

Religious Diversity in the Workplace: Definitions and Resources

Religion and Faith – What’s the difference and which should I use?

The words “religion” and “faith” are often used interchangeably, but can have different connotations and definitions. Both of course capture a multitude of elements that are often difficult to pin down concretely. Deciding whether the term “religion” or “faith” is appropriate to use will depend on the context, but in general, Tanenbaum prefers to use the term “religion” when discussing this aspect of diversity.

The term “faith” is generally tied to belief, particularly belief in a god, deities, or the concept of salvation. By contrast, “religion” is a broader category, which refers to people’s relationship with what they regard as “sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine or worthy of especial reverence.”¹ It is important to note that religion does not necessarily entail a particular belief in a god, deities, or supernatural entities. The term does, however, encompass the devotional or contemplative practices people may engage in, as well as associated cultural elements, such as religious attire or food restrictions.

When Tanenbaum uses the word religion, we are using it in a way that includes people’s personal identification (i.e., how they understand themselves), not just a theological understanding of what constitutes a particular religious tradition.

By using the word “religion,” we can better include people belonging to communities where faith is not a primary element of importance, such as atheists and agnostics. Additionally, the term faith is often specifically used to refer to the belief in a god or higher power and for certain religious communities, this type of belief may not be emphasized. This is true of certain strands of Buddhism, for example. Academics also suggest that distinguishing the two can help us better understand religious communities. There are many religions that emphasize the importance of ritual, practice, and particular kinds of behaviour rather than belief in particular creeds.²

Religion is often a loaded word but in the context of workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion, Tanenbaum finds that it is the clearest and most inclusive term to use.

Other Resources to Consult:

- [**“Faith”**](#) – Encyclopaedia Britannica
- [**“Religion”**](#) – Encyclopaedia Britannica
- [**Defining Religion and Spirituality**](#) – Bowling Green State University

¹ “Religion,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion>. Accessed August 7 2018.

² Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* (Harper One, 2012), 69.

Religion and Spirituality – Understanding the distinction

“Spirituality” is a concept that is notoriously difficult to define, but it can be understood as “being attached to or concerned with religious questions and values broadly conceived,” as well as dealing with “fundamental moral, existential, or metaphysical questions.”³ Spirituality and religion overlap and so do people who identify as spiritual and religious. For some, the term religion may be more closely associated with institutions, such as churches, and regular practices, such as attending religious services, while spirituality is a personal pursuit of meaning through a variety of practices. Another paradox is that within many established religions, the personal pursuit of the mystical aspects of that tradition can also be called spirituality (the practice of the tenets that lead to enlightenment, transformation, etc.).

It is important to consider spirituality when thinking about religious diversity in the workplace because people who identify as “spiritual but not religious” form a growing portion of the American population. Although the applicability of the term itself is a matter of debate (including by those who might fall into the category), understanding that your company may include people who identify this way is important. Those who are “spiritual but not religious” may not associate themselves with a specific religious tradition or community, but rather pursue their own understanding of spiritual fulfillment. That may mean regular prayer or reflection or other personal commitments that could be part of the workday.

Other Resources to Consult:

- [“Spiritual but not religious”: inside America’s rapidly growing faith group](#) Vox
- [More Americans now say they’re spiritual but not religious](#) Pew Research Center
- [Searching for Spirituality in the U.S.: A New Look at the Spiritual but Not Religious](#) Public Religion Research Center

Culture, Belief, and Practice

When engaging in discussions of religion in the workplace, it is important to have a working understanding of some of the elements that make up religion. For the purposes of discussing religion in the workplace, Tanenbaum believes culture, belief and practice are the three main components to consider. This is not meant to be or replace a person’s theological definition of religion. How important each of these aspects is to a person’s overall conception of religion will depend person to person.

- **Culture** (or the customary beliefs, social norms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group)
- **Belief** (convictions of the truth of some statement or the reality of some being or phenomenon)
- **Practice** (“a repeated or customary action; the usual way of doing something)

³ “Spirituality,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/spirituality>. Accessed August 7, 2018.

Everyone balances these three aspects of religion differently. The importance that each aspect carries for an individual can color how they react to different situations or make decisions.

Unaffiliated – Who does this refer to?

An increasing number of people identify as atheist, agnostic, or not part of a particular religion. This population is collectively referred to as “unaffiliated.” Within this umbrella term, there is a wide array of diversity. Some individuals are spiritual and do not believe in god, some do not believe in god and are not spiritual, and still others consider themselves to be religious and not a member of a particular religion. In total, religiously unaffiliated people comprise approximately 23% of the US population and continue to grow.⁴ Included in “unaffiliated” are atheists and agnostics; these are broad terms that we find are often misunderstood and mistaken for one another.

- **Atheism:** Atheism is defined as the “absence of belief in any Gods or spiritual beings,” but can be understood more broadly as a “rejection of religious belief.”⁵ Just as there is great diversity within religious traditions, there is also great diversity with atheism. Not all those who not believe in a higher power identify as atheist, and not all those who identify as atheists necessarily reject beliefs or behaviors people might characterize as religious. People may identify as atheist for a number of reasons and being atheist does not necessarily indicate hostility toward religion or religious people.
- **Agnosticism:** Agnosticism is defined as the idea that people are unable to know of “the existence of anything beyond the phenomena of their experience.”⁶ Individuals who identify as agnostic often do not subscribe to a religion, although some may. As with all religions and sets of beliefs, there is variety within agnosticism, meaning that people who identify as agnostic may have different ideas about what agnosticism means to them. For some, identifying as agnostic involves the rejection of a religious identity for oneself, referred to as secular agnosticism. For others, however, an identity of agnosticism involves a disbelief in the unknown as well as a belief in a religious element of this unknown, referred to as religious agnosticism.⁷

With this diverse and increasing population of religiously unaffiliated people, Tanenbaum believes that greater awareness and knowledge of the group is important in order to be respectful to people who are unaffiliated, both in the workplace and beyond. To acknowledge this in practice, companies are encouraged to create terminology that is inclusive of all religions and none as well as to update company policy to provide all employees with the opportunity to take off a day of significance, whether for religious or non-religious purposes. From the business perspective, by respecting religiously unaffiliated people a company can increase its internal and external reputation, attract and retain employees, and increase profits overall.

⁴ Michael Lipka, *A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones’* (Pew Research Center, 2015).

⁵ Kai E. Nielson, “Atheism,” Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/atheism>. Accessed August 9, 2018.

⁶ Garrard Newton Flew, Antony, “Agnosticism,” Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/agnosticism>. August 10, 2018.

⁷ Id.

Although the term “unaffiliated” may not always be used, it is important for diversity and inclusion professionals to be aware of and respectful of the term in order to be inclusive of this increasingly present segment of the population and support company growth through inclusivity.

Other Resources to Consult:

- [When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?](#) Pew Research Center
- [Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion – and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back](#) Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)
- [10 facts about atheists](#) – Pew Research Center
- [Agnosticism](#) – Pew Research Center

Intersectionality – How does this apply to religion?

Intersectionality is the interlocking of traditionally marginalized identities, including race, religion, and sexual orientation/gender identity, with the effects of power and discrimination. The word has its roots in academia from an initial paper written by Professor Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 about the failure of anti-discrimination law, feminist theory, and anti-racist politics to each only address a single factor at a time of the multi-faceted experiences of black women.⁸ Since Professor Crenshaw’s introduction of the term, “intersectionality” has expanded to apply to other traditionally marginalized identities.

Tanenbaum’s use of the term “intersectionality” focuses on the overlapping identities of religion with other identifiers, such as race, religion, and sexual orientation/gender identity, in the workplace. Intersectionality is an important aspect of diversity and inclusion efforts as it highlights the nuanced identities that employees bring to work. Although it is common to assume that one identifier precludes another identifier (i.e. a person can either be religious or LGBTQ, but not both), the reality is that many individuals experience an intersectionality of multiple identifiers where they are further challenged in their pursuit and experience of equity in the workplace.

Understanding intersectionality and its applicability to addressing religion in the workplace is crucial to developing and fostering a respectful professional environment, both for employees and clients, which supports a more profitable business.

Other Resources to Consult:

- [Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics](#) University of Chicago Legal Forum
- [Kimberle Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later](#) Columbia Law School
- [#RaceAnd: Sonny Singh](#) – Race Forward

⁸ “Word We’re Watching: Intersectionality,” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster. (2017). <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/intersectionality-meaning>. Accessed August 1, 2018.