Faith at Work: The Latest Type of Diversity in the U.S.

Key words: religion, spirituality, faith, diversity, social forces, multicultural concerns
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Abstract

U.S. society has addressed a number of multicultural concerns of various constituencies including certain racial and ethnic groups, women, families, and homosexuals. Successful firms have confronted such societal movements by proactively addressing the concerns of these various employee groups and their respective rights and needs in the workplace. The recent societal interest in religion and spirituality has resulted in faith becoming the latest type of diversity in the workplace. This paper discusses social forces that have led to this experience and what organizations may anticipate as faith at work continues to be a significant issue.
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Leslie, the new division manager, sponsors a luncheon to recognize the division’s members for successfully meeting strategic objectives for the month. Meats, cheese, breads, fruit, and a cake are chosen for the event. The celebratory mood of the event quickly dissipates as various employees within the twenty-member Internet sales division react to the setting. Paul, an evangelical Christian, first asks those assembled if he can offer grace to the group before they begin to eat. Sam, a devout Jew, informs Leslie that he cannot partake because the mixing of meat and cheese is not kosher. Abu, a Muslim, shakes his head in disgust and leaves the gathering after informing Leslie that the luncheon conflicts with his daily prayer time. Melinda, a strict Vegan, refuses to eat and tells her co-workers that it is immoral to kill or exploit animals. --Morgan (2004, p. 11)

Organizations exist within a complex network of political-legal, economic, technological, and social forces that affect all business firms in an industry. Together these elements comprise an organization’s external macroenvironment that are important to strategic managers (Parnell, 2004). Of the four macroenvironmental forces indicated, social forces (e.g., lifestyles, demographics, traditions, societal and cultural values, and social trends, Carroll and Buchholtz, 2006) are emphasized here because they are highly relevant to the most recent type of diversity—faith, religion, and spirituality in the U.S. marketplace as suggested in the above scenario.

An understanding, comprehension, and scrutiny of social forces offer opportunities and challenges to strategic managers as they address faith at work (FAW) issues. The goal of such analyses is to alert decision-makers to potentially significant factors before they have crystallized so that they may have as much lead time as possible to consider and to plan for their implications. Hence, this paper defines religion within the context of other U.S. diversity-related initiatives, offers a number of societal trends that have led to the increased importance of FAW, presents key FAW learning points for organizations, and concludes with a summary of why firms may wish to view religion in the workplace as an opportunity rather than a threat.
A Logical Progression of an Inevitable Historical Pattern

As U.S. society has become more preoccupied with constitutional concerns for civil liberties of all its citizens, firms have responded with a number of diversity-related initiatives in the recruitment, selection, and management of its workers. For example, the 1960s erupted with the civil rights movement, and soon leading companies sought to develop race-friendly policies to encourage integration and racial equality in the workforce. The 1970s produced the modern feminist movement, which confronted corporations with women’s rights to equal pay and equal opportunity to compete for jobs and positions historically thought suitable only for men. Enlightened companies, instead of fighting this, sought to develop gender-friendly policies to attract and retain women in all organizational levels. The 1980s gave rise to many single-parent families, families where both parents worked outside the home, and blended families composed of remarried couples and children from different marriages living under one roof. Forward-thinking companies created a range of family-friendly policies including flextime, telecommuting, job sharing, day care centers, and paternity leave. The 1990s witnessed progressive firms embracing inclusion for the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered community in their human resources departments through nondiscrimination policies covering sexual orientation and gender identity, domestic partner health insurance benefits, and other policies relevant to homosexuals.

In the 2000s firms are seeing a growing interest by businesspeople bringing marketplace issues and religious, spiritual, and faith teachings into conversation with each other. Such endeavors have variously been called “spirituality and work,” “spirituality in the workplace,” “God and work,” “soul at work,” “religion in the workplace,” “God and business,” and “faith in the workplace” (Miller, 2007, p. 14). Religion at work appears to be the latest type of diversity in
the workplace to be addressed as corporations develop faith-friendly policies to honor, respect, and dignify the spiritual dimension of employees’ lives (Yung, 2007). Indeed, the respected Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding (n. d.a) observed that religious diversity in the workplace has become one of the most important social issues today.

In response to these various societal movements impacting diversity, organizations have been forced to understand and effectively deal with challenges of various employee groups and their respective rights and needs in the workplace. A pattern can be seen where prominent companies choose to embrace holistic policies and constructively engage the often personal and emotional topics of race, gender, extended family, sexual orientation, and now, religion. Over these past five decades, most highly achieving firms that compete for top talent in the global marketplace have developed a mixture of race-friendly, female-friendly, family-friendly, homosexual-friendly and, increasingly, faith-friendly policies.

**Religion[1] in the Workplace**

Religion in the workplace is a relatively new multicultural challenge in the U.S. but also in other parts of the world (Miller, 2007). Religion is an important aspect of most societies because each country’s religious practices influence ethics, human dealings, social customs, the ways in which members of a society relate to each other and to outsiders, as well as workplace behavior (Griffin and Pustay, 2007).[2] Historically, in the U.S. the idea of workers bringing God into their job was unthinkable but increasingly the boundaries between faith and work are diminishing as employees desire integrated lives where faith and workplace practices and beliefs are aligned (Miller, 2007). Religion has become more visible at work because the faithful live out their beliefs and practices through various actions—styles of dress, manner of keeping or wearing one’s hair, recruiting others to their faith, following certain diets, praying, fasting,
avoiding certain language or behavior, and observing certain religious Sabbaths and holidays. Not surprisingly, such differences provide ample ground for disagreement, conflict, or even harassment among employers and employees. Business leaders need to be aware of these challenges and recognize that faith in the workplace has the potential for divisiveness and discrimination if not addressed in inclusive and respectful ways.

**Social Environmental Factors Making Faith at Work More Prevalent**

The increasing visibility of religion in the U.S. marketplace has roots in a number of social environmental forces. The attitudes, beliefs, values and customs of people in a society are an integral part of their culture and influence their behavior on the job and the environment within the organization. A better understanding of the multiplicity, interaction, and uncertainties of these factors, the more realistic a firm’s planning is likely to be and the better able it can prepare itself for sudden shifts in trends and the onset of what would otherwise be surprises. These forces, summarized in Table 1, are not meant to be exhaustive but identified as meriting special consideration as they affect FAW. Each is discussed below.

**Table 1. Factors in the Social Environment Impacting Faith at Work**

- Rising affluence
- Entitlement mentality
- Work patterns and practices
- Rights movement
- Revival of interest in ethics, values, and morals
- Renewed religious interest
  - Particularly fundamentalist sects
  - Faith at work (FAW) movement
- Religious diversity and increased secularism
- A religious country
- Media awareness
- Significant demographic shifts
  - Immigration patterns
  - Aging population
  - Delayed retirement
**Rising affluence.** Affluence refers to the level of wealth, disposable income, and standard of living. Measures of the U.S. standard of living indicate that it has been rising for decades. Per capita personal income continues to rise, and this has created a high standard of living for its citizenry, despite the fact that not everyone has shared in this prosperity (Carroll and Buchholtz, 2006). In spite of this financial success, or perhaps because of it, increasing numbers of affluent workers began feeling that their lives were unstable and that the pursuit of more material acquisitions left them unfulfilled. Consequently, they began looking for worth and relevance in life outside of material possessions (Cash and Gray, 2000). Such meaning, for many, involves incorporating aspects of faith into a work life previously focused only on the accumulation of wealth.

Such a search appears to be a common occurrence, especially where societies experience prosperity (Morgan, 2004). In fact, the Islamic faith grew from just such a situation. Armstrong (2004) indicated that during the last years of the sixth century, tribes in and around Mecca experienced considerable economic growth which, within two generations, transformed nomads scarcely able to survive to a community controlling one of the most important trading cities in the world. As a result, many individuals and families living in the area became wealthy. The price of such affluence, however, was the sacrifice of important tribal values, including supporting the less fortunate and furthering the interests of the community over the individual. Muhammad sensed people felt increasingly unsettled and lost as money became dominant. In response, Muhammad established Islam to combat such excessive egotism, greed, and affluence.

**Entitlement mentality.** Recent press coverage as well as more systematic research has noted a growing sense of entitlement in a variety of groups, ranging from corporate executives, workers in their twenties, teenage employees, to union members (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, and Bushman, 2004). Entitled individuals believe that their superiority allows them special
or preferential treatment, and they are highly invested in asserting their rights and collecting on that which they believe is owed them (e.g., a job, an education, health care) because they are a member of society (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, and Finkel, 2004). In the latter part of the first decade of the 2000s, religion at work and the perceived holistic life it presents has become an issue over which entitlement thinking has been discussed (Bishop and Lane, 2002) with such entitled individuals more willing to assert their religious convictions at work than previous generations.

**Work patterns and practices.** Over the last several decades, a number of business practices have arisen that have generated huge short-term social and human costs. These activities include worker layoffs, plant closings, reengineering and restructuring efforts, downsizing, outsourcing, offshoring, increasing use of temporary workers, merger mania, career uncertainty, and evaporating employee and employer loyalty. These measures have increased worker stress and anxiety levels. Such work practices as well as contemporary lifestyles—single-parent families, geographic mobility, the temporary nature of jobs, new technologies that create distance between people—underscore the lack of community many people feel. In response to such loneliness and emptiness employees are increasingly turning to faith, religion, and spirituality to provide satisfaction. More and more, it seems that workers believe that happiness is attained by living a “balanced” life where significance in their lives finds expression not only at home but also on the job (Morgan, 2004). This search for religious and spiritual purpose in the workplace is a departure from the more traditional business mentality of “power, profit, and takeovers, and where religion was something saved for the Sabbath day” (Bailey, 1998, p. A1).

**Rights movement.** There appears to be a rights movement that is present in U.S. society today. Over the past few decades, federal legislation has radically changed the rules for management of employees by granting them many specific rights. Among these are laws
granting the right to equal employment opportunity, union representation if desired, safe and healthful work environments, and equal pay for men and women performing essentially the same job. Additionally, the U.S. Supreme Court has heard large numbers of cases aimed at establishing rights for selected groups.

Some of these rights, such as the right to privacy and the right to due process, have been perceived as generic for all citizens. However, in addition to these generalized rights, there has been activism for rights for particular groups in U.S. society. Inspired by the success of African-Americans in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, many other groups have sought progress by similar means. Thus, the protected status of minorities has grown to include Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, indigenous peoples, women, disabled persons, older individuals, and other groups. At various levels—federal, state, and local—there are declarations for the rights of airline passengers, students, homosexuals, smokers, nonsmokers, obese persons, AIDS victims, and animals, just to mention a few. Recently, one New York City woman won a $29,000 settlement with the city because she was arrested on a topless stroll “despite a 1992 state appeals court ruling that concluded women should have the same right as men to take off their shirts” (Topless Woman, 2007, p. 2A). Hence, there seems to be no limit to the numbers of groups and individuals seeking rights (Goldberg-Hiller and Milner, 2003) for something or other and increasingly, there seems to be developing rights for those desiring to express their faith at work.

**Revival of interest in ethics, values, and morals.** It appears that American society of the first decade of the 2000s is clamoring for a renewed emphasis on ethics, values, and morals. Recent high-profile corporate scandals at Enron, Tyco, WorldCom, Adelphia, and Arthur Andersen are making corporate America more receptive to efforts fostering an ethical workplace. There is also renewed interest in business ethics, and the proliferation of business ethics courses in
colleges and universities reflects this revitalized interest (The Latest in Business Ethics Education, n. d.). Religion has long been a basic source of morality in American society, as in most societies. Religion and morality are so intertwined that William Barclay related them for definitional purposes: “Ethics, is the bit of religion that tells us how we ought to behave” (Barclay, 1971, p. 13). Associated with this increased interest in ethics has been an increased interest in religion and spirituality that is spilling over into the marketplace.

**Renewed religious interest.** Another significant trend in the world has been the revival of religion, particularly religious fundamentalism (Emerson and Hartman, 2006). This is not just something that has occurred among Christians in the U.S., but also in Muslim countries. Islam, often in its most fundamentalist form, is growing, frequently fueled with money from oil deposits (Davidson, 2003). Islamic countries are becoming more militant in their pursuit of fundamentalist Islamic principles. Some argue that the Six Day War in 1967 in the Middle East set the stage for the development of both Jewish and Islamic fundamentalist movements.

In the U.S., organizations such as the Christian Coalition, People for the American Way, and the Moral Majority are flexing their political muscle (Carpenter, 1999). These organizations mix Christianity with patriotism and a unique view of the U.S. and its place in the world. They have been successful, partially because they, unlike mainstream denominations, have a very clear idea as to who they are, what they are about, and where they are headed. They believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible and are more inclined to follow the Great Commission to “go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations” (*The New American Bible*, 1970, Matthew 28:19) than other less conservative or evangelical faiths. The Great Commission fuels a greater willingness of employees to assert their religious convictions at work. Thus, whether in the U.S., the Middle East, Africa, or South Asia, “fundamentalists attempt to resacralize an increasingly
secular world” (Patterson, 2004). In The Battle for God Armstrong (2001) noted that “In various ways, fundamentalists have rejected the separations of modernity (between church and state, secular and profane) and have tried to recreate a lost wholeness” (p. 16).

Religion’s return to the public square has also been heralded by the reentry of religion into politics in an organized and influential fashion beginning with President Jimmy Carter in 1977. Under President Bill Clinton’s watch, two key faith-friendly laws were passed. The first, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) in 1993, was aimed at preventing laws which substantially burden a person’s free exercise of their religion. Although partially overturned in 1997 by the Supreme Court, most scholars believe RFRA still applies to federal acts and a number of states have passed so-called mini-RFRAs. The second significant piece of legislation passed under President Clinton’s watch was The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act in 2000 (RLUIPA) which prohibits governments from imposing a substantial burden on a person’s free exercise of religion through land use regulations. RLUIPA also prohibits governments from imposing troublesome obligations on the religious exercise of persons in institutions such as prisons or facilities for the elderly or disabled.

Similar governmental faith initiatives occurred early in the administration of President George W. Bush when the Department of Justice for the first time established a Special Counsel for Religious Discrimination to ensure that laws protecting religious freedom were enforced vigorously (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). President Bush also created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in January 2001 to help the Federal Government coordinate a national effort to expand opportunities for faith-based and other community organizations (Bush, 2001). Supporters of these initiatives say that they reverse a long trend of anti-religious discrimination through the distribution of federal funds (Hagerty,
Furthermore, on February 20, 2007 Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales announced a new Department of Justice initiative to protect religious liberty—The First Freedom Project (Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, 2007).

In addition to the executive branch of government, the Supreme Court appears to be more sympathetic to the treatment of faith-based initiatives by government. For example in *Mitchell v. Helms* (2000) the court ruled that government-funded computers could go to Catholic parochial schools, as long as they were made available to public and other private schools. In *Good News Club v. Milford Central School* (2001) the court found that if public schools create an open forum, they cannot exclude clubs because of their religious speech, even speech considered evangelistic. Additionally, in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002) the court declared that poor parents could use publicly funded vouchers at their school of choice—public, private, or religious. Finally, The Supreme Court rejected a federal lawsuit by church-state separationists challenging the use of taxpayer dollars to fund faith-based initiatives. At issue was whether ordinary taxpayers have standing to sue and whether taxpayers may challenge a Presidential program not created by Congress. The Court ruled that the separationists had no legal standing to bring suit against a Bush Administration’s Executive Order establishing a Faith Based and Community Initiatives Plan authorizing discretionary use of federal tax dollars to organize conferences encouraging religious groups to apply for federal grant programs. In a 5-4 decision, the high court issued its decision on June 25, 2007 in the case of *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation* (2007). According to some (e.g., the American Center for Law & Justice, n. d.), this decision represents a significant victory that sends a powerful message that those antagonistic to religion do not get an automatic free pass to bring Establishment Clause lawsuits.

**Religious diversity and increased secularism.** Some countries are overwhelmingly
composed of members of one religion. For example, most individuals in Saudi Arabia are Muslim while Sweden is 97 percent Lutheran. Such uniformity permits firms operating in such locations to more easily regulate its workplace activities to meet the expectations of its workers and customers than firms operating in more religiously dissimilar nations.

Because the U.S. is the most religiously diverse country in the world (Eck, 2001), firms operating in America face greater challenges in addressing the religious needs of their employees and customers. The U.S. today is home to more than 2,000 different faiths and denominations (U.S. Information Agency, 1997). The vast religious diversity in the U.S. is illustrated in Table 2. As the U.S. becomes more religiously diverse, preventing discrimination based on religion has become more important. Such diversity is always challenging, whether it is manifest in language differences or in modes of dress, food and dietary restrictions, and Sabbath days. Seeing people with different habits and lifestyles makes it harder for individuals to practice their own beliefs unreflectively. When religion is involved, these challenges are multiplied.

Table 2. Top Twenty Religions in the United States, 2001(from Adherents.com, n. d.)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>151,225,000</td>
<td>159,030,000</td>
<td>224,437,959</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonreligious/Secular</td>
<td>13,116,000</td>
<td>27,539,000</td>
<td>38,865,604</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>+110%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td>3,137,000</td>
<td>2,831,000</td>
<td>3,995,371</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>527,000</td>
<td>1,104,000</td>
<td>1,558,068</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>+109%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>401,000</td>
<td>1,082,000</td>
<td>1,527,019</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>+170%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>1,186,000</td>
<td>991,000</td>
<td>1,398,592</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>-16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td></td>
<td>902,000</td>
<td>1,272,986</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>227,000</td>
<td>766,000</td>
<td>1,081,051</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>+237%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
This increased religious diversity stimulates increased levels of religious participation within immigrant subgroups (Van Tubergen, 2006). Sherkat and Alanezi (2003) also found that greater differences in religious heterogeneity between origin and host societies increase immigrant religious participation in the host society. Essentially, religious heterogeneity encourages competition within the religious market creating faith organizations that employ more aggressive techniques so as to retain and grow their market share (Finke and Stark, 1988).

In addition to religious heterogeneity it has been found that decreasing religious proportionality also increases religious participation among immigrants in the U.S. This occurs as smaller religious groups attempt to ensure religious survival against a highly concentrated Christian backdrop (Kurien, 2002). Indeed, many immigrants comment about how they are more religious after settling in Western countries than in their society of origin, particularly those representing smaller religious groups such as Hindus and Muslims (Dietz and El-Shouhoumi, 2002). Kurien (2002), for example, found that Hindus in America, an extreme minority faith in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religions</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2020</th>
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<th>2015-2020</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unitarian Universalist</td>
<td>502,000</td>
<td>629,000</td>
<td>887,703</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>+25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiccan/Pagan/Druid</td>
<td>307,000</td>
<td>433,267</td>
<td>433,267</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritualist</td>
<td>116,000</td>
<td>163,710</td>
<td>163,710</td>
<td>0.05%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American Religion</td>
<td>47,000</td>
<td>103,000</td>
<td>145,363</td>
<td>0.05%</td>
<td>+119%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baha’i</td>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>84,000</td>
<td>118,549</td>
<td>0.04%</td>
<td>+200%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Age</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>68,000</td>
<td>95,968</td>
<td>0.03%</td>
<td>+240%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhism</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>57,000</td>
<td>80,444</td>
<td>0.03%</td>
<td>+338%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientology</td>
<td>45,000</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td>77,621</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
<td>+22%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanist</td>
<td>29,000</td>
<td>49,000</td>
<td>69,153</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
<td>+69%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deity (Deist)</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>49,000</td>
<td>69,153</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
<td>+717%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taoist</td>
<td>23,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>56,452</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
<td>+74%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eckankar</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>36,694</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
<td>+44%</td>
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some areas, describe themselves as “better Hindus” (p. 112) in the U.S. through extensive social influences found in small Hindu groups. In sum, these studies seem to indicate that immigrants of a religious minority or those belonging to a religious group with decreasing proportionality in their context of settlement experience increased religious participation and become more willing to assert their religious convictions at work.

Often lost amidst the mesmerizing tapestry of faith groups that comprise the American population, however, is also a vast and growing population of those without faith. They adhere to no creed nor choose to affiliate with any religious community. These are the seculars, the unchurched—the people who profess no faith in any religion (Cox, 1965). The magnitude and role of this large secular segment of the American population has undoubtedly contributed to increased levels of religious divisiveness and discrimination seen today because of the challenge of balancing society’s commitment to religious pluralism in the political order and the rights of those who choose to live with no religious conviction (Hillman, n. d.). Comparable global trends in rising levels of secularism have been associated with an increased resurgence of religion and fundamentalism around the world as religious individuals and groups articulate their position as active contributors to public debates (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, 2003; Casanova, 1994).

A religious country. In addition to being religiously diverse, the U.S. is also a nation of deeply religious people with surveys consistently finding that more than 90% of its citizens believe in God (Morgan, 2004). A study by the Pew Research Center (2002) revealed that the country stands alone among wealthy nations with almost six-in-ten of Americans reporting that religion plays a very important role in their lives. Moreover, weekly church attendance is also higher in the U.S. than in any other nation at a comparable level of development (Swanbrow,
As a nation of deeply religious people, conflicts can arise when people feel they should not have to check their faith at the door when they go to work.

A recent manifestation of this religiosity is the FAW movement. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing today, a complex set of relatively independent developments emerged that, taken together, have been called the FAW movement (Miller, 2007). At its core, the FAW movement is organized around a quest to integrate one’s personal faith teachings with one’s work responsibilities. Workers of all kinds, it is said, no longer want to live bifurcated lives where work and spiritual identity are compartmentalized into disconnected and unrelated spheres. Integration argues for a holistic lifestyle in which the entire self—mind, body, and soul—is important and that those who fail to integrate may be less psychologically and physically healthy (Calvin, 1987; Volf, 1991).

Religious faith with more traditional teachings, such as Islam, actively promote a integration between religion and the external political, social, and legal environment. Such groups appear to be growing faster than some mainstream religions, in part because of their emphasis on self-control and responsibility in a society perceived by many as plagued by the breakdown of the family, an increase in pornography, and a lack of respect for authority (Becker, 1996). Cal Thomas, an evangelical political columnist, supports this concept of an integration between religion and one’s external environment when he said that “all of life is religious—economic, relational, political” (Ferguson and Lee, 1997, p. 72). Indeed, human resource professionals report dealing with increasing numbers of employees with problems that seem to cross the lines between the spiritual, personal, and professional (Breuer, 1997).

**Media awareness.** During the last decade the increasingly blurred boundaries between
faith and work has gained considerable media attention. The mainstream business press has captivated the attention of readers who increasingly resonate with work/faith issues. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* has published articles on various facets of the more spiritual workplace (“After their Checkup for the Body, Some get One for the Soul,” Miller, 1998; “Workplace: In a Factory Schedule, Where Does Religion Fit In?,” Schellhardt, 1999; “More Chaplains Take Ministering Into Workplace,” Silverman, 2001; “More Employees Are Seeking to Worship God on the Job,” Machalaba, 2002). Similarly, business-oriented magazines such as *Fortune* (“God and Business: The Surprising Quest for Spiritual Renewal in the American Workplace,” Gunther, 2001), *Business Week* (“Religion in the Workplace: The Growing Presence of Spirituality in Corporate America,” Conlin, 1999), and *Across the Board* (“How the Church Has Failed Business,” Nash, 2001) have also featured stories on FAW. Additionally, according to the International Coalition of Workplace Ministries (n. d.), in 2000 there were 79 books published about faith and work and some 2000 books in 2004 and 2006. Furthermore, leading academic/practitioner journals specializing in business also have published widely on the topic. Among a host of prestigious contributions are “A Study of Spirituality in the Workplace” published in the *Sloan Management Review* (Mitroff and Denton, 1999) and “A Framework for Accommodating Religion and Spirituality in the Workplace” in the *Academy of Management Executive* (Cash and Gray, 2000). The simple fact that so many of these stories and articles documenting the integration of work and religion and spirituality exist across a number of sources contributes to the phenomenon’s ongoing growth.

**Significant demographic shifts.** There are several demographic shifts that have given rise to the greater interest in faith in the workplace: immigration patterns, aging, and delayed retirement. For much of the last century, the immigration policy of the U.S. strongly favored
individuals from Europe, while severely restricting immigration from Asian and African nations. The Immigration and Naturalization Act Amendments of 1965 (1966) lifted the strict restraints on non-European immigration, resulting in dramatic increases in numbers of Asians and Africans entering this country. In 1970 less than 5 per-cent of the U.S. population was foreign-born, a number that more than doubled in 1997 to 10.4 percent (Bennett 2001). The number of immigrants to the U.S. from Europe in the 1970s diminished from 62 percent in the 1970s to just 17 percent in 1997 (Eck, 2001). Wuthnow (2005) reported that some twenty-two million immigrants have established themselves in the U.S. and, in contrast to earlier waves of immigration, this new cohort traces its origins in large part to non-Christian cultures. These new Americans brought non-Judeo-Christian religions, particularly Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, in larger numbers to the U.S. Such a demographic shift has contributed to increased levels of disagreement and hostility regarding religion. The expression of religion at work may be quite natural for those who embrace non-Judeo/Christian belief systems because many of these workers come from societies where expressions of religious beliefs were public and common (Morgan, 2004). Particularly for foreign-born or first-generation employees not indoctrinated with the traditional U.S. view that expressing FAW is inappropriate, displaying holy symbols and participating in religious practices at work are integral aspects of a faith-based life in these other sects. Their willingness to stand up and talk about their faith may encourage, and perhaps even provoke, other religious groups to do the same.

Another demographic factor is the aging population of the U.S. The baby-boom generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) will soon be eligible for Social Security benefits. Longitudinal studies show that adults in the United States generally become more religious as they age (Argue, Johnson, and White, 1999; McCullough, Enders, Brion, and Jain, 2005) and
that age has a positive effect on religiosity (Argue et al., 1999; Firebaugh and Harley, 1991).

Lastly, it appears that retirement is being delayed resulting in a greater number of older workers in the labor pool. As the baby boomers begin to ease into their 60s, most expect to delay retirement longer than their parents or grandparents (Boomers, 2007). As indicated above, older individuals are more religious and concerned with spiritual matters and thus FAW considerations can be expected to remain an enduring interest in the foreseeable future.

In summary, among recent U.S. immigrants many are adherents to religions not historically represented in large numbers in America. As immigrants become more acculturated, as numbers of older workers grow, and as employees keep working longer, FAW will continue to exert considerable influence.

Implications of Faith at Work for Firms

As religion and spirituality continue to challenge firms, there are several factors that organizations must address, including sincerely held religious convictions, reasonably accommodating the religious needs of employees balanced against undue hardships placed on the employer, training of supervisors and managers regarding the issues surrounding faith in the workplace, and maintaining a harassment-free work environment.

Sincerely held religious convictions

Often, when claims of religious discrimination or harassment surface, or when workers request accommodations for their religious convictions, one of the first actions firms inevitably do is investigate the worker’s claim that he or she has a legitimate religious belief. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act defines religion to include “all aspects of religious observance and practice, as well as belief” (42 U.S.C. § 2000e(j)). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) further 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” (432 U.S. 63, 1977). Thus, it is not necessary to have a strong linkage between an individual’s conviction and a specific religion.

The Supreme Court, in a number of cases, has likewise tried to interpret what is a religious belief. In 1944, for example, in *United States v. Ballard* the court ruled that “religious experiences which are real as life to some may be incomprehensible to others,” (p. 78) and encouraged lower courts that they were not to rule on comprehensibility. Later, in 1965 in *United States v. Seeger*, the court defined religion as a “given belief that is sincere and meaningful [and] occupies a place in the life of its possessor parallel to that filled by the orthodox belief in God of one who clearly qualifies for the exemption” (p. 173). *Seeger* was followed by *Welsh v. United States* in 1970 which held that the central consideration in determining the religiosity of an individual’s beliefs was whether the beliefs played the role of a religion and function as a religion in the person’s life. The court stated that “the task is to decide whether the beliefs professed by a registrant are sincerely held and whether they are in his own scheme of things, religious” (Welsh, 1970, p. 340).[3]

Moreover, in *Thomas v. Review Bd. of Ind. Employment Sec. Div.* (1981) the court indicated that protected religious beliefs need not be objectively reasonable (i.e., acceptable, logical, or consistent to others) to be entitled to protection. As a consequence of the extremely expansive view given to the definition of religion, it is exceedingly difficult for an employer to defeat the assertion that a worker’s convictions are not religious. Only a few courts have addressed the issue of sincerity, most finding that the plaintiff made the necessary showing of sincerity for their belief. Also, courts have rejected employer arguments that employees must
provide a comprehensive or detailed explanation of how and why their religious beliefs need accommodation (e.g. *California Fair Employment and Housing Commission v. Gemini*, 2004). Employees, however, must inform employers of the religious nature of their beliefs or practices. Based on such considerations, some researchers have advocated that firms “accept any sincerely held belief based upon principles of what is right or wrong—no matter how unusual—as a religious belief” (Frierson, 1988, p. 62) while Cash and Gray (2000) suggest ignoring the issue completely and focusing on the impact on the firm of accommodating faith-based claims.

*Balancing interests of firm and worker in accommodations*

Because of the greater willingness of employees to assert their religious convictions at work, organizations should expect that its workforce increasingly will be asking for accommodations for their religious beliefs and practices. Cash and Gray (2000) identified two kinds of requests requiring employer accommodations: 1) *observance requests* (outside work) which involve employees asking for annual leave to take part in a religious festival, day of Sabbath observance or pilgrimage, or for occasional extended leave for births, weddings, deaths where staff with relatives abroad have particular faith or cultural needs; and 2) *manifestation requests* (at work) which entail workers asking for: a) exceptions to or exclusions from dress, clothing, and grooming codes (e.g., wearing pants, allowing facial hair, permitting headcovering or other religiously mandated garb, uniforms, facial or religious jewelry and piercings, or similar adornments), b) greater food choices consistent with religious beliefs at firm-sponsored cafeterias and restaurants, c) relief from specific tasks inconsistent with faith practices and beliefs (e.g., a Baptist law enforcement official refusing to work at casinos, a Catholic police officer unwilling to protect and guard abortion clinics, an Internal Revenue Service employee’s refusal to handle applications for tax exempt status submitted by organizations supporting
abortion, a Jehovah’s Witness wait person’s unwillingness to sing happy birthday to guests) d) time off for prayer during normal working hours and/or during work breaks and lunch, e) use of facility space (e.g., conference rooms) for faith-related activities, f) permission for evangelization activities including handouts of religious literature and posting of flyers announcing faith-related activities, g) exceptions to union membership (generally, an employer or union shall not require membership from any employee or applicant whose religious creed prohibits such membership), h) religious-based customer greetings and salutations (e.g., “Praise the Lord” and “God bless you.”), i) exclusion from workplace diversity initiatives advocating mutual respect for employees based on their sexual orientation, gender identification, and/or lifestyle choices (e.g., unwed parenthood), \(^4\) and j) non-participation in certain objectionable non-religious motivation or training programs incorporating controversial techniques.\(^5\) Firms should also anticipate that FAW at work issues may give rise to employee requests for accommodations for prayer and religious study groups, workplace chaplains,\(^6\) and affinity groups.\(^7\)

In considering such worker requests organizations must determine any undue hardships they may incur (Baz v. Walters, 1986). The U.S. Supreme Court set the standard for what constitutes an undue hardship to the employer in Trans World Airlines v. Hardison (1977) holding that a cost of approximately $50 per month caused undue hardship to the airline which exempted it from having to accommodate an employee’s religious beliefs (Brierton, 2002). Undue hardship is thus established if the employer is required to spend even a minimal amount of money (a de minimis cost) to accommodate the request. The determination of whether a particular proposed accommodation imposes an undue hardship “must be made by considering the particular factual context of each case” (Tooley v. Martin, Marietta Corp., 1981, p. 1242). In
assessing an undue hardship, organizations will want to evaluate the impact of the employee’s request in light of a number of factors including: 1) firm productivity standards and process schedules; 2) safety considerations; 3) effect on other employees, including negative employee morale and unequal treatment of other employees (Aron v. Quest Diagnostics Inc., 2006); 4) customer relations issues,[8] and 5) collective bargaining agreements.

It is noteworthy, that this *de minimis* cost standard defining an undue hardship may be eroding. For example, a New York statute was amended in 2002 to redefine undue hardship from a “palpable increase in cost” to “significant expense or difficulty,” (New York Executive Law, Article 15, § 296 10d) to establish a justification for denying an accommodation. This resulted in an increased burden upon employers in denying workers’ requests for accommodation of their faith beliefs and convictions. Similarly, the bipartisan Workplace Religious Freedom Act of 2005 (WRFA) was introduced on March 17, 2005 in the U.S. Senate (S 677), and amends the Civil Rights Act by requiring employers to make an affirmative and *bona fide* effort to accommodate employees’ religious practices unless it would create an undue hardship. The Act proposes to define undue hardship to require “significant difficulty or expense” (The Orator.com, n. d.). Although the WRFA is not yet a law, if and when it does pass, it will mean that employers will have to go to greater lengths to accommodate employees’ religious beliefs because of the higher standard for undue hardship (*de minimis* cost vs. significant difficulty or expense; Morgan, 2005). It also means that employees will have much more power to exercise their religious beliefs in the workplace, thus making employers’ responsibility to keep the workplace free from religious discrimination and harassment more difficult.

The EEOC has taken the position that when there are several reasonable accommodations that do not pose an undue hardship, the employer must offer the employee the accommodation
that causes the least disadvantage to the employee: “[W]hen there is more than one means of accommodation which would not cause undue hardship, the employer or labor organization must offer the alternative which least disadvantages the individual with respect to his or her employment opportunities” (29 C.F.R. 1605.2(c)(2)(ii)). However, the employer does not have to grant the specific accommodation requested by the employee; it need only provide an effective accommodation. For example, in Ansonia Board of Education v. Philbrook (1986), the court held that “By its very terms the statute directs that any reasonable accommodation by the employer is sufficient to meet its accommodation obligation,” (p. 67) while in Rodriguez v. City of Chicago (1998), it indicated that “Title VII ... requires only reasonable accommodation, not satisfaction of an employee’s every desire” (p. 775).

In addressing employee accommodation requests, it is important that organizations demonstrate good faith efforts and that its actions be perceived as reasonable and within the spirit of equal employment opportunity law. Courts will generally find a violation if the employer makes little or no effort to accommodate the employee or refuses to discuss the issue. For example, in Brener v. Diagnostic Center Hospital (1982) the court held that “bilateral cooperation is appropriate in the search for an acceptable reconciliation of the needs of the employee’s religion and the exigencies of the employer’s business” (p. 146), while in Soldinger v. Northwest Airlines, Inc. (1996) the court indicated that “The obligation to search for an acceptable solution is bilateral. Employees also have the obligation to make a good faith effort to explore alternatives” (p. 760). Additionally, employers must also be able to show evidence of undue hardship that is more than mere speculation. The employer is on stronger ground when he or she has attempted various methods of accommodation and can point to hardships that actually resulted rather than hypothetical burdens.
Therefore, it is prudent for employers to consider the employees’ proposed accommodation and if unreasonable, offer the employee alternative accommodations that would resolve the conflict, instead of flatly rejecting the employee’s proposal. While an employer’s first reaction may be to deny an accommodation because of fear that the accommodation will set a precedent or because of the possible cumulative effect of another employee wanting the same accommodation, this is not a valid defense without evidence that an accommodation will cause undue hardship to the employer. This appears to have happened to Alamo Car Rental. A Phoenix, Arizona jury on June 3, 2007 awarded more than $287,000 in a religious bias suit. Alamo will pay $21,640 in back pay, $16,000 in compensatory damages, and $250,000 in punitive damages to Bilan Nur, a refugee from war-torn Somalia. The EEOC had charged Alamo committed discrimination based on religion when it fired the Somali customer sales representative for refusing to remove her head scarf during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan without assessing the burden such an accommodation would impose on the firm. According to the EEOC’s lawsuit (EEOC, 2007e), Alamo refused to permit Nur to continue to cover her head, as she had done in previous years, even if she wore an approved Alamo-logo scarf. Prior to being fired, Nur had worked for Alamo since 1999. EEOC’s lawsuit asserted that the company had permitted her to wear a head covering for religious reasons during Ramadan in 1999 and 2000. However, following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Alamo refused to permit Ms. Nur to observe this particular religious belief during December of 2001. Alamo claimed that it told Ms. Nur that the company dress code prohibited wearing of a scarf. Notwithstanding Alamo’s representation, the EEOC found that the company had no such policy. When Ms. Nur refused to remove the religious garment, Alamo disciplined, suspended, terminated her employment, and declared her ineligible for rehire.
Even something as innocuous as celebrating a birthday can be costly to an organization, as Razzoo’s Cajun Café in Mesquite, Texas, found out recently. The conflict started when waitperson, Sabrina Balentine, refused to help celebrate customers’ birthdays because her Jehovah’s Witness faith does not recognize such practices. Razzoo’s proposed accommodation to Ms. Ballentine was for her to stand silently while coworkers celebrated diners’ birthdays, however, according to Robert Canino, regional attorney for the EEOC, “because her religious belief was that she shouldn’t even celebrate birthdays, that would not have resolved the conflict” (Getz, 2007, p. 9B). Ms. Ballentine’s proposal to wait on other tables as her colleagues sang happy birthday was rejected by management. Consequently, Ms. Ballentine no longer works at Razzoo’s, the company has started extensive training programs instructing managers how to accommodate employees’ religious beliefs, and Ms. Ballentine is some $38,750 richer because of her EEOC-mediated settlement.

A final consideration in addressing employee accommodations is to think creatively about ways that both the needs of the worker and the needs of the company can be met. Not only is there a good chance that a compromise can be found, but even if one is not, this shows that the employer made a good faith effort to provide an accommodation. The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding (n. d.b provides an example of such creativity: A situation arose at a large hi-tech firm shortly after 9/11 where the security department insisted a new Muslim employee remove her hijab (veil) for her photo identification key card. She insisted that her religious belief prohibited her from appearing unveiled before non-familial men. Management deliberated and came up with a solution. The new employee was given two identification cards—one veiled and one unveiled. Her unveiled photo was taken and processed by a woman and would not be shown or used for entry purposes. The veiled photo card was the one
programmed to unlock doors and was the one shown for identification purposes as she moved around the facility. Another example of creatively addressing a FAW issue involves payment of union dues in violation of a worker’s religious beliefs. Many employees object to causes that some unions support, such as Planned Parenthood, or other pro-abortion organizations. Workers objecting to the payment of union dues on religious grounds may be accommodated by allowing employees to contribute an amount equal to their dues to an acceptable charity. Another possible accommodation is discounting the union dues in proportion to the amount of money spent on the objectionable union activity.

*Training of supervisors and managers regarding FAW issues*

Firms would be wise to train supervisors to deal with sensitive issues related to faith, religion and spirituality in the workplace. Indeed, supervisors must be particularly cautious in what they say or do. Where the surrounding circumstances indicate that religious expression is merely the personal view of the supervisor, and that employees are free to reject or ignore the supervisor’s point of view or invitation without any harm to their careers or professional lives, such expression is legally protected (Adams, 2000; Guidelines on Religious Exercise, 1997). Yet, because supervisors have the power to hire, terminate, or promote, employees may reasonably perceive their supervisor’s religious expression as coercive, even if it was not intended as such. Therefore, supervisors should be particularly careful to ensure that their statements and actions are such that employees do not perceive any coercion of religious or non-religious behavior (or respond as if such coercion is occurring), and should, where necessary, take appropriate steps to dispel such misperceptions.

*Hostile environment*
In addition to refraining from indefensible religious discrimination, an employer must maintain a work environment that is not hostile or abusive with regard to religion. Title VII requires that an employer take prompt action to prevent an employee from expressing their opinion in a way that abuses or offends their co-workers (Davis v. Monsanto Chem. Co., 1988). Speech and/or conduct constitutes harassment if it is “severe and pervasive” to alter the conditions of employment and create a hostile or abusive work environment based on an employee’s religion or other protected category (Harris v. Forklift Systems Inc., 1993). A hostile work environment can be created by slurs, jokes, comments and other forms of ridicule, persistent “unwelcome” proselytizing of subordinates or co-workers and any “mandatory” religious activity in the workplace (Venters v. City of Delphi, 1997; Weiss v. United States, 1984; Young v. Southwestern Savings and Loan Ass ’n., 1975). However, merely handing out a religious book does not create a hostile working environment (Taylor v. National Group of Cos., Inc., 1989). Nor would an occasional and isolated utterance of an epithet that engenders offensive feelings in an employee typically be considered harassment. A hostile environment, for Title VII purposes, is not created by the bare expression of speech with which one disagrees.

Management should be particularly vigilant when the phrase “I am offended” is spoken. America’s seemingly hypersensitive culture is hurting freedom of speech considerations (Priority Associates, 2007). People seem to not be able to say anything anymore without someone saying that “I am offended”. This statement has become particularly effective in inhibiting faith-oriented speech. The “I am offended” cohort seems to usually target religious speech that speaks to universal standards and attempts to suppress its expression. This violates the principles upon which the U.S. was founded and outlined in the Constitution. A person does not surrender their rights to free speech simply because someone does not like the content of what they are saying.
The one exception to this viewpoint involves an individual employee speaking to another employee about faith-related ideas and the co-worker asks that the conversation be stopped and the topic not be brought up again. At that point neither employee has a grievance. However, if the first employee persists and the second employee still insists on not discussing it, then this is the first step toward possible religious harassment. Thus, firms should proceed with guarded concern when “I am offended” is voiced.

For religious harassment to be illegal under Title VII, it must be sufficiently severe and pervasive to alter the conditions of employment and create an abusive working environment. Whether conduct can be said to be religious harassment under Title VII depends on the totality of the circumstances, such as the nature of the verbal or physical conduct at issue and the context in which the alleged incidents occurred.

**Conclusion**

For most of the 20th century U.S. society considered it inappropriate to explicitly bring religion into the office. The sentiment was encapsulated in the term, “Sunday-Monday gap” (Miller, 2007, p. 9) where workers’ Sunday worship hour bore little relevance to issues encountered during Monday work hours. The 21st century, however, “is dawning as a century of religion” (Huntington, 2004, p. 15). Faith and spirituality has come into the workplace, and with this phenomenon now public, the “last taboo in corporate America” (Gunther, 2002, p. 59) is disappearing. Therefore, employers increasingly must balance the firm’s and employees’ rights to express their religious beliefs and values while not subjecting other employees to harassment or discriminating against employees on the basis of different and perhaps contradictory religious beliefs. Such tensions have surrounded the latest type of diversity that firms must address—religion at work.
A constellation of social environmental forces identified in this paper have contributed to a more religiously diverse workforce increasingly willing to proclaim their faith. In an ideal work environment, the religious beliefs of a given employee, or of the employer, do not create conflicts. Either is free to believe as he or she chooses and, as long as the work is performed satisfactorily, neither will encounter difficulty on the basis of religion. Yet, in the real world, a number of issues can arise to create friction. An employer and employee may discuss, or even argue over, religious principles; however, religion is not simply a matter of belief but is manifested through various actions such as style of dress, praying, and fasting. Put simply, the many characteristics of different religions provide ample ground for disagreement, conflict, or even harassment among employers and employees. Indeed, religion has become more visible at work and is the latest type of diversity in the workplace that has presented many challenges to organizations. Business leaders need to be attentive to the potential for divisiveness and discrimination if religious and spiritual practices in the workplace are not implemented in inclusive and respectful ways.

Given the caveats presented above, some businesspeople, whether religious or not, feel that integrating faith and work is problematic and seek to institute policies and procedures aimed at minimizing and, in some cases avoiding altogether, religious expression. They promote a level of religious expression commensurate with the least amount of faith-related exhibition allowed by law. Unfortunately, the exact contours of the legal and societal landscape regarding FAW are uncertain. Therefore, leaders adopting this strategy may act at considerable risk in attempting to gauge correctly legal rights and responsibilities affecting faith in the workplace.

Such a minimalist approach may fail to adequately recognize opportunities for improvement in a number of areas. Recent empirical studies have shown that certain dimensions
of religion and spirituality in the workplace, such as meaning making, meditation, and sense of mission, relate positively to job satisfaction, job involvement, and productivity (Garcia-Zamor, 2003; Millman, Czaplewski, and Ferguson, 2003). These positive outcomes may benefit companies as well as their employees. Additionally, companies shown to have strong spiritual corporate cultures economically outperformed others in investment return and shareholder value (Thompson, 2000).

Another difficulty with prohibiting or limiting FAW is the problems it creates for human resource professionals. These managers often must bridge conflicts between the implementation of top management’s strategic objectives and the interests of individual employees (Mello, 2000). A strategy that minimizes religious expression in the workplace will chafe at the increasing number of employees who desire to bring their faith to work. Furthermore, the ability to attract and retain high-performing employees may also be endangered where management adopts an overly restrictive view and thereby engages in self-handicapping behavior since “it is often employees themselves—its human resources—who possess the competitive edge” (Rowden, 1999, p. 27). Leading organizations realize that their most valuable resource is competent employees and the information they possess (Pfeffer, 1994). The old aphorism, “people are our most important asset,” is actually true (Pfeffer, 1998). As a means of attracting and retaining competent workers and the information they possess, firms are becoming more worker-friendly and responsive to their employees’ increasing interest in FAW. It seems only logical then that the next best-practice frontier for firms is to develop faith-friendly policies and practices to honor, respect, and dignify the spiritual dimension of employees’ lives. An inclusive organization must certainly embrace employees’ faith concerns.
Endnotes

1 The terms religion and spirituality are used interchangeably in this paper although the author recognizes that spirituality has become a particularly popular term. It has often used as a synonym for a personal belief in God or Higher Being and a yearning for wholeness that transcends the structured dogmas and doctrines of organized religions. In contrast, the word religion has lost favor in part because Americans understand religion today in more rigid, public, and institutional terms which many people increasingly reject, whereas spirituality is understood as more informal, private, and personal, which most people find attractive (Fuller, 2001). Additionally, the EEOC has historically promulgated guidelines that, to a great extent, parallel and supplement the decisions of the Supreme Court and appear to clearly support nondifferentiation of formal religion and spirituality (Cash and Gray, 2000). In order to move beyond the tired debate between religion and spirituality, the term faith is often used in this paper.

2 85 percent of the world’s people claim some religious affiliation with 74 percent of the world’s population adhering to one of four religions: Christianity, comprising Roman Catholic (17.4 percent), Protestant (12.3 percent), and Eastern Orthodox (3.6 percent); Islam (20.6 percent); Hinduism (14.3 percent); and Buddhism (6.0 percent).

3 The freedom not to believe in a deity is also a protected religious belief under Title VII.

4 Employer-established diversity programs sometimes conflict with employees who feel a religious duty to affirmatively oppose what they consider sinfulness. In Peterson v. Hewlett-Packard Co. (2004), Richard Peterson, a self-described “devout Christian,” felt religiously compelled to post at his work station biblical passages denouncing homosexuality in response to diversity posters hung by his employer that included an employee labeled as “gay.” Determining that the scriptural passages could be offensive to certain employees, management asked that they be removed. Peterson responded that he would remove his scriptures only if Hewlett-Packard removed its diversity posters, which he viewed as condoning homosexuality. Peterson, though otherwise a satisfactory worker, was fired for his refusal, as his postings violated the company’s anti-harassment policy, which forbade conduct that “failed to respect the dignity ... of the individual.” Allowing Peterson’s posting of the scriptures (unless that “gay” diversity poster was removed) was not, the court ruled, a reasonable accommodation to Peterson’s religion: It would either force the employer to accept demeaning and harassing postings in its workplace or infringe on its right to promote diversity and tolerance among its work force and would have inhibited the company’s efforts to attract and retain a qualified, diverse workforce, which the company reasonably viewed as vital to its commercial success.

5 Mandatory “new age” training programs, designed to improve employee motivation, cooperation or productivity through meditation, yoga, biofeedback or other practices, may conflict with the non-discriminatory provisions of Title VII. Employers must accommodate any employee who gives notice that these programs are inconsistent with the employee’s religious beliefs, whether or not the employer believes there is a religious basis for the objection.

6 Chaplain functions generally include being available and being a listening ear and comforting voice for employees, many of whom have spiritual needs but are not members of a particular congregation and do not know where to turn to in times of personal or professional crisis. Chaplains often perform hospital visits, grief counseling, and occasionally even funerals for family members of employees who are not members of a particular congregation or worship community. Many corporations include corporate chaplains as one element within their wellness or employee assistance programs.

7 Affinity groups, also called networking groups, generally speaking are organized around common interests, hobbies, or employee characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, country or origin, and sexual orientation. Initially meant to help support minority and historically disenfranchised populations and serve as a source of networking, today affinity groups are often viewed as mechanisms of attracting and retaining the best talent, and helping to create an organizational culture that that values inclusiveness and diversity.

8 A company’s claim of undue hardship cannot be based on the preferences of its customers even though customer preferences—or prejudices—could well affect a company’s profits. The courts have never found that customer preference was a legitimate business necessity and a valid reason for discrimination. For example, suppose a clerk in a retail store practices a religion that requires a certain style of dress, or covering her face with a scarf. Even if
customers do not like her appearance and choose to shop elsewhere, the employer cannot respond to customer preference by terminating her.

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