

# Workplace matters

## Is there room for God at work?

**Sandi Mann**

In the current climate, religion, already seen by many as an outdated concept, has become a topic subject to heated debate, as fanaticism and extremism become ever more associated with religious fervour. Yet, organised religion shows no sign of fading quietly away and, indeed, there seems to be something of a resurgence in religiosity and spirituality today that is reflected in offices throughout the land – and beyond.

According to Laura Nash, author of *Believers in Business*, 'spirituality in the workplace is exploding'<sup>1</sup>. And this is reflected in the huge increase in books on religion and spirituality lining the bookshelves which, according to one source, reflects the 'growing emphasis on spirituality in society in general'<sup>2</sup>. Combined with increased awareness of diversity and discrimination issues, this means that religion is becoming more, not less, of an issue for today's manager.

Religion can cause a degree of tension amongst employees for a number of reasons. There can be resentment about privileges that religious people are perceived to receive. Tension caused by differences in belief between the religious and non-religious (within the same faith), as well as between members of different faiths may also exist. This can be increased by attempts to 'convert' others to personally held viewpoints, or by negativity shown towards lifestyle choices.

Tension can increase at times of religiously involved terrorist activity: for example, 9/11 or at times when there are other religion-related events at the forefront of public consciousness, such as wars between different religious groups. Managing all these different tensions is an important role for employers who must, through personal example as well as more formal means, foster tolerance and respect for all employees.

Despite this bleak list of areas of potential conflict, it is important to realise that religion in the workplace can bring harmony as well as tension. Many organisations are recognising that the potential for conflict is outweighed by the gains of having people 'of faith' bringing their own brand of spirituality to their workplaces. The emphasis on self-control, communal

responsibility and respect for others that some religions offer is seen by some as an antidote to the perceptions of a society suffering from family breakdown, lack of respect for authority and too much sexual freedom. Religion can appear to offer solutions in an uncertain world and many faiths actively promote a blurring between religious expression and all spheres of life, including work; hence, the upsurge in workplace religiosity and spirituality that seems to be apparent today.

And there could well be benefits to be gleaned from accommodating 'people of faith' in the workplace: for example, there is some evidence within the US of a correlation between religion and what might broadly be called 'niceness'. In *Gross National Happiness*<sup>3</sup>, Arthur Brooks points out that atheists are less charitable than their God-fearing counterparts: they donate less blood and are less likely to offer change to homeless people on the street. Translated into the workplace, this could manifest itself into what is termed 'organisational citizenship behaviours' (OCBs): those behaviours that benefit the organisation rather than the individual.

Individuals with strong OCBs would be less likely to steal pens and office resources, make personal phone calls or use work computers for personal stuff. Religious people who believe that there is always someone watching them may well be more likely to engage in OCBs than others. Certainly, at least one study does show a link between the extent to which one is religious and one's ethical business behaviour<sup>4</sup>.

The benefits that religious beliefs have brought to business enterprises abound in the literature. For example, Timberland's CEO in 1999, Jeffrey B Awartz, was an orthodox Jew who used his religious beliefs to guide business decisions and company policy. According to website Minyanville, Indra Nooyi, CEO of PepsiCo, a devout Hindu, has drawn upon her religious beliefs to foster a culture of diversity and inclusion at the soft-drink manufacturing company she heads. Conrad Hilton, founder of the Hilton Hotels Group, drew upon his Christian ideology to develop his business (as did Walmart

founder, Sam Walton). UK business leaders are perhaps less forthcoming about the influence of religion in their working lives, though former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, provides a good example of this, as his Tony Blair Faith Foundation testifies.

Religion in the workplace is a complicated issue which the astute manager should embrace rather than shy away from. Accommodation should also be made where feasible but other workers must not be alienated or feel resentful of these. Similarly, people of faith have a responsibility to foster good relations at work, too, with the emphasis for all being on tolerance and acceptance, rather than resentment and conflict.

### References

- 1 Religion in the Workplace. Businessweek Online. [Online] [http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99\\_44/b3653001.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99_44/b3653001.htm). 1 November 1999.
- 2 Cash KC, Gray GR. A framework for accommodating religion and spirituality in the workplace. *Academy of Management Executive* 2000;14(3):124–133.
- 3 Brooks AC. *Gross national happiness: why happiness matters for America and how we can get more of it*. New York: Basic Books; 2008.
- 4 Worden S. Religion in strategic leadership: a positivistic, normative/theological, and strategic analysis. *Journal of Business Ethics* 2005; 57: 221–239.



**Dr Sandi Mann** is Senior Lecturer in Occupational Psychology at the University of Central Lancashire and Director of The MindTraining Clinic. She is author of several psychology self-help books including *Manage Your Anger and Overcoming Phobias and Panic Attacks* (both Hodder and Stoughton). [smann@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:smann@uclan.ac.uk)