

BOOK REVIEW

Religion and Organizational Stigma at Work

By Stanley Bruce Thomson
Palgrave Macmillan

Reviewed by
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While “Spirituality has exploded onto the management agenda . . . religion seems to have been left behind by business academics” (p. 2). This is surprising considering that many consider religion is an aspect of diversity that numerous individuals cannot simply switch off when they go to work (p.2). Going beyond a mere conversation about religious accommodation in the workplace, Stanley Bruce Thomson offers a book that is an insightful exploration of the strategies individuals use to manage their religious identity in the workplace.

Thomson’s book is based on qualitative research using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, with the analytic process guided by Grounded Theory. The qualitative methods employed allow the reader to have an accurate depiction of the individual’s perspective and the strategic thought process as they seek to maintain their religious identity in the workplace.

The research uses as anchoring theories Social Identity Theory, which considers how individuals create a personal identity in relation to social categories or group membership (Hogg & Abrams, 1990) and Similarity Theory, which has a major tenet of homophily, the tendency to choose a person or group which is similar to oneself (Byrne, 1971). Thomson further frames his work using Stigma Theory, which states, “an individual attribute viewed by others as a personal flaw within a social context” (Ragins, 2008, p. 196). The indication is that existing perceptions create a context, and those perceptions and the resulting social contexts they create inevitably cause those who are stigmatized to strategically respond, that is, adapt to their environment in response to the stigma projected onto them.

Thomson’s research is guided by the following question, “What identity management strategies do individuals use with regard to their religious belief” (p. 38)?

To this end, the book, beyond the introduction and conclusion, can be drawn into four sections: a review of literature, research on individual solutions, organizational themes and national themes.

Section one, chapter two, reviews the literature in the field to date. Thomson’s review finds that the majority of research regarding religious diversity can be codified into one of three areas: accommodation issues, empirical research and theoretical literature. Thomson finds the emphasis within the literature on religion in the workplace to be centered largely on accommodation of religion in the workplace from a management viewpoint. And “little has been written about the strategies the organizations utilized or the strategies utilized by individuals to manage the religious aspect of their life and the religious aspects of their coworkers’ lives” (p.27).

The second section, comprised of chapters three and four, explores individual management strategies. Drawing from the anchoring theories, Thomson’s research delineates four perceived categories which individuals consider in regards to how to strategically integrate their faith into the workplace. The four categories individuals consider include: awareness of religious differences in the marketplace, positive benefits of their religion at work and the connection of religious faith to spirituality. This section resolves by considering “aspects of either the individual or the religion that guided the individual’s management of the aspects of either their religion or that of their coworkers” (p. 84).

The third section of the book, chapter five, considers the problems religious individuals have within the workplace and how these individuals perceived their organizations have endeavored to manage religious diversity issues. Religious diversity issues become problem-

atic for organizations when tenets of the employee's faith require specific prescriptions pertaining to clothing, food and prayer.

This section of the book also considers how an organization's policies and culture changes the individual's perception of their level of faith integration. From the interchange of a person's aforementioned religious faith requirements, the perception of an organization's existing policy and the organizational culture – personal strategies emerge. These personal strategies would be to either avoid faith expression, assimilate their faith to that of workplace, integrate their religious faith to benefit the organization or simply have an open acceptance of religious diversity regarding their religious faith. The research here demonstrates a similarity in problems and solutions defined in the literature and the problems and solutions as described within the research participants. "This highlights the importance of regarding religion as a stigmatizing characteristic in the workplace" (p. 183).

The final section of the book considers how perceptions of national attitudes regarding religious faith, create perceptions that people of faith must respond to when considering appropriate levels of faith integration or expression within the workplace. As before, Thomson's research shows a depth of analysis with multilayered categories including: perceptions of nationals regarding immigrant's religion, perceptions of immigrants and their home countries' religious expectations, connections of religion to sports and Western values emphasis on religious tolerance. These findings suggest the national culture does "play a role in how the

individual and the organization management religious diversity and chooses a strategy . . ." (p. 211).

Thomson's assessment of existing academic research on religion in the workplace is accurate, since most research does focus on either spirituality or how management is to respond and accommodate religion in the workplace, which results in ignoring that "a primary force behind many people's lives is religion" (p. 213). Alternatively, Thomson's book embraces the reality that individuals are bringing their religion to work and provides a well-researched and insightful description of the strategies, perceptions and challenges of these individuals who bring their religious faith to work.

In Thomson's research, "participants revealed that their strategy to manage religion in the workplace was contextual and factors that influence their decisions occurred on the individual, organizational and national levels" (p. 217). Certainly this book makes a significant contribution, going beyond simply filling a necessary gap in the literature by providing an understanding of the perceptions of religious individuals as they seek to live out their faith in the workplace.

But more importantly, this book will be a welcomed resource for individuals, managers and researchers who are seeking to better understand the role of religion in the lives of employees. It will allow the reader, maybe for the first time, to see the perspective, hear the voice and understand the strategic thought process of someone whose religious belief is considered a vital aspect of their human identity – regardless of where they find themselves, including the workplace.

References

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