

Religious Self-Identification

Employees may choose to identify their religion in the workplace in a number of ways, from personal expression of their observances to public celebration of their holidays. And employers may desire to know more about their employees' religious affiliations to better accommodate them. This fact sheet explores the employer's role regarding religious self-identification and best practices for employers regarding questions about employees' religious identity.

Should I Request that Employees Self-Identify Their Religion?

In general, we do not believe that it is the best practice for companies and organizations to request that employees self-identify as belonging to a particular religion or belief system.

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “[q]uestions about an applicant's religious affiliation or beliefs (unless the religion is a bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ)), are generally viewed as non job-related and problematic under federal law.”ⁱ While “an employer whose purpose and character is primarily religious is permitted to lean towards hiring persons of the same religion... Other employers should avoid questions about an applicant's religious affiliation.”ⁱⁱ Nonetheless, when reviewing employee requests for religious accommodations (e.g., time off for holidays), the employer may “ask the applicant or employee to explain the religious nature of the practice and the way in which it conflicts with a work requirement.”ⁱⁱⁱ

An employer may see a request for religious self-identification as a well-intentioned effort to identify diversity and make employees ‘feel seen.’ However, it could have the opposite result, instead making them feel exposed and uncomfortable, run against the grain of their communal traditions, and/or evoke collective trauma. The Jewish faith, for example, traditionally takes a dim view of counting Jews – a traditional perspective made more poignant by a history that includes the singling out of Jewish people for genocide.

Nearly half of nonreligious Americans surveyed (44.3%) mostly or always concealed their nonreligious identity at work.^{iv} Some may do this to avoid discrimination or mistreatment in the workplace due to their identity. In a report by the U.K. Equality and Human Rights Commission, an Atheist employee described being subject to proselytizing in the workplace from a manager once that manager learned that the employee was not religious.^v That same report noted that some Christian employees felt that stereotypes about Christians were unfairly applied to them. One employee described being accused of being homophobic simply for identifying as a Christian.

Handling Employees' Voluntary Self-Identification

Employees may voluntarily choose to identify their religion, for example, when requesting accommodations. They may also incidentally identify their religion by the way in which they personally express their observance – for example, religious headwear, or symbols in their workspace. Furthermore, voluntary efforts to participate in employee resource groups (ERGs) or holiday party

planning efforts may result in some employees identifying their religion.

Employers should have clear protocols and clearly enforced best practices for handling that information, as well as any requests for accommodation, to ensure the utmost sensitivity and confidentiality. Such information should be shared on a need-to-know basis, discussed for purposes relevant to the workplace, and treated respectfully and impartially.

What If I Want to Better Accommodate Employees' Religious Diversity?

The best approach is to: train for sensitivity to diversity in religious perspectives; communicate with employees as to the procedures for requesting accommodations (including following up effectively); and make sure that holiday events respect the diverse spectrum of religious belief and expression with employees voluntarily included in their planning. Employees may change their religious beliefs and affiliation over time (e.g., from affiliated to unaffiliated), and new employees may add to the overall religious diversity of your team. But your dedication to learning, communication, and supporting employee diversity in the workplace should be a constant and consistent effort. Whatever the religious affiliation of your employees, they should feel comfortable coming to you with accommodation requests, and comfortable being their complete selves in the workplace.

Contact Tanenbaum if you need assistance and training related to religion in the workplace - including navigating religious accommodations, planning for inclusive holiday events, and other issues you may face in ensuring respect for religious diversity.

For more useful information on world religions, subscribe to Tanenbaum's online resource, [**Religion at Work: A \(Human\) Resource**](#). Visit the Tanenbaum [**Workplace Resources**](#) page for additional Tanenbaum fact sheets and contact Tanenbaum at [**membership@tanenbaum.org**](mailto:membership@tanenbaum.org).

ⁱ "Pre-Employment Inquiries and Religious Affiliation or Beliefs," U.S. EEOC, accessed February 9, 2023, par. 1, <https://www.eeoc.gov/pre-employment-inquiries-and-religious-affiliation-or-beliefs>

ⁱⁱ Ibid, par. 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Section 12: Religious Discrimination," U.S. EEOC, accessed February 9, 2023, s. IV(A)(1), par. 3, <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/section-12-religious-discrimination>

^{iv} Somjen Frazer et al., "Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America," U.S. Secular Survey, American Atheists, accessed February 9, 2023, p. 19, <https://www.secularsurvey.org/s/Reality-Check-Being-Nonreligious-in-America.pdf>

^v Martin Mitchell et al., "Religion or Belief Call for Evidence findings," U.K. Equality and Human Rights Commission, last modified March 1, 2015, pp. 42-43, https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/rob_call_for_evidence_report.pdf