

Religion and Work:

Introduction to a Symposium

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Religion is an important influence on the world of work, as the faithful bring their values into the workplace. Religion is inevitably shaped by people's experiences at work as well. The essays in this *Perspectives on Work* symposium explore the relevance of religious doctrine and practice on labor and human resource management issues.

A Survival Tool with Contested— and Often Evolving—Meaning

Religion is a tool for survival in an uncertain world. The realities of mortality, pain, and oppression contrasted with the joys of family, friendship, and opportunity provide irreconcilable contradictions. We embrace religion to help us maintain the energy to confront contradiction, to attune ourselves to hope and possibility and attenuate fear. Religion helps mediate both day to day concerns and life cycle issues. As we spend a substantial proportion of our lives at work, religion may help us grapple with the trials, abuses, and opportunities in this sphere. This was true of African-American slaves transforming the Christianity of their masters to sustain them in bondage, and it is true today of farm workers seeking solace in Catholic fellowship.

Within most (if not all) religious communities, there are both employees and managers, and inevitably there are different interests manifested. Religious leaders advance positions on workplace issues, sometimes embracing the interests of low-status workers, sometimes sanctioning the privileges of management, sometimes asserting a unity of interests. Religious institutions, meanwhile, cannot be wholly untouched by crass economics. They require capital, own property, provide welfare services, manage employees, and attend to the retirement of their staff; they are inevitably wrapped up in the conflicts within society, and religious formations ally with or against powerful groups.¹

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There is seldom doctrinal or practical consistency as to the implications of religious doctrine on labor issues. While the Jesus Christ of many of the Gospels scorned the rich and embraced the poor (and the Social Gospel and liberation theology reaffirm these values), leading Protestant thinkers from Calvin to today have regarded wealth as a sign of piety. Moreover, religious doctrine changes over time as it reflects conflict and change in the larger society.

The pro-union policies of the Jewish Labor Committee reflect values consis-

tent with the calls of the prophets of the Old Testament. However, there is no unanimity about labor questions within and between Jewish denominations. While the experience of Jewish immigrants in the United States inclined many to identify with organized labor, the exploitive employers faced by Jewish garment workers were Jewish as well. The so-called "Protocols of Peace," establishing a regime of labor-management cooperation in the twentieth century in New York City, derived impetus from common Jewish identity, but shared identity had not prevented tenement sweatshops. The Jewish prophetic tradition continues to inspire activism in defense of the world's oppressed, but meets the opposition of more parochial and conservative constituencies.²

Varying Interpretations

The interpretation of religion doctrine is always contested. For example, scholars of Catholicism argue about the inclusion or exclusion of particular Gospels. Some note that the position of women in the church suffers as a result of the absence of a Gospel of Mary Magdalene. The First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. altered the character of Christianity by ruling certain tendencies heretical, suppressing debate, asserting hierarchical control, and mixing church and empire. Both the character of approved Gospels and the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church have reinforced a conservative legacy with respect to women's rights.³

Shia and Sunni among Muslims struggle, sometimes violently, over their in-

terpretations of Islam. Iranian dissidents find Shia doctrines critical to calls for democratic and trade union rights, while the conservative clerics justify their repression through appeal to the same religious philosophy.⁴

Churches and religious organizations own many hospitals and schools in the United States. Theory and practice come into collision as managers struggle with the teachings of their churches and managerial strategy. Since the 1800s and the promulgation of *Tertium Quid* and other papal encyclicals, the Catholic Church has been formally committed to acceptance of unionism and collective bargaining. The church has recognized a need to support the economic interests of those in its flock; indeed, so-called "labor priests," like the late Monsignor



George Higgins, mobilized the faithful on behalf of organized labor. However, hospital and school administrators often feel pressed to act differently. The administration of the University of Great Falls in Montana, a Catholic institution, fought faculty unionism with assistance from judicial decisions exempting church employers from regulation; they opposed unionism despite church doctrine. Conservative leaders in the church emphasize hierarchical authority over Catholic social doctrine.⁵

Adventist hospital administrators have not faced a comparable conflict. Adventist doctrine finds unionism incompatible with the notion that personal action should be guided by individual conscience (not by a collective like unionism). Of course, individual Adventists have joined unions and some directly challenge the church policy on this question.

The stance of a religious community on labor questions is influenced by many factors. These can include the jobs held by (and socio-economic wellbeing of) the faithful, the economic stakes perceived by the religious hierarchy, the religion's reliance on hierarchical or more democratic organizational structures, and the level of tolerance and religious freedom prevailing in the larger society. A religion's organizational structure reflects its worldview and helps determine its alliances. Consider the organizational differences between the hierarchical Catholic Church and laterally organized Friends Meetings. The American Friends Service Committee champions pacifism and problem-solving. The Catholic Church mediates between an array of constituencies: the working class and poor, clerical interests, and rich supporters.

In this symposium, we find evidence

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of the debates about labor's status from within varied religious communities. Rabbi Jill Jacobs describes her advocacy of the rights of janitors. She suggests that Jewish teachings mandate mutual respect by employee and employer. Jill Kriesky argues that the Christian faith community, evangelical and liberal, has provided decisive support to West Virginia Mineworkers. Richard Marens finds that Catholic doctrine was an important influence on the philosophy of the United Auto Workers (and Congress of Industrial Organization) and may have contributed to errors in labor strategy. Warner Woodworth considers the views of Mormon pioneers and contemporary leaders as they relate to labor issues. He notes that that Church's founders were critical of the excesses of capitalism, but this reformist zeal appears to have abated.

In a world of multiple perils exacerbated by religious strife, there is much to be gained by finding common ground among religions. Compassion for labor has a place in the doctrines of many faiths. We help to advance justice and peace by uncovering this reality and defending the best in our respective traditions.

NOTES

1. Demerath, N. J. *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
2. Greenwald, R. A. *The Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).
3. King, K. *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2003).
4. Chaulia, S. "Shia Democracy: Myth or Reality," *Worldpress.org* (February 16, 2007), http://www.worldpress.org/print_

article.cfm?article_id=2799&dont=yes. Accessed June 9, 2008.

5. Henriques, D.B. "Where Faith Abides, Employees Have Few Rights," *New York Times* (October 9, 2006), <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/09/business/09religious.html?scp=1&sq=university%20of%20great%20falls&st=cse>. Accessed June 9, 2008.



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