Isn't That Unconstitutional? Religion and Professional Life

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Religion and professional life in the U.S. today

BY AMY UELEMEN

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It’s a common reaction to proposals to integrate religious values into one’s professional life.

It is probably fair to say that in drafting the First Amendment—“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”—the founders were not especially concerned about the influence of religious values in the private, non-governmental work context. The overarching purpose of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights was to articulate the powers and limitations of the federal government, not to limit the actions of private citizens.

On the other hand, the reach of government activity and regulation has expanded exponentially since the time of the founding. Today private employers must keep their eye on an array of governmental rules regarding worker safety, business agreements, discrimination, and a host of other issues that the founders would not have imagined.

So is it “unconstitutional” to bring one’s religious values to bear on professional decisions and judgments? In professions that involve implementation of the government’s roles and powers, the debate is especially heated. However, most private professional day-to-day decisions do not involve the exercise of governmental power—so the Constitution is not directly at issue.

In the private sector, the real issue appears to be more cultural than legal. Perhaps the concern about integrating religious values into one’s professional life is whether it is a good idea to do so in our pluralistic society. Many are especially concerned about individuals in positions of power imposing on others belief systems that not all may agree with, or even comprehend. For example, most people would find it unfair for a supervisor to offer as the only explanation for firing an employee, “I have to fire you: it’s God’s will.”

Professionals fear, with good reason, that strongly held religious convictions may become a painful source of otherwise avoidable misunderstandings and divisions in the workplace. Why wade into such treacherous waters?

Often the underlying assumption is that non-religious philosophical values systems when applied to professional decisions are in some sense “neutral,” and therefore not open to debate. Instead, professional ethics scholars increasingly recognize that no professional values system is “neutral.” All human beings bring the particularity of their cultural perspective and values to bear on their decisions, whether they work from a religious framework or not. The full array of one’s values will inevitably inform one’s professional decisions and judgments. The words of Atticus Finch, the lawyer in the classic To Kill a Mockingbird, “I can’t live one way in town and another way in my home” express two truths: first, it is impossible to successfully separate one’s personal values from one’s professional life, and second, attempts to do so often lead to an unhealthy and disorienting “moral schizophrenia.” In a certain sense, it is simply more honest to broaden the open discussion about the values that inevitably inform our professional judgments and decisions.

ANOTHER REASON for integrating religious values into professional life is that there is much to be gained. For many people, in addition to the obvious benefits of living a morally integrated life, religious values may also be an unparalleled source of strength and integrity to live out their commitments to serve the common good, and to resist the temptations of greed and dishonesty that often arise in a professional context.

As business ethics professor Timothy Fort described, “enhanced ethical...
God’s eyes” may offer a healthy challenge to dominant professional practices, and thus enrich discussions about alternative approaches.

Of course these advantages do not erase the important concerns about the tensions and conflicts that will inevitably arise. Often, however, the roots of disagreements may be not so much in the fact of introducing religious perspectives into the conversation as in the limitations of one’s approach to the conversation. Perhaps what troubles us most about offering “I have to fire you; it’s God’s will” as the only explanation for a supervisor’s actions is not so much the grounding in religious values as the failure to offer an explanation that the employee could understand.

In open discussions about how religious values may inform one’s professional life, the challenge is to respectfully express one’s convictions in a way that others from various backgrounds can understand, and with appreciation for the fact that others may disagree. Those in positions of supervisory authority should be especially attentive. In the effort to listen and reach a genuine exchange, one may be surprised to find vast common ground that cuts across the most varied religious and non-religious perspectives.

While the task is certainly not easy, there is much to be gained. As ethics scholar Howard Lesnick noted: “A polity that encourages its citizens to bring to bear their own serious moral reflections on the morally significant decisions they face will more likely to grow in justice and humanity.” It is well worth the risk, not only for individuals striving to live integrated and consistent lives, but also for the positive development of professional cultures.

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