need of nourishment of the spirit and an effective combination of the mind and spirit to work together to help increase the self worth of the employee and as a result achieve the company goals of profit.

The above named companies are referred to as the fourth wave of the spiritually-based firm according to Wagner-Marsh and Conley (1999). They believe that these fourth wave spiritually based firms have a value for mutual trust and honesty; a value for honesty with self; a commitment in declaring their philosophical commitment with both employees and people they do business with; emphasis on quality and service by placing it at the forefront while still being profitable; a value of their employees as individuals and being committed to their professional development and lastly, selecting personnel that match the corporations spiritually-based philosophy.

Although these functions depict a sense of oneness and togetherness as stipulated by Burack (1999), who believes that spirituality in the workplace are necessary accomplishments for achieving a unified whole, Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) believe that spirituality can be defined as something originating from the individual; as something tied to one's religious affiliation and also as involving existentialist questions such as "What is the meaning of my work? and "Why am I doing this work?". These definitions and views are all encompassed in

characteristics of the fourth wave spiritually based company as identified by Wagner-Marsh and Conley (1999).

Honesty with self, mutual trust and honesty with others can be termed as spirituality originating from the inside of the individual which could also be as a result of being tied to one's religious affiliation that believes in always being honest. The Holy Bible possesses the 10 Commandments which Christians are to abide by and one of these commandments states, "thou shalt not lie". The holy Quran also serves as a reminder to Muslims to restrain from lying. In articulating the organizations spiritually-based philosophy, committing to quality, service, employee and selecting personnel to match the corporations spiritually based philosophy can be viewed as related to the definition of spirituality as involving existentialist questions.

In this situation of existentialist questions, the employee and the employer, in a bid to find a greater meaning in their lives develop a sense of commitment which is focused on the development of the employee, the employer and the company as a whole. They ask themselves what this work means to them and why they are doing this particular work and not some other work. These questions serve to refocus their attention to the need to better themselves and their organization as a whole to create a better feeling of self worth and commitment to the organization.

These questions in effect lead to the benefits involved in promoting spirituality in the workplace. Burack (1999) believes that since work comprises so much a part of everyone's life, organization practices can contribute greatly to

spiritual (mental) growth. This can be achieved through seeking creativity in the face of problem solving which will challenge conventional thought patterns and result in additional learning. This learning will make the individual experience spiritual growth.

### **Implementation of workplace spirituality**

Krishnakumar and Neck (2002), state that spirituality can be implemented in the workplace through two major perspectives which they identified as the organization-centered perspective and the individual-centered perspective. The organization based perspective suggests that spirituality should be implemented to the organization as a whole. Cash and Gray (2000) opine that in-order to create the effective spiritually accommodating workplace, there is a need to achieve a neutral operational framework which can be obtained through both legal precedent and practical application. Hence, rather than focus on the legitimacy of the employee's faith obligation the company should focus on business driven issues such as production schedules, employee leave time availability, overtime schedules, bonafide seniority systems, replacement costs, and other relevant objective data.

In an article by the Employers Forum for Belief in Association with Business of Faith (2009), some suggestions they came up with in implementing spirituality in the workplace included creating an employee network which can use email newsgroups to communicate with each other, thereby fostering a sense of support and inclusion for members of staff of different religious and

cultural backgrounds. They also suggest creating a quiet space within the organization where employees can achieve some quiet time or self reflection.

The individual based perspective of spirituality acknowledges and tries to foster from an individual centered point of view. Employees should be encouraged to express their own spiritual beliefs which will help them relate their idea to the values of the organization, Krishnakumar and Neck (2002). This spiritual expression, the authors believe, would enhance organizational performance and better personal development of the employees. The Employers Forum for Belief (2009), view this action as openness within the organization. By being open, both employee and employers can channel their spirituality towards achieving the company goals.

Cash and Gray (2000) assert that by allowing employers to express themselves and accommodating their requests to the best of the organizations ability, this will allow the employees to create their own individual hierarchies of work and family needs thereby relieving the managers the challenge of being monitors and value referees. This way the individual begins to implement the spirituality within the workplace which will give more meaning and purpose to the employee's workplace and life as a whole. The implications as a result of this information is covered within the next section

### **Implications**

Life is a race that must run its course irrespective of the ups and downs that we may encounter in the course of living life. The individual realizes the need to walk this journey with a superior being who has a greater understanding of this

world and controls the turn of events within it. The series of literature that have been reviewed gives us a definition of what religion is as against what Spirituality is. In some school of thoughts there is no difference between Spirituality and religion because they believe that spirituality originated from religion. To others religion is not viewed as spirituality because the focus is on the outward expression through the use of formal rites rather than focusing on the transformation from within the individual.

As a result of the inward and outward expression we are given the impression of how being religious and being spiritual can mean two completely different things while actually being closely linked. This close link and obvious difference can also be said to be a form of irony because an individual, can be religious without being spiritual. Hence the focus is on how most organizations today have gradually progressed from focusing on religion to transforming their interest to spirituality within the workplace.

Spirituality is more focused on the individual within and how that peace within can be shared to create a more peaceful exterior. The actions which are generated to actuality in the dealings and interactions of the individual in the workplace are most times as a result of in-depth research of dogmas, doctrines, rules and regulations concerning religions and choosing that which best suits the aim of the individual in life. This act of researching to eventually arrive at a chosen path reveals how the mind of the spiritualist is open to flexibility, willing to accommodate, ready to adopt and willing to learn. This automatically creates a

sense of inclusion and bringing together of ideas that serve the common goal of internal transformation and the creation of outward peace.

The broad definition of religion by the EEOC, and the Court of Law also does not make it any easier for people to term if what people practice in their workplace is religion or spirituality. Research shows that in the practice of religion in the workplace there is more conflict because of the outward display of set obligations, rules and regulations. The individual may in some cases lose sight of the aim of that religion and begin to act more pious than the other group in the workplace believing that this mainstream religion which the individual actually belongs is the ultimate Truth, which automatically makes them think that they are superior to others outside their in-group in the workplace.

The adoption of religion in the workplace can be viewed as a remedy for disaster if not appropriately handled to prevent those belonging to different religious groups from trying to impose their superiority on one another. The spirituality in the workplace is a better term to be adopted because it gives a softer edge to the practice of belief in the existence of a superior being and how that relationship between the individual and the Supreme Being can create a better sense of self worth and meaning to the individual. This spirituality will in effect create a more inclusive workplace that will be more devoid of conflict and hindrance to the organizational aim.

The Inclusion created by spirituality serves as a tool which brings people together in the work place and helps them to find the means to be more accommodating of one another, thereby promoting peace and togetherness in

the workplace. Hence spirituality is the new bridge that facilitates a better work environment for the organization which is focused on the inclusion of its employees, the welfare of its employees and the success of the company as regards its production, sales, and profit, as the case may be.

One of the future foci concerning spirituality in the workplace could be to discover whether spirituality can truly exist without religion in the workplace. Also to discover what type of reactions one would get in regards to intergroup relationship in the workplace when the emphasis is on two major different religions like Islam and Christianity rather than Christianity versus Christianity. This focus will give a clear cut picture of how two very different religions can either make or mar the organizational focus through intergroup relations affected by religion and religious identity in the workplace.

In conclusion spirituality is a fast growing trend that has gradually seeped into the walls of the workplace and has assisted in the creation of meaning to the life of individuals as they go to work with their spirituality. The individual is always metamorphosing, and by relying on the familiar, the individual creates a better wholesomeness and understanding of what one should make the focus and purpose of life. Spirituality is a familiar terrain, while the workplace is the unfamiliar terrain where we learn to expect the unexpected, like layoffs, mergers, work station transfers and even sometimes boredom as a result of routine. In spirituality there is a comfort in the knowledge that the Supreme Being that one has faith in is always faithful, present, constant and unchanging. Hence rather than experience a fear of the unknown as is the case with the ups and downs of

the work place, in spirituality the individual experiences less anxiety, more peace and a greater sense of self confidence, thereby creating a more stable individual. Through an inward self reflection and focus, the individual taps into the well of strength to face the challenges of the unknown.

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