

HEADS UP

UPDATES AND ISSUES

DIVERSITY AND CIVIL RIGHTS



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Developing and Valuing Religious Tolerance

The right to believe in a supreme higher power, or not to believe, without fear of governmental restriction or interference has been one of the cornerstones of freedom in this country since its inception. Utah State University Extension is an employer of persons of faith, and values this rich diversity in the workforce, as well as the service provided to the people of Utah.

Varying beliefs can be difficult to deal with in the workplace. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, religious conflicts are occurring at an ever-quicken pace. From 1997 to 2008 the total number of complainant's filing with the EEOC alleging religion-based discrimination rose from 1,709 to 3,273.

The First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion or freedom to not have a religion at all. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination, including harassment, based on religion, and grants employees the right to request that their employer provide a reasonable accommodation to them, so that they may observe sincerely held religious beliefs when at work. A reasonable religious accommodation is any adjustment to the work environment that allows an employee to practice his/her religion. An employer is not required to provide a requested accommodation that would create an undue hardship. The most common types of religious reasonable accommodation are leave, wearing of religious attire, alteration of work schedules and providing a time/place to pray. As a general matter, discussing religion in the workplace is as entitled to constitutional protection as any other form of speech—as long as a reasonable observer would not interpret the expression as a government endorsement of religion, and the discussion does not contribute to a hostile work environment based on religion in violation of Title VII.

It is important to emphasize respectful tolerance of all beliefs. Our attitudes and behaviors reflect our values. Values, in turn, are based on our beliefs—some strongly held and others less so. Often, our most strongly held values are based on religious, ethical and moral convictions and beliefs. Conversely, many Americans make it clear that their values are not supported by any religious beliefs, and in some cases, not adhering to a religious belief system is their most strongly held value.

In observing their own religious traditions and beliefs, all Extension employees should remember that those beliefs are not necessarily shared by all others in the workplace. The key is developing and valuing religious tolerance through respect for the beliefs of others, and developing an accepting attitude for the freedoms granted constitutionally.

Reference: *State Magazine*, January 2010, John M. Robinson

"Utah State University is an affirmative action/equal opportunity institution."