
Religion and Global Business

By Lothar Katz

Does your faith, or if you prefer, your personal orientation towards religion, affect how you do your job or how you conduct business?

Not a question one hears often, is it? Which, come to think of it, is quite understandable. After all, the subject touches on deep personal values and might trigger strong reactions. Answers from those willing to respond reflect the rich diversity of human beliefs, ranging from "Sure, how could it not?" to "Sure not, why would it?"

My subject for this month, and my question to you, is slightly different, though: what if it's not about YOUR job or YOUR way of conducting business, but about dealing with others and THEIR faith (or lack thereof)? If you're, say, a deeply religious person, does it matter whether your business contacts share your faith, belong to a different religion, or are even atheist/agnostic?

Maybe you simply don't want to know? That's a fairly common way to avoid unpleasant experiences: participants in a business collaboration or other interaction just stay away from the subject. In international business, however, that's sometimes not an option. If you ever went on a business trip that took you to a part of the Islamic world during Ramadan, or stayed in India over Diwali, you know what I mean. Of course, it doesn't take such first-hand experiences to recognize a fundamental rule. All of us working around the globe who aren't orthodox ultras have learned that we cannot afford to ignore the religious orientations and practices of others.

For one, values influence practices. Just as prevalent business styles in most of the Western world, with their task orientation and expectations of 'good faith,' are influenced by 'Protestant ethic', business practices elsewhere reflect the value systems of other world religions. Members of many Asian and African cultures, for example, show fatalistic tendencies and believe that individual desires and plans matter little in the face of higher powers. Where such attitudes prevail, effective business interactions can require a great deal of tolerance and adaptation. For example, one needs to understand that attempts to establish Western project management practices, such as strict task scheduling and progress tracking, often have little impact there.

Of more immediate consequence is that a certain degree of 'religious etiquette' is commonly expected of locals and foreign visitors alike. Across most of the Islamic world, for instance, interrupting work for prayer several times a day is the norm, as is fasting during Ramadan. Being unaware of such practices can be fatal. A "Hey, let's go out for lunch!" during Ramadan might at best trigger disbelief or amusement. More likely, it will be taken as blatant ignorance or, worse, willful disrespect of your hosts' faith and values.

As a general rule, expectations are stricter in cultures where one religion dominates, whereas people tend to be more tolerant in those countries where multiple ones influence the local culture. Across the board, though, showing interest and willingness to learn will be well received.

Sometimes you'll even want to actively participate in local practices. Take predominantly-catholic Latin America, for example. No matter where you are in Latin America, being invited by a local business contact to join them in church on Sunday or come to a religious family ceremony is a sure sign that 'you made it,' that they consider you a trusted partner and friend. Even if you're not Catholic, you'll want to accept this invitation and show respect for religion and rites.

No Place For Missionaries

Whenever religion and business mix, nothing is better than to try and embrace two virtues that are valued by most religions anyway: tolerance and patience. Know what to expect, accommodate local practices, and most importantly, take the time to become comfortable with the fact that you and your business contacts may have very different beliefs.

Showing interest in others' values is appreciated all over the world. Doing anything that could even remotely be interpreted as sending a message of "my faith is better than yours" most certainly is not. Global business is no place for missionaries.

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