Accommodating religious identities in the Economic and Management Sciences Faculty

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Introduction

Religion is a sensitive issue in most workplaces. In secular work environments, employees may not understand why some colleagues choose to foreground their religious identities. Employees may present their religious identities upfront if faith is a key aspect of their core identities. They may choose to behave in particular ways in the workplace that align with their faith (such as praying or fasting) if such rituals are a critical aspect of their day-to-day existence. The religious affiliation of some employees manifests at every juncture. For example, Muslims will pray before work, while at work, when they leave home, when they travel, etc. Employers should, therefore, make an effort to be inclusive within their respective work cultures. They should try to accommodate employees with different religious affiliations, as well as staff members who do not subscribe to any formal expression of religious belief.

In this paper, I highlight some of the steps that have been taken by the Heads of Departments within the Economic and Management Sciences Faculty to accommodate employees of different faiths. Furthermore, I highlight aspects of the EMS Faculty work which still need to be addressed to ensure inclusivity of employees and visitors of diverse religious backgrounds.

I begin with a discussion about rights and labour legislation, namely, the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission), the South African Charter of Religious Rights and Freedoms, the Employment Equity Act of 1998, and the *Protection of Personal Information (*POPI) Act of 2013.

Legislation and national policies

The Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities

In the mid-1990s the South African Constitution established a number of bodies known as 'Chapter Nine institutions' to safeguard democracy in South Africa (Carrim 2016). The Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (the CRL Rights Commission) is one of these bodies (South African Constitution 1996). The objective of the CRL Rights Commission in terms of Chapter 9 section 185(1) of the Constitution is to promote respect for, and further protection of, the rights of cultural, religious, and linguistic communities; to promote and develop peace, friendship, humility, tolerance, national unity among and within cultural, religious, and linguistic communities on the basis of equality, non-discrimination, and free association; to promote the right of communities to develop their historically diminished heritage; and to recognise community councils (South Africa 1996). The CRL Rights Commission is therefore tasked to take care of people's religious freedom on a macro level. It still has unresolved issues, evidenced by the protests of a number of religious groups that certain Christian festival days are deemed official public holidays, but the same privilege has not been extended to the important religious celebrations of all faith groups (Carrim 2017).

South African Charter of Religious Rights and Freedoms (SACRRF)

The charter was developed by South African religious and civil organisations with the intention of defining the religious rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of South African citizens (South Africa 2021).

Employment Equity Act of 1998

The Employment Equity Act of 1998 prohibits unfair discrimination in employment and aims to encourage the recruitment, selection, and retention of a diverse workforce. Section 6(1), Chapter 2 of the Act deals with the prohibition of unfair discrimination and states explicitly that no individuals may be discriminated against in the workplace because of their religious beliefs (South Africa 1998).

Protection of Personal Information Act of 2013

The Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act of 2013 aims to ensure that the personal information of all individuals is protected. The POPI Act grants individuals certain rights of protection, and the option to limit access to their personal information (South Africa 2013).

Section 26 of the POPI Act refers to a particular category of personal information designated 'special personal information'. Section 26 includes, amongst others, personal, religious, and philosophical beliefs (South Africa 2013). The PoPI Act grants individuals the right to share such special personal information only when, and to the extent that they wish to do so unless it is necessary to disclose such information in terms of the law or for research, historical, or statistical purposes (South Africa 2013). Thus, within the workplace, a manager may not compel an employee to disclose certain types of personal information, such as religious beliefs, unless it is necessary to do so.

Code of Conduct and Anti-discrimination Act, University of Pretoria

All staff at the University of Pretoria are required to sign an online Code of Conduct which stipulates that employees cannot be discriminated against on any grounds. The University also has an anti-discrimination policy, which stipulates that employees will not be discriminated against on any basis.

Methodology

I sent a questionnaire regarding departmental accommodation of diverse religious beliefs to the Deputy Dean (Research) in the EMS Faculty, Prof Karin Barac, asking her to pass on copies to the Head of the EMS Departments (HODs), and request the HODs to complete and return the questionnaire. The questionnaires requested HODs to complete a table (shown below), and to answer various open-ended questions, which follow:

HODs were given the following instruction: Please complete the table and indicate the number of employees in your department who follow a particular religion or do not follow a religion (see Appendix A).

Table 1

Department	Religious identity / Non-believers / A-religious					
	Muslim	Hindu	Christian	African religion	Other	Non-religious/a-religious

Open-ended questions

A. How are the following addressed in your respective department? Please elaborate.
  1. *Religious celebrations*
  2. *Religious activities (for example, fasting, prayers)*

B. How are non-religious/a-religious people accommodated in your respective department?

The HODs in the Faculty responded to the questionnaire. I will now discuss the range of responses that were received. I also mention the remarks of three staff members, who belonged to minority groups in the Faculty, regarding accommodating religious differences in the EMS Faculty.

HOD responses regarding religious accommodation

Not all HODs were comfortable disclosing the actual numbers of staff members of different faiths in their respective departments. I was, therefore, unable to ascertain the number of staff members in the faculty who belonged to particular religious groups, or the number of staff members who did not have religious beliefs. For example, HOD A commented:

> I take note of the question below that requests me to list the number of staff for each religion. I do not think that I know exactly what religion each and every staff member practice[s]. I do know who requires *halaal* food, vegetarian food, sugar-free food, and wheat-free food, but not all staff request this because of religious reasons. I do know that some staff are Christian, Muslim, and Hindu because we have discussed this, and also because staff request leaves for

specific religious holidays, for example, Ascension Day (Christian), Eid (Muslim), and Diwali (Hindu). I also know that some staff believes that there is no God, and also that others believe in a universal God, as we sometimes have private philosophical debates. Some staff, however, like to participate in these debates and debates from various perspectives. Staff also request leave for personal rituals related to the African religion. I will, therefore, only list the presence of each religion in the Department, but not the numbers.

Religious diversity in departments

Some HODs responded that they had staff members with diverse religious backgrounds, while others said that they had a limited range of staff members with different religious affiliations. One HOD indicated that staff represented just one religious group.

HOD M responded as follows:

> Our department has a diverse staff component – Christian, Muslim, and Jewish religions, to name a few.

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HOD T commented:

> ... We are all Christian in our department.

HOD M remarked:

> Currently, we have a relatively homogenous religious cohort in the department. [The] staff are from one religious group only.

Visibility of religious identities

HODs had different ways of ascertaining the religious identities of staff. HOD B shared the following response:

> A fascinating aspect of the world of work and always experienced as being sensitive and a 'please let's not go there' topic. The absolute contrary occurred when I approached my staff to discuss religion in the workplace, concerning *recognition*, *conception* (which is a critical

issue), and *accommodation*. The Department of B is an extensive academic unit in our Faculty and in total [has] close to 60 staff members (permanent, part-time, assistants, and tutors). I've included the whole spectrum as we all interact, engage, and share. Our scope and representation in terms of religious diversity include[s] the following: Islam; Christian (Protestant, Catholic, Pentecostal, and African-initiated churches); spiritual but church agnostic; and atheists. An attempt to open a discussion inclusive of *recognition*, *conception* and *accommodation* was not found to be suitable in a formal departmental meeting. We followed a phased process:

Phase 1 – An anonymous submission of 'tell us about your religion.'

Phase 2 – An open and one-on-one discussion with the HoD on what matters, what worries [them], and what can we change in the workplace (reflecting on your religion and linked principles, values, and beliefs).

124   **Phase 3** – Manage the workplace to accommodate via open discussion (and addressing workload, scheduling, and time off pertaining to specifics, e.g. *Ramadan* and announce and celebrate, for instance, *Eid al-Fitr*/*Eid al-Adha*[,] not only Christmas and other global religious highlights).

Phase 2 was an absolute highlight in the process of comprehending, and likewise strategising, the future of inclusiveness and accommodation (e.g. the planned establishment of a reflection room or 'quiet' room). It was the first experience for many and more than productive, insightful, and filled with compassion. Not a single staff member experienced religious bullying at UP, but [they] seek much more understanding of especially traditions and even shared values (e.g. benefitting humanity and unselfishness). Phase 3 is an ongoing process and will evolve in more practical terms once we move back to the office environment.

    One must manage a fundamental principle pertaining to newly appointed staff members and accommodate religion from the first day of employment towards recognition, inclusiveness, and open communication.

HOD M remarked:

> The Head of Department has a discussion with every employee (upon appointment) regarding their religious background, and what this means for the individual in their working environment. In the past, colleagues in the department were made aware of special religious commemorations such as *Diwali*, Easter, *Ramadan,* and Christmas, and the staff was free to congratulate one another on these special occasions. Currently, we have less discussion about religion because, while diverse in terms of race, culture, and country of origin, staff have similar religious backgrounds at the moment (for example, we do not currently have staff members that celebrate *Diwali* or *Ramadan*). Overall we have a very open culture where staff are free to share their beliefs – often during our voluntary departmental tea times.

On the other hand, HOD H pointed out:

> Some colleagues are unconfirmed or unknown. I believe religion is a personal part of a person, and if they wish to share with me as line manager their personal voice or belief (in a one-to-one or in the group) then they are open to doing so. I personally feel it invasive to ask someone point-blank about their religion or spiritual identity without being invited to do so (you need to show self and social awareness and sensitivity in this case). Religion is part of a person's personal life, and if the colleague wishes to share their beliefs and discuss them (in a group or one-to-one), I am open to it. It pertains from individual to individual.

HOD E voiced their opinion as follows:

> The majority of people in the department do not really feel it is any of our business to ask.

Religious celebrations

Most of the HODs responded that staff members are given leave to observe their religious festival days. For example, HOD F noted:

Staff have been accommodated on their religious requests regarding leave and non-attendance of certain functions for religious reasons.

HOD H noted:
>Although I am a Christian, I should not impose my personal views and celebrations on others. As a line manager, I make sure to use general terminology, and not-labelled – For instance, not saying 'Christmas party', but 'Farewell party'. Also, 'Enjoy the holidays!' and not 'Happy Christmas!', etc. Be aware that throughout the year, different religious celebrations occur. As far as possible, try not to schedule meetings or functions during that period when you are made aware of it, but if unavoidable, excuse the colleagues from work commitments.

HOD T commented:
>During birthday celebrations, spring day, and year-end functions a prayer will be said, taking into consideration that we are all Christians in the department.

Dietary requirements

The HODs noted that they tried to accommodate the dietary needs of their staff as far as possible.

HOD H had the following to say:
>You need to cater for everyone's needs, therefore, make sure to cater and be sensitive to the dietary needs of all colleagues. If you do not know the exact dietary needs of colleagues, make sure when an invitation is sent out, that it requires to indicate dietary needs from colleagues. If a colleague specifies dietary needs, be open to catering to the needs of the colleague as far as possible. Although it is not possible to cater 100% to each colleague's dietary needs, as far as possible, you need to be sure there is an inclusivity (shared) component of food between all, and they also cater to individuals who requested specific food due to their dietary requirements.

Religious activities

HODs indicated that where possible, they take cognisance of diverse religious activities.

HOD A pointed out:
> When somebody dies or somebody's relative dies then the Departmental group is vocal with 'We are thinking of you', 'You are in our prayers and thoughts'. Fasting is not accommodated only in the sense that we try to be sensitive not to eat around people who are fasting. We know that we have Christians and Muslims in the Department who fast for specific periods of time. We do not pray as a team, but we allow for quiet time if people would like to pray, meditate, or think about somebody during a difficult time.

HOD H noted:
> Colleagues should feel they can practise their faith as it suits them, and according to their religious practices. Like religious celebrations, be aware and be open when it is shared with you by a colleague who may be from a different religion and belief or faith practice. Accommodate colleagues as far as possible not to schedule meetings or functions during that time, but if not avoidable, then give the option to the colleague to be excused.

HOD F remarked:
> The Department accommodates staff for religious activities. However, such activities have to be brought to the attention of the HOD in order to be accommodated.

Accommodating non-religious and a-religious staff

HODs felt that they accommodated non-religious and a-religious staff in the same way that they managed employees who belonged to diverse religious faiths.

HOD H commented:

> As a line manager, you need to avoid certain religious terminology. For instance, do not say when you talk to the group, 'We pray for a full recovery', [but] rather say 'We are thinking of you during this time'.

HOD F commented:

> Non-religious/a-religious groups are treated fairly. Each staff member is treated and respected in the same manner.

HOD A reflected:

> We do not accommodate any person differently from another person. But we also do not exclude staff when we allow for quiet time after, for example, the death of somebody the whole team knew. Maybe we should, but I must admit, I have not thought to do it in the past. We very much follow the method used during graduations and we might still have to reflect on this.

128 HOD M said:

> The general notion in the Department is that staff need to be respectful of each other's beliefs and practices. The Department currently does not celebrate any form of religious celebration/ activity at work; thus there is no difference between how 'religious versus non-religious' individuals are managed. No staff member is forced to participate in, or engage with, religious expressions such as prayer, rituals, or written or oral accounts.

Staff anecdotes

Two staff members noted that they could be accommodated further in terms of their religious beliefs, but one was satisfied with the way in which she had been embraced in her Department.

Staff member H, a woman who belonged to the Hindu faith, stated:

> I am accommodated in my Department in terms of my religious beliefs.

Staff member D referred to a Jewish visitor's dietary requirements. He mentioned that he had requested the departmental administrator to arrange for *kosher* food to be delivered to his office for the visiting academic for lunch. Unfortunately, the administrator was unable to procure *kosher* food from the list of university vendors. Also, he could not find *kosher* food in the campus cafeteria.

Staff member X mentioned that while there were Muslim vendors on the procurement list, *halaal* food was not purchased for social functions. Rather, non-*halaal* vendors would buy *halaal* chicken from Woolworths and cook it in their own containers. Staff member X pointed out that the chicken would no longer be *halaal* as the dish that the chicken was cooked in had previously been used to cook non-*halaal* food, and so the container would contaminate the food.

Departments within the EMS Faculty need to take cognisance of venues where *kosher* and *halaal* food can be purchased, since food purchased at non-*halaal* or non-*kosher* eateries cannot be regarded as *kosher* or *halaal*.

Colleague M from the Diversity and Inclusion Committee believed that HODs should allow staff with different religious beliefs to express these within the workplace. Also, when prayers had to be conducted, for example before eating or at a meeting, then this should be done silently and individually, and religious beliefs should not be imposed on people who were not religious.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have described some of the opinions of HODs and staff in the EMS Faculty regarding attitudes to religious faith in the workplace. The comments described do not represent the official views of the University of Pretoria.

It is nevertheless evident that more could be done in the EMS Faculty to accommodate staff and visiting scholars in terms of their religious beliefs.

Acknowledgements

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