An excerpt and adaptation from the introduction of
Religion and the Workplace: Pluralism, Spirituality, and Leadership

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The standard approaches in leadership studies, organizational culture, and human resource management pay inadequate attention to religious beliefs and practices at work. In models of the secular workplace, religion is clearly a "private" matter and should be excluded from "private" sector workplaces. My analysis argues that labeling either religion or business as private is descriptively inaccurate and morally problematic. The religious commitments of employees find their way into the workplace in one way or another, whether or not managers or scholars acknowledge it. Managers should create conditions under which employees are able to express their religion at work within certain moral constraints.

In contrast, advocates of "spiritual leadership" recognize that the workplace is not properly understood or managed as a secular sphere, but they depend upon an untenable dichotomization of spirituality (which is welcome at work) and religion (which is not welcome). Despite the fact that many practitioners accept such a spiritual-religious distinction, problems with its conceptual and practical applications persist. Most accounts of spiritual leadership disguise genuine differences of perspective and potential conflict behind happy (and often false) commonality. In addition, too many scholars and corporate leaders portray spirituality as the latest leadership tool to be used in the quest for increased efficiency and profitability.

In recent public discussions about corporate scandals marked by leaders' deception, greed, and corruption, journalists and scholars have called upon American corporate leaders to demonstrate more social responsibility, exercise servant leadership, and cultivate a moral character. Some commentators assert that bringing more "faith" or "soul" or "values" (and these terms are often thrown about interchangeably) into the workplace is a ready solution. Such perspectives overlook the diversity of moral values --which values?-- and they make a facile assumption that people from religious and spiritual backgrounds are more likely than their coworkers to act ethically.

In the United States, a solid majority of citizens claim Christianity as their "religious preference." (Fewer than half, however, are regular participants in a congregation.) A voluminous literature of popular and scholarly works advises Christians on how to live out their faith at work. Most of these authors rightly note that Christian theological and moral traditions have a great deal to say about economic life. Few of them, however, pay proper attention to the religious diversity of coworkers or to the problematic nature of culturally established Christian workplaces.

If the respective fields of leadership and management studies have avoided religion, the academic discipline of religious studies has overlooked the workplace. Scholars' most in-depth examinations of religion in public life have addressed politics or civil society. In the U.S., these discussions focus on "civil religion" in presidential pronouncements,

predominantly legal debates over religious and government institutions ("church and state"), and the potential relationship of religious involvement and social capital. In terms of religion and the economy, religious ethicists have analyzed the "meaning of work," the social responsibility of corporations, and questions of distributive justice. Scholars of religion have devoted scant direct attention, however, to religion and the workplace. Increasingly, the workplace has become a significant and public sphere in which people of diverse religious perspectives encounter one another; it thus merits scholarly attention. Supporters of models such as the secular workplace, spiritual leadership, and Christian preference will encounter challenges in this book. They will take issue with some points of my analysis, because I argue that each of those views is significantly flawed. At the same time, these scholars and practitioners will also find areas of agreement or complementarity with their perspectives. I intend my criticisms to be constructive and hope that the ensuing debates will contribute to workplace policies and cultures that respect, on equal terms, employees of all backgrounds.

Making sense of religion and spirituality in the workplace requires an understanding of the changes in U.S. society in the post-World War II period that have come to bear on religion in public life and the workplace. Chapter 1 examines how developments in immigration policy, especially in 1965, significantly widened the scope and degree of religious (and racial, ethnic, and cultural) diversity in the United States. More recently, the responses to the events of September 11, 2001, brought the questions of religiously based conflict and religiously based discrimination to the center of public debate. How has the changing American context transformed the relationship of religion and business in the past fifty years?

How has the current interest in religion and, especially, spirituality in the workplace arisen? What factors have contributed to the corporate interest in spirituality? Chapter 2 attributes the recent interest in spirituality to demographic, economic, and religious trends in the U.S. and to transformations in the nature and organization of work. Some of the factors that have led people to embrace spirituality in the workplace are positive, while others are morally troubling. Is it possible to determine how much of the current interest entails genuine respect for workers and their needs and, in contrast, how much reflects companies' efforts to take advantage of employees?

How can businesses adapt to increasing religious and spiritual diversity? Chapter 3 asserts that the literature on spirituality and work tends to emphasize the sameness or commonality that is supposedly at the root of spirituality-- rather than the religious particularity that appears at first glance to be (and often is) diive. Employees from different religious and spiritual perspectives may well be able to find significant common ground, but commonality should not simply be assumed.

Is religious expression more controversial, difficult, or incomprehensible than other kinds of potential conflict among coworkers? Chapter 4 considers individual-level and institutional-level issues concerning religion in relation to conflicts based on spiritual, political, and cultural expression at work. A variety of recent cases that have received

media attention serve as examples. Are there ways to address conflict without subscribing to a reductionist view of religious difference?

Chapter 5 offers a map of various ways in which individual employees express their religious commitments differently from one another. What does it mean to "be religious at work"? Some persons, coming from minority traditions, wear distinctive garb that sets them apart from most of their coworkers. Other employees, for various reasons, keep their beliefs and practices to themselves and are thus not overtly religious at work, but their commitments still fundamentally influence their actions. Some employees do not identify as religious or spiritual; many (but not all) of these persons would prefer a secular workplace. Chapter 5 traces the variety of religious and spiritual forms, among other kinds of diversity, in the workforce.

What happens to religious diversity when an organization supports a religion of the workplace? Chapter 6 analyzes the institutional roles of religion in the workplace. The chapter draws upon the concepts of civil religion and established religion in the political sphere in order to draw analogies to institutionalized beliefs and practices in the workplace. The case of "corporate chaplains" is considered as a curious and problematic intersection of workplace spirituality and established Christianity.
Chapter 7 explores religion, public life, and the workplace in India and Singapore. These two very different societies experience tremendous degrees of religious diversity, each contrasting explicitly with a neighboring Islamic state. Given their distinct histories, how have India and Singapore shaped a pluralistic identity? My analysis offers neither of these nations as a wholly positive model for addressing diversity in the U.S. society or workplace-- indeed there are morally problematic features with each. Yet this cross-national examination informs the examination of the U.S. context.

My constructive proposal for respectful pluralism is developed and applied in chapters 8 and 9. Given the complexities detailed in earlier chapters, can a moral framework give adequate guidance to company leaders who wish to respect the diverse religious, spiritual, political, and cultural identities of employees? What can employees expect from their companies and what can companies rightly ask of their employees? This moral framework presupposes the legal minimums of religious expression guaranteed by U.S. laws, and it argues that a level of respect higher than the legal minimum guarantees is due to employees. Chapter 8 outlines the moral argument for respectful pluralism and applies the framework to specific scenarios in the workplace.

Chapter 9 asserts that respectful pluralism connects to various themes of leadership studies, such as organizational culture, ethics, diversity, and critical thinking. What requirements does the framework place on leaders? Is constructing respectful pluralism itself an act of leadership? Chapter 9 concludes with a discussion of some limitations of my perspective and some central implications and areas for future research on religion and the workplace.

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How can leaders and followers negotiate religious differences in their workplace? Respectful pluralism is a framework, not a specific blueprint, for addressing inevitable conflicts that result from religious, spiritual, and other differences in the workplace. Pragmatic and moral issues that are context-specific will require that the view be adapted to fit well in any actual organization. Nonetheless, at a time in which Americans have endorsed a vision of a national community in which people of many faiths (and no professed faith) are invited to participate in all spheres of society, this framework of respectful pluralism can contribute to a conversation about religion and spirituality at work and in other spheres of public life. I hope that readers living outside the U.S. may also see applications and insights for understanding diversity in their own contexts.