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Religious  
Freedom  
in the  
Workplace:

**AN  
EMPLOYEE'S  
GUIDE**

★★★★★★★★

**RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM  
CENTER**

**NEWSEUM INSTITUTE**

*freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*



Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

—THE FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

*Religious Freedom in the Workplace: An Employee's Guide* is designed to give employees a clear overview of their religious freedom rights in the workplace. Through a question and answer format, it illustrates what the law allows and does not allow them to do so that they can be better prepared to exercise their rights in harmony with the rights of others, including co-workers and employers.

This guide is not comprehensive. The law varies somewhat from state to state, and is modified from time to time through legislation and court interpretation. Thus, those with specific legal questions should seek advice from a competent lawyer.



# WHAT IS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

## 1. What is meant by the phrase “religious freedom” as it applies to the workplace?

The Constitution of the United States, many state constitutions, and various state and federal laws provide special protections for fundamental rights of individuals. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution specifies rights that protect the vitality of our democracy. Among our First Amendment rights are freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly.

Religious freedom means more than just freedom to believe what you want. It is also freedom to talk about and act on your beliefs without coercion or interference. As with any right, religious freedom is not absolute; but courts have held that limits may be lawful if they are narrowly tailored and truly necessary, such as to protect public safety and health.

When considered in relation to the workplace, religious freedom simply means the ability of an individual to believe and act consistently with deeply held religious beliefs while in the workplace.

The Constitution prevents the government from enforcing laws that restrict these rights. In addition, federal law prevents both public and private employers from discriminating against employees based on religion and even requires employers to “reasonably accommodate” an employee’s exercise of their religious belief.

# RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN THE WORKPLACE

## 2. Is there general agreement about how religious faith should be treated in the workplace under the First Amendment?

Yes. As a fundamental right guaranteed by the First Amendment, employers must respect all religious beliefs and reasonably accommodate the religious needs of all employees. In support of this right, Congress included language in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that, among other things, requires that employers not discriminate on the basis of religion. It applies to any employer that has 15 or more employees for at least 20 weeks during the year.

Under Title VII, employers must not treat employees (or applicants for employment) differently because of religious beliefs or practices, or lack of religious beliefs or practices. Employees cannot be required to participate or refrain from participating in a religious activity as a condition of employment. Title VII also requires that employers try in good faith to accommodate the religious needs of their employees upon request, unless it would cause an “undue hardship” to the employer. Title VII prohibits harassment because of religious beliefs or practices, and forbids an employer from retaliating against an employee for asserting rights under Title VII.



# EMPLOYEE RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

## 3. May employees express their religious beliefs or practices at work?

Yes, although reasonable limits may apply, as discussed in answers to the following questions.

## 4. May employees share their religious beliefs with co-workers?

Yes, but not to the detriment of either the work for which the employee has been hired, or to the irritation of co-workers. Clearly, if one worker asks about the religious belief of another worker, a free exchange of ideas between them is protected. Respectful conversation about religion while at work is certainly not less protected than conversations about other topics—and is arguably more so. These protections do not mean, however, that the discussion is allowed to interfere with the assigned work of either worker, or to disrupt other workers in the vicinity.

## 5. May employees wear clothing or hairstyles that are required by their sincerely held religious beliefs while on the job?

Yes, unless the clothing or hairstyle presents a safety or health risk to the employee or others. Under most circumstances, the law requires employers to make a reasonable effort to accommodate religious symbols (such as a Christian cross), clothing (such as a Jewish yarmulke or Muslim headscarf), and hairstyles, including facial hair (such as Sikh uncut hair and beard).

If the employer's dress or grooming standards prohibit such things, the employee may ask for an exception, known as a "reasonable accommodation." The employer may not simply refuse the request but must work in good faith to arrive at a reasonable accommodation, unless it would work an undue hardship on the employer. The employer has the burden of proving undue hardship in these circumstances. However, the law does not require the employer to adopt the specific accommodation that the employee has requested, even if it is a reasonable one. Rather, the employer is free to come up with its own reasonable accommodation. Courts have decided cases concerning religious clothing and hairstyles in the workplace in a variety of ways, not always in favor of the employee involved.

## 6. May an employee have a Bible, a religious picture, or other religious item on display in the employee's personal workspace?

Yes, but it depends on the nature of the workspace and the policy of the employer toward all employees. If the employer allows employees to have non-work related items in personal workspace, such as photos, posters, or other items, then religious items should be allowed as well.



# RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

## 7. How should an employee's sincerely held beliefs about religious days of rest or religious holidays be treated in the workplace?

Federal and state law designates certain holidays for which employees are to be given paid time off. Some of these legal holidays are also religious holidays, such as Christmas Day for example. Federal law does not currently require employers to give time off, paid or unpaid, for other religious observances not included in the list of legal holidays. However, under Title VII an employer is required to reasonably accommodate an employee's request for time off to meet the obligations of the employee's sincerely held religious beliefs, unless it would cause the employer undue hardship. The employer may not simply refuse to accommodate an employee's request. Reasonable accommodations might include flexible scheduling, shift swaps, agreeing to work other holidays, and the like. An employer may require the employee to use paid time off as part of the accommodation.

# DISTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

## 8. May employees or employers distribute religious literature in the workplace?

Employers may allow, but are not required to allow, the distribution of literature in the workplace. This includes religious literature. Remember that Title VII says that employers may not treat employees differently because of religion. This means that if an employer allows employees to distribute or post personal items in the workplace of a non-religious nature, then the employer should also allow similar actions by religiously motivated employees.

# EMPLOYEE RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION TO CUSTOMERS

## 9. May an employee discuss religious views with customers?

Not unless the employer permits it. An employer may prohibit an employee from discussing religious views with customers. An employer may require the employee to greet customers with “Merry Christmas” or certain other generic religious expressions.



# COMPANY SPONSORED RELIGIOUS EVENTS

10. May an employee be required to attend a company sponsored religious event?

No.

# PROTECTION FROM RELIGIOUS HARASSMENT

11. May other employees mock or harass an employee at work because of the employee's religion?

No. An employer has an obligation to maintain a work environment free from harassment based upon religious beliefs or practices, once the employer is made aware of the offensive conduct. This includes offensive remarks, as well as verbal or physical threats or abuse. The employer's obligation is not limited to employee behavior only, but also covers others in the workplace. These might include

owners, supervisors, contractors, and even customers or others regularly within the workplace.

It is important also to understand that this protection extends to an employee's co-workers and others who have indicated a preference not to receive the employee's religious communications.

# FINDING COMMON GROUND

## 12. What do I do, as an employee, if my employer and I disagree on what my religious freedom rights are?

Employees have three options when they disagree with their employers about religious rights in the workplace:

- One side or the other can terminate the employment (quit or be fired), which may lead to litigation;
- One side or the other can take the matter to court or a government commission to determine what the law requires under the particular circumstances; or
- Both sides can attempt to understand the other's position and find an acceptable compromise. Obviously, a peaceful solution that does not result in ongoing negative consequences for either side is preferable when possible.



Employees and employers in many companies have had success in finding common ground using the following strategies:

**Include all stakeholders.**

Success in any enterprise depends on the joint efforts of both employees and employers. Policy decisions should be made only after appropriate involvement of those affected by the decisions and with due consideration of those holding dissenting views. While employers generally make the policy decisions, the active input of employee views and constructive suggestions are often a shortcut to success.

**Listen to all sides.**

If we are to build trust and truly listen to one another, we must all acknowledge a valid criticism of policies and practices, particularly concerning the treatment of religion and religious perspectives. At the same time, those with sincere religious convictions need to acknowledge that the rights of others are equally important, and that the task of employers is to see that all are treated with respect. Employees can contribute to a respectful workplace if they raise concerns with the employer before they become full-blown disputes.

**Work for comprehensive policies.**

Adopting clear policies that uphold religious freedom in the workplace can contribute to greater harmony and productivity. On the other hand, failure to have such policies can lead to confusion, conflict, and even legal disputes. By working together to develop comprehensive policies, employers and employees demonstrate that they take religious freedom seriously. Many employers would welcome respectful suggestions for policy improvement.

### **Be pro-active.**

Waiting for a problem to arise before taking action increases the likelihood of strife in the workplace, legal challenges, and mistrust. Acting before the problem arises, such as by adopting clear policies, will minimize problems and maybe avoid them altogether.

### **Commit to civil debate.**

Being able to express and discuss differing views on important issues is vital to free society. It is equally important that those expressions and discussions be conducted in a way that is constructive, not destructive. Personal attacks, name-calling, ridicule, and similar tactics destroy the fabric of our society and undermine the success of any enterprise. We must treat each other with respect and courtesy and strive to be fair and accurate. Deeply held beliefs may prevent full agreement, but civil and courteous debate will allow us to live more peacefully with those differences.

## More Resources

The following is a list of sources you may find helpful in developing a better understanding of the religious liberty rights and responsibilities employees and employers have in the workplace:

[www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/religion.cfm](http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/religion.cfm)

[www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/qanda\\_religion.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/qanda_religion.html)

[www.iclrs.org](http://www.iclrs.org)

[www.ReligiousFreedomAndBusiness.org](http://www.ReligiousFreedomAndBusiness.org)

[www.ReligiousFreedomCenter.org](http://www.ReligiousFreedomCenter.org)



# ABOUT US



**The International Center for Law and Religion Studies** is a global leader in comparative and international law concerning religion. The Center's mission is to help secure the blessings of freedom of religion and belief for all people by 1) expanding knowledge and expertise, 2) building networks of experts, and 3) contributing to law reform. As an academic institution at J. Reuben Clark Law School, Brigham Young University, the Center partners with leading universities, NGO's, and governments around the world to organize conferences, training seminars, and workshops. Since its inception in 2000, the Center has helped organize more than 350 educational events in more than 50 countries; worked with more than 1,000 scholars, government officials, judges, and community and religious leaders; consulted on proposed legislation in 55 countries; produced numerous scholarly works and training materials; and educated thousands of students. To learn more visit [www.iclrs.org](http://www.iclrs.org)



**RELIGIOUS FREEDOM &  
BUSINESS FOUNDATION**

**The Religious Freedom & Business Foundation** educates the global business community about how religious freedom is good for business, and engages the business community in joining forces with government and non-government organizations in promoting respect for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). The Foundation places emphasis on helping businesses foster interfaith

understanding and peace and envisions a global future of innovative and sustainable economies where freedom of religion or belief and diversity are respected. The Foundation accomplishes its work through research, the Empowerment+ initiative, global awards, world forums, and education on how freedom of religion or belief is in the strategic interests of businesses and societies. To get involved, please visit [religiousfreedomandbusiness.org](http://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org).

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CENTER

**NEWSEUM INSTITUTE**

**The Religious Freedom Center of the Newseum Institute** is a nonpartisan national initiative focused on educating the American public about the religious liberty principles of the First Amendment. Reorganized in 2010 to expand on religious liberty initiatives begun by the First Amendment Center in 1994, the Religious Freedom Center has sponsored numerous public programs at the Newseum, developed partnerships with national and international organizations, and convened a broad range of religious and civil liberties groups. The mission of the Religious Freedom Center is twofold: to educate the public about the history, meaning and significance of religious freedom and to promote dialogue and understanding among people of all religions and none. The Religious Freedom Center carries out its mission through five initiatives: promoting civil dialogue, engaging the public, equipping schools, educating leaders and publishing religious liberty scholarship. To learn more visit [ReligiousFreedomCenter.org](http://ReligiousFreedomCenter.org).

# EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

The Religious Freedom & Business Foundation in partnership with the Religious Freedom Center of the Newseum Institute offers executive education programs to prepare business leaders to become constitutional and human rights specialists on issues of religion and business.

These programs equip business leaders to promote both religious liberty and religious literacy in corporate leadership so as to not simply avoid legal conflicts but to create a culture of respect, inclusion, peace and understanding.

View the course catalogue and download resources at [ReligiousFreedomCenter.org](http://ReligiousFreedomCenter.org).



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