RELIGION IN THE WORKPLACE

BY HOWARD RIELL

One of the few things that Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and others all have in common is that they might – and often do – end up working somewhere in the hospitality industry.

The diversity in the workplace discussion used to focus on gender and ethnicity. Now we're talking about religion. From ethnic dress to religious holidays, prayer breakfasts, corporate chaplains and more, companies are reacting in a variety of ways to this latest challenge to the norm. The time to think of an approach and start drafting policies is now.

"In the past there were three taboos at work: you didn't talk about religion, politics or sex," says Prof. David Miller, Executive Director at Yale University's Center for Faith and Culture and author of God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement.

Well, one by one all of those taboos are falling away. Of course, people talk about sex now… and everyone talks about politics. So it seems like this is the next taboo to fall. "I think people are uncomfortable about it," notes Stew Friedman, Practice Professor of Management and Director of the Wharton Work/Life Integration Project in Philadelphia, PA.

"The discomfort comes from religious viewpoints that have as part of their practice or belief some judgments about other people that put them in a different status or class. For example, there are certain religions that discriminate against equal rights for women, or for gays and lesbians."

"The problem is that more and more people don't want to look at their work as just a job, or a way to pay the rent or mortgage," says Miller. "They want to find some meaning or purpose in it, some sense of fulfillment. They want to work for organizations where they feel they can bring their whole self to work, and bring their value set to work and everything that makes them tick. So the issue isn't so much bringing religion into the workplace, because that suggests a certain dogma or regimen. It's more letting the person bring his full self to work, and part of that is their spiritual identity or faith tradition."

"Most companies today are 'equal opportunity' employers," says veteran restaurant consultant Arlene Spiegel, FCSI, of Arlene Spiegel & Associates in New York City, "but what does this mean as it relates to uniforms; head coverings; dietary laws; holiday observances/absences; and even time for prayer?"

The most important aspect of the intake interview, Spiegel points out, "without violating any labor laws, is to insure that the employers expectations and policies are brought out completely both verbally and in writing -- and that the candidate sign and date the document."

In restaurants, as in any setting in which employees go before customers, the issue is a bit trickier.