

# Reconciling Spirituality and Workplace: Towards a Balanced Proposal for Occupational Health

Miguel González-González<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 16 August 2017  
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**Abstract** We examined the relationship between spirituality in the workplace and occupational health and explored the benefits for employees, employers and the organisation. Using a qualitative methodology, we focused on secular organisations in the service sector to analyse this question in the context of labour relations in Europe. Our results indicate that embracing spirituality in the workplace yields a number of benefits in addition to those of a health-related nature. Religious beliefs and practices can be accommodated in the workplace provided that a balance is maintained between the needs of employers and employees.

**Keywords** Spirituality · Workplace · Occupational health · Compatibility · Anthropology of work

## Introduction

In recent years, the role of human resource (HR) management within organisations has become one of the most important issues in research on labour relations and organisational culture because of its potential to contribute effectively to the well-being of workers. Interdisciplinary, transnational studies (Bartram and Dowling 2013) have revealed that HR management exerts a significant influence on workers' attitudes, perceptions, decision-making, behaviours, the work environment, organisational culture and, in general, the health of workers and the organisation. These studies show that occupational health may be influenced by two factors: working conditions and the work environment. Working conditions include maximum and minimum age limits for employment, the number of working hours per day and week, time for rest and food, social security, salaries, compensation and other issues that are usually covered in labour legislation. The work environment refers to

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✉ Miguel González-González  
migog@unileon.es

<sup>1</sup> Antropología Social -Departamento de Historia, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de León, Campus de Vegazana, 24071 León, Spain

social relationships within the organisation, which are influenced by organisational culture and atmosphere, and affects occupational health. An increasing number of studies on the work environment have associated spirituality and religiosity in the workplace with occupational well-being and health. However, as Krause (2011) has indicated, the growing body of research suggesting that religion can exert a beneficial effect on the physical and mental health of workers and people in general has unfortunately rendered it difficult to obtain a clear picture of what has been achieved so far.

The aim of the present study was to analyse the influence, effects and implications of the relationship between religion and spirituality in the workplace and occupational and organisational health. First, we reviewed the corpus of research that has specifically associated religiosity in the work environment with occupational well-being and health. This can affect employees, employers and organisations alike; however, we focused—although not exclusively—on employees.

We employed a qualitative methodology for this social anthropology study, using techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups. Fieldwork was carried out between 2013 and 2015, with a total of 47 individuals, of whom 21 were men and 26 were women, all aged between 21 and 62 years old. We also had access to 8 employers. Participants worked in non-religious service sector organisations (education, communications and new technologies) in northern Spain/southern Europe. We explained the study procedures and objectives to recruited participants and obtained their informed consent. The rejection rate was 4.5%.

Rather than simply reporting our substantial ethnographic fieldwork, in this article we analyse and reflect on the subject under study and, due to space constraints, only refer explicitly to our fieldwork when absolutely necessary.

## Definition and Concept

In general, the literature on cultural anthropology and social psychology suggests that religion is highly beneficial to humans. Based on this premise, from among the many groups whose health could potentially be benefitted by spirituality and religion, we focused on the economically active population in the workplace, from the perspective of the anthropology of work and organisations.

Mitroff and Denton (1999) noted that this subject has not been comprehensively and systematically addressed in depth in organisations or academia; nonetheless, in a review of the literature on this subject covering the period 1994–2003, Sheep (2004) found evidence of conceptual convergence between the various authors studied when discussing the issue of spirituality in the workplace. This convergence occurs in four recurring themes: self-workplace integration; meaning in work; transcendence of the phenomenological self; and personal growth and development through work.

As with the concept of spirituality, there is a diversity of perceptions and definitions of spirituality in the workplace. According to Jurkiewicz and Giacalone (2004), spirituality at work can be defined as a framework of organisational values that are expressed in the culture and which promote an experience of transcendence in employees through the processes of work, facilitating their sense of connection with others in a way that engenders feelings of happiness and wholeness.

Given the wide variety of aspects encompassed within definitions of spirituality at work, some authors have elected to present those they have been able to identify, whereas others,

in pursuit of greater clarity, have indicated aspects found in organisations where spirituality is promoted at work. According to Edelberg (2006), these aspects include business ethics, truth, belief in God or a higher power, respect, understanding, openness, honesty, self-motivation, stimulation of creativity, giving to others, trust, kindness, orientation towards teamwork, few organisational barriers, a sense of peace and harmony, an aesthetically pleasing workplace, interconnection, support for diversity and acceptance. In short, the words that best summarise spirituality at work are interconnection, meaning and self-fulfilment.

Furthermore, after examining several studies on spirituality and work behaviour, Mohamed et al. (2004) proposed four hypotheses about the relationship of these constructs and established that for each of them, high levels of individual spirituality were associated with various organisational attitudes and preferences. They indicated that the higher a person's degree of spirituality, the greater his or her tendency to support democratic leadership styles, exhibit altruistic behaviour, participate in organisational citizenship, show more commitment to the organisation and work teams and be more tolerant of problems at work.

Other studies such as those mentioned by Pérez Santiago (2007) suggest that encouraging spirituality at work can benefit aspects such as creativity, honesty, trust, commitment and self-fulfilment, all of which ultimately lead to better performance and greater success for the organisation.

Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) have argued that supporting organisational strategies that promote spirituality at work can bring benefits in the areas of creativity, honesty, trust, sense of achievement personal and individual commitment, which again result in improved organisational performance and achievement.

## Spirituality Within the Framework of Labour Relations in Europe

Although freedom of religion is well established as a fundamental right in Europe, the extent to which this applies to the workplace is still a matter of debate. Two main areas enter into conflict on the question of religion at work, and these have generated some prominent cases in recent years which have received significant media attention: one involves religious workers within a company, or in what are referred to as secular organisations, and the extent to which religious individuals can expect an organisation to accommodate their religious needs. The other refers to the interests of religious organisations and the extent to which they should be governed by laws of equality. The questions that immediately arise are: can religious employees reasonably expect time off for prayer or other religious observances? And can religious organisations demand staff hold certain beliefs in order to work in the organisation?

As defined in various legal texts on labour relations (Malone et al. 1998d), spirituality can be considered a belief in the supernatural, sacred or divine and, in moral codes, practices, rituals, values and institutions related to the same, including all aspects of religious observance and practice. Consequently, as Fahlbeck (2004) has indicated, the right to freedom of religion, considered one of the fundamental rights of citizens, even in the workplace, protects both positive and negative rights, and even the right to change belief.

In the European Union, Directive 2000/78/EC of the Council of the European Union, of 27 November 2000 (Council Directive 2000), establishes the fundamental right to freedom

of religion within a general framework of equal treatment in employment and occupation. It should be borne in mind that in its constant fight against inequality, the EU also protects religious freedom in the context of labour relations. Thus, the exercise of freedom of religion has many nuances that cannot be disregarded. For example, as Malone et al. (1998b) have indicated, religious discrimination may be linked to racial origin due to the association between ethnicity and creed, as in the case of the Jews. Therefore, as Bradney (1993) has noted, measures that clash with the religious faith of certain workers mask indirect racial discrimination. At the same time, religious freedom may clash with the principle of equality, for example, if a male worker refuses to work with women or to share his space with them (Malone et al. 1998c). Given the heterogeneous casuistry, one could question along with Rodríguez-Piñero and Bravo-Ferrer (2003) the extent to which the ethical convictions and clear conscience inherent to human dignity, and consequently subjective religious feeling, are protected. The question of the ideological and religious freedom of workers is probably most evident in ideological companies; however, due to mass migration, it is also of considerable and growing importance in companies which do not profess a specific ideology, but whose workers have non-specific rights and duties such as religious freedom.

Our fieldwork revealed that the concessions requested by employees associated with religion in the workplace generally concerned “timetable changes”, “proselytising among work colleagues”, “clothing required by a given religion”, “the display of religious materials” and “the possibility to pray, study or discuss during break time”, etc. These are undoubtedly sensitive issues that require compliance with legal regulations to reduce the possibility of disputes, but this compliance is no easy task. There is always the risk that one or more employees may denounce the existence of religious harassment or discrimination in an organisation. However, this conflict of interest often arises not between the two sides of the employment relationship, but between those at the same level, whether between employees or between company partners. Examples include “an employee who wore a religious symbol that other workers considered offensive to their faith”, “a worker who proselytised among colleagues, warning them of the adverse consequences of their lack of faith” and these complained to the employer, “who did not know what to do about either the beliefs or the colleagues” and another “worker who criticised the “uncontrolled” behaviour of colleagues, such as marital infidelity, fondness for drink, or other addictions, citing religious reasons”.

Most employees work in non-ideological organisations, but nevertheless often manifest the desire for a space for personal expression within the company (Malone et al. 1998a). Although this is usually in relation to other fundamental rights (such as privacy or freedom of expression), there is also clear scope for application in relation to the right to religious freedom.

The results of our fieldwork indicate that people who believe in a transcendental reality and express this through the profession of a religion will behave in coherence with their faith in all aspects of their lives, including employment, since they consider this a transcendent truth that explains the meaning of human life. Moreover, to some extent, they will expect the company for which they work to allow them to live and work in accordance with their beliefs.

Similarly, the legitimate interests of employers lead them to manage their productive organisation in keeping with the criteria of technical and economic efficiency, and thus, on occasions, a worker’s demands may clash with what an employer considers most advantageous for the company. This creates what Fahlbeck (2004) has identified as a new conflict between employees and employers, which as with so many other issues related to

labour relations, requires a detailed analysis of situations. The real problem arises when an external manifestation is pursued, as this may affect the services provided by the company and therefore clash with business interests. It could even entail a risk to safety, as in one case mentioned where a worker wearing a long robe ran the risk of becoming caught in machinery and equipment. The employer would be entitled to prohibit this if it presented a high risk to the health or even to the life of the worker (Atkinson 2000).

Nonetheless, our fieldwork also revealed instances of the opposite situation, whereby religious employers have attempted to organise their companies in accordance with their religious precepts, entailing the risk of converting these companies into what Esau (1993) has termed “islands of exclusivity”. In the cases we studied, such policies sometimes masked discrimination, especially when adopted without the appropriate precautionary measures and where, as Vickers (2003) has reported, workers were expected live in accordance with the employer’s own moral standards and could encounter problems at work if they did not comply.

In this situation, the worker’s right to religious freedom involves the right to refuse and request that the employer adopt a “principle of neutrality” (Rodríguez-Piñero and Bravo-Ferrer 2003), whereby workers cannot be obliged to participate in practices in which they do not believe, in accordance with their own ideology, or may participate, if they consider it opportune, but always within the parameters of freedom of choice (Adams 2000; Malone et al. 1998d).

Fieldwork shows that in principle, employers can carry out “official” company actions of a religious nature, but should make it clear to workers that their participation is absolutely voluntary, and that participation or not in such acts will in no way affect their employment or promotion opportunities within the company. Similarly, in accordance with the criteria of equality and non-discrimination established in the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations issued in 2003 by the European Union, job applicants may not be rejected during recruitment procedures (Vickers 2003) on the grounds of professing (or not professing) a particular religion or given ideas or beliefs, just as they may not be rejected because of sex or race (Malone et al. 1998d; Vickers 2004).

However, it is difficult to identify the right solution “when I, as an employer, do not want to hire a particular worker because he or she professes a given religion” or because “I prefer another one, who although not as well qualified, conforms to the moral profile that I the employer am seeking”.

## **Between Discrimination and Religious Accommodation in the Workplace**

One aspect underlying the question analysed here is the problem of discrimination at work for religious reasons. This has been addressed in depth in various disciplines by numerous authors, including Delpo (2000), Adams (2000), Waddington and Hendriks (2002), Weller et al. (2001) and Vickers (2004). These have reported direct discrimination, for example, when a person is treated in an unfavourable way because of his or her religion or beliefs; when employers refuse to hire religious people in general; or when they employ people professing a particular religion under more favourable conditions than those for people professing another religion. Although there is no justification for direct discrimination, according to Vickers (2015) there is one exception, namely when a religion or belief constitutes an obstacle to performing a job due to the nature of the occupation or the context in which it is carried out, in which case it is reasonable to impose certain

requirements and any resulting discrimination is lawful. As Mitchell et al. (2015) have indicated, the fundamental question is to what extent all the interests in conflict are suitably accommodated.

Indirect discrimination also occurs and operates in a similar manner. Thus, rejecting a religious employee's request for different treatment or accommodation may amount to indirect discrimination unless the refusal can be justified. This interpretation of indirect discrimination has some legal support, since the lack of reasonable accommodation is considered proof that the employer's refusal to modify requirements is disproportionate. Underlying this situation is the question of whether the creation of an explicit duty to accommodate religion at work would improve protection of religion and beliefs at work, and this remains a matter of much debate (Alidadi et al. 2012; Loenen 2012; Gibson 2013). What does seem clear, however, is that pursuant to current European legislation, religious employees are entitled to effective accommodation of their religious needs in a secular workplace, based on a proportionality assessment to determine the facts and context of the case.

The report of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC 2013) cited by Vickers (2015) indicates that religion or beliefs affect whether job seekers, employees and customers are of their legal rights, believe that the law is effective and have direct experience of discrimination due to their religion or beliefs. In agreement with Weller et al. (2013), the EHRC (2013) and Mitchell et al. (2015), our fieldwork revealed that over the last decade, many workplaces have implemented policies and practices to accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce as regards religion.

These legal developments indicate greater recognition of the importance of the workplace as an environment in which religious freedom and equality must be respected. This is partly due to the fact that for many workers, it is not possible to separate religious observance from work, because religious practices such as dress codes or prayer times cannot be put aside during working hours (Weller et al. 2013).

Regardless, a fundamental principle to prevent discrimination is that an employer has no right to know or judge (Esau 1993) a worker's religious beliefs (Malone et al. 1998d). In situations like this, experts on labour law (Fernández et al. 2007) have formulated a legal structure that has gained popularity, known as the "right to lie". Thus, if an employer asks inappropriate personal, private or intimate questions, for example, enquiring into religion, political affiliation, trade union membership, the possibility of having children in the future or sexual orientation, employees or job applicants are entitled to give a false response tailored to what they think the employer "wants to hear" in order to avoid adverse consequences (Bible and McWirter 1990). It is a different matter if the employer wishes to find out about aspects that could affect the employment relationship, including religious beliefs: "I need to know if a worker can comply with the company's work timetable and calendar, or if their religious practices will clash with our stipulated hours, I need to know about these issues". In this case, the employer's enquiry is strictly related to work, obliging workers to respond truthfully, although they are not required to declare the beliefs that prevent them from undertaking the duties associated with the job (Malone et al. 1998d). Conversely, a clause allowing employers to impose their beliefs on workers (Adams 2000) or oblige them to participate in religious practices would clearly be detrimental to fundamental rights, even if the workers were willing to accept them "voluntarily" in order to avoid dismissal (Fahlbeck 2004).

In short, if one accepts this thesis, employers have the negative duty to refrain from intruding on workers' beliefs and the positive duty to accommodate their employees' religious practices as far as possible, applying flexible criteria that render their interests

compatible with the fundamental rights of their workers (Malone et al. 1998a) provided that the workers' beliefs are "sincere" (Adams 2000; Vickers 2004). Regardless, as Hager (2000) has indicated, it may be easy for the employer to assign the task in question to another worker with different beliefs for whom it does not pose an ethical dilemma, reassigning other tasks to the objector to compensate for this (Malone et al. 1998c).

In general, employers should be able to reconcile these two aspects and forge, if not a "secular company", then at least a "neutral company", which may be ideologically committed but at the same time fully observes workers' right to religious freedom (Fahlbeck 2004), and workers should never be made to feel that their continued employment or possible promotion within the company depends on adhering to these beliefs and religious practices (Adams 2000; Delpo 2000). Similarly, employees cannot be expected to behave in their private lives in accordance with the moral dictates of their employer's religion, nor can employers penalise workers who do not abide by their precepts, for example, a strict employer who is unable to accept the divorce of one of his or her employees (Vickers 2008).

In addition to not encroaching on their employees' beliefs and behaviours, employers also have a positive task, which is to ensure the peaceful and tolerant coexistence of employees—a difficult but not impossible goal (Smith 2001). They should neither commit nor permit "harassment on religious grounds": neither the employee nor a group of workers should display unwanted behaviour relative to the religion or beliefs of other workers with the purpose of creating a hostile environment and threatening the latter's human dignity, a concept that is specifically referred to in the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations of 2003 (Vickers 2003). Although the right to observe religion includes proselytising, this right is not absolute and should be restricted wherever inappropriate. Attempting to convert others is inappropriate if this interferes with their right to freedom from harassment at work, because the right to religious freedom does not include the right of practitioners to harass others. Similarly, the question of whether religious employees can share their religious opinions, particularly when these beliefs involve negative views on homosexuality, is an issue that has affected a number of religious groups and appears frequently in the literature on the subject (Mitchell et al. 2015). In some cases, discourse on religious attitudes to homosexuality can be seen as harassment, and consequently, this discourse could be restricted at work. In such cases, the freedom to discuss religious doctrine must be balanced with the need to protect the dignity of other workers.

## Continuities and Complicities Between Spirituality and Work

To speak of spirituality in the workplace seems a contradiction in terms, but further investigation (Edelberg 2006) indicates that it is not, and that in fact, far from contradicting each other, the two terms complement each other quite well. It is unnecessary to dwell on this subject, since the question was comprehensively discussed and the benefits demonstrated in the 1990s. It seems essential to develop a corporate soul that encompasses intangible aspects of the human spirit such as the need for meaning, purpose, empathy, care and participation (Piper 2005). The corporate soul sets in motion the deepest and most sacred human possibilities, stimulating creativity, energy, passion for work and living life to the full (Izzo and Klein 1989). As an executive explained, encouraging people to talk about the concept of the corporate soul means making them talk about how employees and



managers are connected to each other and to the person who benefits from the work (Brown 1998). The proliferation of faith-friendly companies indicates the importance of this aspect, both for the health of the company and for the occupational health of workers and managers. Through the formation of religious networks or groups, these can try to regain direction, meaning and balance in their lives and, ultimately, well-being.

Closely linked to the concept of well-being, spirituality in the workplace exerts a powerful effect on subjective perceptions of health (Dein 2005; Sperry et al. 2007). Spirituality is related to aspects of the workplace that promote individual feelings of transcendence and satisfaction, which in turn are projected onto the group and the organisation (Noor and Arif 2011). Such transcendence is related to interconnectedness and completeness (Milliman et al. 2003; Noor and Arif 2011). It enhances people's inner life and consequently improves job satisfaction and subjective perceptions of health. High levels of spirituality mitigate perceptions of occupational stress and contribute to well-being and health (Rathi and Rastogi 2007). Consistent with these claims, very spiritual people present good self-esteem, a predominantly internal locus of control, effective stress management mechanisms, high tolerance levels and abundant emotional intelligence (Goldstein 2007). Thus, promoting spirituality at work could be a way to reinforce the relationship between spirituality and resilience (Rodríguez et al. 2011) and to enhance feelings of well-being (Arnold et al. 2007), workers' health (Sperry et al. 2007) and organisational performance. In this respect, authors such as Van Der Walt (2007) have explicitly indicated a close and positive relationship between job satisfaction and spirituality. Everything seems to indicate that high levels of spirituality generate affective commitment to the organisation and intrinsic job satisfaction (Moore and Casper 2006).

Last but not least, we should also mention that the potential benefits for occupational health of participation in a community of faith seem to be influenced by sex, as was also reflected in our fieldwork. Thus, Koenig et al. (2001) indicated that women are more likely to attend religious services, pray in private, report that religion is important in their lives and rely on religion as a coping behaviour. Therefore, it is possible that religious beliefs and practices are more deeply rooted in the social and psychological lives of women, and hence, they obtain greater benefits as regards their occupational health and life in general. On the other hand, research by Snarey and Dollahite (2001) has indicated that religion has a greater impact on the behaviour and well-being of men than of women. Although in principle these two conclusions seem contradictory, Koenig et al. (2001) reported that the data obtained from an across-gender comparison clearly showed that more women are more religiously involved than is the case for men. Meanwhile, Snarey and Dollahite (2001) concluded from studies incorporating a within-gender comparison that the differences between religious and non-religious men tended to be more pronounced than those between religious and non-religious women. As Marks (2005) has observed, in context, both statements are well founded and shed light on the relationship between spirituality and the workplace and its impact on occupational health.

## Conclusions

Here, we have attempted to describe the benefits organisations may accrue from allowing spirituality and religion in the workplace. Although one could argue that religion is a private matter that has no place at work, such an opinion stems from an overly functional view of work and the workplace. Few now would agree that work is based solely on the



economic transaction entailed in an employment contract. Instead, for most people, work forms a significant part of their lives: it is where people meet each other, participate in society in general, obtain economic benefits, experience personal and professional development and express aspects of their personality. Work constitutes an environment that should be healthy for employers, employees and customers alike, and therefore, it seems inappropriate to exclude religion from the workplace.

However, it should also be acknowledged that protection of religious freedom in the workplace can generate tensions, for example, between equality of rights and between religious interests and the economic interests of employers. Consequently, religious people can expect their religious practices or beliefs to be accommodated at work provided there is a reasonable balance between the needs of employees and those of their employers.

As Vickers (2015) has observed, proportionality continues to be the most effective means to protect religious interests in the context of the workplace, despite the difficulty of achieving a balance between employers' economic freedom, equal treatment of employers and service users' interests.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** Miguel González-González declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Human and Animal Rights** This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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