

Work and Religion: Artificial Dichotomy or Competing Interests?

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Abstract—Prior research has examined the relationship between religiosity, religious involvement, and involvement in secular, civic organizations. However, research has not examined the influence of religious involvement on secular, *non*-civic organizations (i.e. work organizations). This study examines the link between religiosity, religious involvement, and the three-component model of organizational commitment. More specifically, the author hypothesizes that individuals high in religiosity (and religious involvement) will have lower affective, continuance, and normative commitment than less religious (or non-religious) individuals. In addition, it is hypothesized that this relationship is moderated by a third factor: organizational spirituality. Further, the author hypothesizes that for organizations that are “spiritual” the negative relationship between religiosity and job commitment will be weakened or even negated.

Keywords—Job Commitment, Organizational Spirituality, Religiosity.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE relationship between religion and work is often described using the analogy of “oil and water” to represent what many have insisted are two domains that cannot, and should not, be mixed [1]. In fact, support for a clearly delineated dichotomy between religion and work resulted in the longstanding credo, “church on Sunday, work on Monday”, which was embraced by the modern organization [2]. However, there is growing evidence that the once distinct line between religious (and spiritual) belief and the workplace may be blurring. For instance, Morgan has found that the “traditional wall separating faith from work” seems to be crumbling at an accelerated rate and that religion no longer seems to be “a hat that can be removed and forgotten as soon as an employee enters the doorway of an office or factory [2].” Further, Hill and Smith found that during the decade spanning 1994 to 2004 the percent of workers stating that they “feel the need to experience spiritual growth *in their work*” (emphasis added) increased from 30% to 78% [3].

Because of these dramatic changes, organizational researchers have begun to examine the influence of religion and spirituality on work outcomes. For instance, recent studies

have examined the relationship between religious (and spiritual) belief and job satisfaction [4]-[8], job performance [9], organization-based self-esteem [6], and organizational frustration [10]. However, while research has begun to examine the link between an organization’s spirituality (a construct that will be defined and discussed at length in a later section) and job commitment, researchers have failed to examine the direct influence of individuals’ religious and spiritual beliefs on their commitment to their work. Since employee commitment can influence several other individual-level and organizational-level outcomes, such as satisfaction and performance [11], a detailed examination of the relationship between commitment and religion is needed. The focus of this paper will be the analysis of this relationship. First, the relationship between religiosity, religious involvement, and secular, civic organizations will be discussed. Then, the link between religiosity, religious involvement and secular, *non*-civic organizations (i.e. work organizations) will be examined. Finally, the influence of organizational spirituality on the link between religiosity and organizational commitment will be detailed.

II. RELIGIOSITY AND CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS

Religiosity, or “religiousness”, is arguably the most studied construct in the religious studies discipline. Religiosity can be defined as the strength of one’s connection to, or conviction for, their religion [12]. Or, more simply, it is the “the importance of [one’s] faith” [13]. Researchers have found a relationship between religiosity and a diverse set of variables, including marital satisfaction [14], physical health [15], mental health [16], premarital sexual activity [17], and several others. Perhaps not surprisingly, a strong correlation has also been found between religiosity and religious involvement. Religious involvement can be defined as, the extent that an individual attends religious services and takes part in worship activities, groups, committees, and worship-related organizations [18]. Specifically, prior research has found that as religiosity increases so does religious involvement, with more religious individuals being more involved in their places of worship [19].

In addition, researchers have also examined the relationship between religiosity and individuals’ involvement in secular, civic organizations (i.e. non-church affiliated volunteer organizations). The American Red Cross and Habitat for Humanity are two examples of this type of organization.

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Initially, researchers found a positive, linear relationship between religiosity and civic involvement: as religiosity increased, civic involvement increased [20]. However, later studies revealed that the relationship between individuals' religiousness and their involvement in civic organizations was more complicated than first believed. Park and Smith [13] showed that, on average, it is true that the religious are more involved in civic organizations than the non-religious; but, as religiousness (and hence religious involvement) increases individuals spend less time engaged in secular, civic organizations. In other words, the relationship between the two variables is not linear, but an inverted parabola. Increases in religious involvement will lead to increases in civic involvement until a certain threshold of religious involvement is reached after which further increases in religious involvement are coupled with decreases in civic involvement.

There are three general explanations provided for why increases in religiosity and religious involvement may lead to decreases in civic involvement.

A. Time Constraints

The most obvious explanation for the negative relationship between civic volunteering and high levels of religious involvement is that individuals face a time constraint. As Uslaner [21] states, both religious participation and civic organizations take time and time "does not discriminate between the rich and the poor – since even the wealthiest have but 24 hours in their day." Individuals who are very religiously involved often devote significant time and resources (both physical and mental) to their places of worship, which can significantly affect members' other organizational commitments [22]. It follows that as individuals spend more of their time in church-affiliated volunteering, church leadership and committees, and other forms of church organization, that they devote less time to secular, civic organizations.

B. Social Networks

Religious involvement can also influence civic involvement in the formation of social networks and by influencing one's sense of community [23], [13]. Researchers have found that, like other organizations, "religious congregations are networks of social relations" such that "involvement in the social life of a congregation increases the degree of integration of the individual into the religious community" [20], [23]. As individuals' religiosity increases, religious involvement increases and they become a more "devout" and more involved member of their church community. This causes an increasingly large segment of their social network (or more of their social ties) to become centered on their place of worship. And, as more social ties become focused on this organization, there is presumably less activity outside the organization [22]. The result is that at high levels of involvement, ties to other activities, such as civic organizations, weaken [24].

C. Responsibility to Do Good Works

Most religions implore their adherents to engage in various forms of "good works", or service. This service often takes the form of helping the poor, the ill, or the disadvantaged, and is often viewed as a duty, as a means to glorify one's higher power, as a way to accumulate spiritual riches, or as a way to express thankfulness for one's blessings. The desire of the religious to do good works may influence involvement in civic organizations in two ways. First, when individuals engage in worship, they are more likely to be reminded of their duty to perform good works. If their church then provides them with an immediate outlet for this duty, in the form of church-affiliated volunteering or activities, then it becomes very convenient for individuals to use their church as an outlet for their desire to serve, rather than looking outside of the church to civic organizations [23]. Second, as individuals become increasingly religious, and become increasingly involved in their church communities and organizations, it is often the case that they begin to place more emphasis on the spiritual world and on metaphysical life, and less emphasis on the material, secular world. This change in emphasis causes individuals to be more concerned with engaging in activities, such as good works, that will help them to earn spiritual rewards or that they feel will help them to gain entrance into the afterlife. As Schwadel [25] explains, this leads church members to focus more on "saving souls" and other explicitly religious activities and less on secular participation, which may clearly influence civic activity.

III. IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONS AND WORK

As described, prior researchers have spent considerable time analyzing the influence of religiosity and religious involvement on secular, civic organizations. However, Lenske [26] found that the normative structure of religious organizations affects religious individuals' involvement in all types of organizations. And, given individuals' increasing desire to incorporate their religious perspective into their work [2] and to express their religious and spiritual beliefs at work [4] the question for organizational scholars becomes, "What is the relationship between religiosity, religious involvement, and secular, non-civic organizations (i.e. work organizations)?" More specifically, how might high levels of religiosity and religious involvement influence individuals' job commitment?

A. Religiosity and organizational commitment

Individuals who develop a psychological attachment to an organization, and who internalize the characteristics and perspectives of an organization, are said to possess organizational commitment [27]. Furthermore, as Allen and Meyer [11] state, "this psychological linkage between employees and their organizations can take three distinct forms." Specifically, an individual can possess affective, continuance, or normative commitment [28].

Affective commitment refers to an "employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in an

organization” [11]. As Meyer and Allen [11] describe, this component of commitment is influenced by three general factors: personal characteristics, structural characteristics, and work experiences (which includes a fourth factor discussed by Mowday et al. [29], job-related characteristics). Religiosity falls into the category of personal characteristics, or more specifically, personal dispositions since prior research has found that religious convictions become part of one’s personality [30] and that religiosity can be viewed as dispositional [4]. However, as with other dispositional characteristics such as need for achievement, work ethic, and locus of control, the relationship between religiosity and affective commitment is not clearly positive or negative; instead, the relationship is dependent on contextual and environmental factors [31]. These factors will be discussed in detail in the section devoted to organizational spirituality.

Religiosity’s influence on affective commitment is strongest, and most easily examined, through its effect on work experiences, which include the perceived goals and values of the organization along with the employees’ feelings of membership in an organization [11]. First, the strong church-centered social networks that very religiously involved individuals possess may undermine the individuals’ feelings of membership, or attachment to, their work organization’s community. These social networks can weaken an individual’s ties with coworkers and lead to what Wuthrow [32] describes as “loose connections” to the communities of non-religious organizations. Therefore instead of deriving their sense of community from their fellow coworkers, the strong within-group ties that the religiously involved have at their places of worship may result in a larger percentage of their friendship ties being associated with their church organization rather than their work organization [25], [23]. If this is the case, then these individuals are less likely to be affectively committed to their work.

Religiosity may also influence affective commitment in a second way. Specifically, individuals may not identify with their work organization’s goals or values because their strongly felt responsibility to do good works may not be a value that is possessed by their work organization. Even if an emphasis on service is not necessarily a value that is at odds with the values of an individual’s employer, if the individual does not have the opportunity to “act out” this responsibility and to actually do good works either in their organization or in conjunction with their organization, then the highly religious individual will look to their church, rather than their job, as an outlet for this desire. As Becker and Dhingra [23] found, for several reasons it becomes convenient for individuals to turn to their congregation or place of worship as an outlet to accomplish good works, outreach, and service. If the result is less identification with the organization’s objectives, then this would further weaken an individual’s affective ties to their organization.

These influences of religiosity on affective commitment lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: *There is a negative relationship between religiosity (and religious involvement) and affective commitment.*

The second component of Allen and Meyer’s [11] framework is continuance commitment. This type of commitment is defined as “an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization” and is based on a “need” to remain with an organization [28]. As Allen and Meyer [11] explain, anything that decreases the perceived costs of leaving the organization will decrease an individual’s continuance commitment. There are at least two characteristics of the highly religious (and highly religiously involved) that may influence the perceived cost of forfeiting their current employment.

First, as previously stated, individuals who possess high levels of religiosity are more likely to place significant value on spiritual, or metaphysical, rewards. For this reason, they may be significantly less attached to, or dependent on, the rewards (either financial or otherwise) that a particular job provides. If this is the case, then this will decrease an individual’s *perceived* cost of leaving their work organization. Put simply, it will not cost the highly religious individual as much to exit as the non-religious; and therefore, they may not be as committed.

A second explanation for why the religiously involved may possess less continuous commitment stems, in part, from the extensive church-related social networks that such individuals often possess. The highly religious may believe that if they lose their job that someone from their tight-knit church-related social network will be able to provide them with another job – or at least direct them to another opening or ease their transition to new employment. An individual who does not have ties to an extensive religious community may not possess this type of social “safety net”. Furthermore, there is an additional (albeit related) reason why the costs associated with leaving an organization may be perceived to be lower for the highly religious than for the less religious or non-religious. Namely, as religiosity increases individuals may be more likely to feel as if, should they quit or lose their job, God (or their particular higher power) will be able to provide them with another form of employment. For instance, if individuals believe that their job is their “calling” (in the religious sense of the word) then if they lose their job or are forced to change jobs, they may feel as if their higher power is directing this change. If they believe that their work is part of a divine plan, then either quitting or losing one’s job may also be viewed as part of that plan, which may reduce any cognitive “costs” or trauma associated with leaving a job. This would serve to further weaken the ties of continuance commitment.

Taken together, the effects of religiosity on continuance commitment lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b: *There is a negative relationship between religiosity (and religious involvement) and continuance commitment.*

The third component of Allen and Meyer's [11] framework is normative commitment. This type of commitment is defined as "an obligation to remain with an organization". If individuals are normatively committed to their organization then they feel as if they should stay with their organization and that remaining loyal to their organization is their duty. Normative commitment is formed before joining an organization by normative pressure instilled in individuals through familial or cultural socialization, and after joining an organization through organizational socialization [33]. Religiosity and religious involvement may influence normative commitment because the influence of familial religious identity acts as a form of religious socialization. This socialization may instill a set of normative pressures that emphasize obligation and duty to one's place of worship, or particularly faith, rather than obligation to one's organization of employment [13]. Attendance at religious schools and other institutions that teach religious values may also socialize a set of values that places individuals' obligation to their religion ahead of their obligation to their work. In addition, many religions teach that one's primary obligation is to help others [34]. Individuals who internalize this obligation may have a weakened sense of obligation to their employment. And presumably, the more religious individuals are, and the more involved they are in their religious organization, the more likely they are to possess a deeply felt sense of obligation to their specific place of worship and to their religion in general. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1c: *There is a negative relationship between religiosity (and religious involvement) and normative commitment.*

B. Are the highly religious necessarily less committed to their organizations?

In the previous section, it was hypothesized that religiosity and religious involvement would negatively influence the three components of organizational commitment. This begs the question, what if anything can organizations do about this negative outcome?

On the surface it would seem that there is very little organizations can do. To begin with, religiosity has been classified as a disposition and is therefore difficult to influence. But regardless of religiosity's enduring or non-enduring nature, both legally and ethically organizations may not attempt to influence their employees' religious beliefs. However, there is an avenue of action that organizations can take that not only respects the sanctity of individuals' religious beliefs but may also influence the relationship between religiosity, religious involvement, and organizational commitment. Specifically, the relationship between these constructs may be moderated by a third factor: organizational spirituality.

III. ORGANIZATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

Organizational Spirituality (OS) has been defined in a number of different ways, both secular and religious. However, two representative definitions of a spiritual organization, which include most of the salient characteristics of other definitions, are the following. A spiritual organization provides meaningful work that instills a feeling of purpose, that fosters a sense of connection and positive social relations with coworkers, and that provides workers with the ability to live integrated lives [35]. Similarly, Milliman et al. [6] explain that an organization is spiritual in the extent that it serves as an outlet for its members to satisfy their inner needs, to have a positive impact on society, to develop strong connections to others, and to have consistency between one's core beliefs and the values of the organization. To summarize the commonalities of these definitions, organizational spirituality is characterized by (1) meaningful (and beneficial) work (2) a strong sense of work community and (3) the opportunity for alignment, or integration, between individual values and organizational values.

Organizational spirituality is a contextual construct because it is an element of the organization's culture and is part of the organizational environment. Organizational spirituality may therefore influence the link between religiosity and job commitment because, as King and Williamson [4] state, "even if religiosity is viewed as a personality trait or disposition, disposition interacts with environment to produce outcomes...the posture of the organization and nature of the work environment are likely to interact with the influence of religiosity to determine its affect on work attitudes and outcomes." Furthermore, the favorability of the organizational context has been shown to influence the link between individuals' religiosity and their job satisfaction [4]. In addition, Houghton and Jinkerson [36] have found that in organizational settings that are religious the relationship between religiosity and job satisfaction is moderated by the organization's culture. While spiritual organizations are not explicitly religious, the previous findings suggest that a contextual factor such as organizational spirituality may influence the relationship between religiosity and an outcome such as organizational commitment. For these reasons, it is hypothesized that the three characteristics of spiritual organizations will influence the link between religiosity, religious involvement, and the three components of organizational commitment in the following ways.

First, as previously hypothesized, increases in religiosity (and religious involvement) will decrease affective commitment. Specifically, religiosity and religious involvement influence affective commitment (1) by the religious convictions that become part of, and molds one's, disposition [30] (2) by weakening individuals' ties to their work community, and (3) by causing individuals to not identify with their work organization's values because these values may not be congruent with the individuals' strongly felt responsibility to do good works and to accrue spiritual

rewards. However, organizational spirituality may impact each of these three relationships. First, as a contextual factor, OS may be able to influence individuals' dispositions. Namely, by offering employees meaningful and beneficial work, a strong sense of work community, and the opportunity to integrate their work and non-work lives, spiritual organizations have been shown to positively affect individual's disposition towards their work [37]. Second, organizational spirituality may strengthen individuals' ties to their work community and coworkers. As Rego and Pina e Cunha [35] explain, a critical dimension of workplace spirituality involves fostering deep connections to, or relationships with, fellow workers, which has been articulated as a sense of community. This focus on organizational community strengthens the interactions and ties between employees and their coworkers [38]. The increased connectedness that spiritual organizations promote has been found to influence cooperation [39] to reduce turnover and absenteeism [40] and ultimately, to foster organizational commitment [41]. Finally, spiritual organizations may moderate the influence of religiosity on organizational commitment by creating an environment where individuals can integrate their personal values with their organization's values. Bandsuch and Cavanaugh [5] explain that spiritual organizations do not try to substitute the workplace or work goals for an individual's values, instead these organizational view the work they provide as opportunities for individuals to incorporate their values into the organization's. In other words, these organizations want employees to "see the link between their work and their spiritual lives" [5]. In this way, spiritual organizations are said to strive for "holism" or to hire the "whole" individual [42]. In addition, spiritual organizations may address religious individuals' felt-responsibility to engage in good works by offering their employees work that is not only meaningful, but also beneficial to society. Namely, these organizations strive to make a significant contribution to the welfare of employees, customers, and other stakeholders [43]. These characteristics of spiritual organizations suggest:

Hypothesis 2a: *Organizational spirituality will weaken, or possibly negate, the negative relationship between religiosity, religious involvement and affective commitment.*

It was also hypothesized that increases in religiosity (and religious involvement) will decrease continuance commitment. This relationship was, in part, attributable to the fact that individuals who possess high levels of religiosity are believed to place significant value on spiritual rewards and therefore may be significantly less attached to the financial and material rewards of their work organization. This decreases individuals perceived cost of leaving their organization. However, this relationship may be moderated by the meaningful and beneficial work that spiritual organizations provide – work that is more likely to provide its own form of spiritual rewards. One of the goals of spiritual

organizations is to satisfy their workers' "inner" needs [44]. Organizations try to accomplish this goal by offering employees work that is not merely interesting or challenging but that rewards individuals with deeper meaning and the ability to contribute to others [35]. If this type of work can serve as an outlet for individuals' religiosity, or if it can allow individuals to engage in the good works that their religion requires and therefore to achieve the spiritual rewards that are important to such individuals, then organizational spirituality may increase the "cost" to religious individuals of leaving the organization. If this is indeed the case, then it suggests:

Hypothesis 2b: *Organizational spirituality will weaken, or possibly negate, the negative relationship between religiosity, religious involvement and continuance commitment.*

Finally, increases in religiosity and religious involvement were hypothesized to negatively influence normative commitment. Specifically, it was suggested that familial and educational religious socialization instill normative pressures that emphasize obligation to one's religion rather than to one's work. This results in religious socialization superseding or lessening the influence of organizational socialization. However, the positive workplace that spiritual organizations foster may influence the socialization of obligation-oriented feelings. For instance, Bandsuch and Cavanaugh [5] assert that workplace spirituality promotes "loyalty and commitment" that engenders the retention of qualified and experienced employees" (emphasis added). Pfeffer [9] found similar results; specifically, he found that workplace spirituality assists individual goals like job satisfaction and meaningful work, as well as organizational positives like increased loyalty and commitment. Furthermore, the meaningful work that spiritual organizations provide may cause employees to develop a sense of obligation to their organizations if employees have had few opportunities to be employed at other spiritual organizations. More specifically, if individuals' prior work experience has only been with non-spiritual organizations then these workers may feel an especially keen sense of loyalty to an organization that emphasizes workplace spirituality. Finally, the fact that "spiritually-based firms make it clear that they are committed to the development of their employees, far beyond just their professional development" [45] may actually increase the potency of organizational socialization. These characteristics of spiritual organizations suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2c: *Organizational spirituality will weaken, or possibly negate, the negative relationship between religiosity, religious involvement, and normative commitment.*

IV. CONCLUSION

A. Artificial dichotomy or competing interests?

To return to the paper's title, do the hypotheses put forth suggest that religion and work is an artificial dichotomy or, in

fact, competing interests? In other words, must individuals' decision to become more involved in their religion necessarily come at the expense of their work, or is the religious involvement/organizational commitment choice not necessarily zero-sum? The arguments in this paper suggest that the most accurate answer to these questions is, as is often the case, "it depends". If an organization is not spiritual, in that it does not provide its workers with meaningful work, a strong work community, or the opportunity to integrate work and non-work lives, then religiously inclined individuals may withdraw, both mentally and physically, from their work. In these cases, religious involvement may be substituted for organizational commitment, in essence, causing religion and work to become competing interests. However, if through organizational spirituality, organizations are able to foster an environment where religious, and even non-religious [10], employees can flourish, then it may be the case that the division between work and religion is indeed an artificial construct and that religiosity and organizational commitment may be complements rather than substitutes.

B. Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes three contributions. First, prior studies (e.g. [35]) in the spirituality, religion, and management domain have focused on the influence of the *organizational* context, and specifically organizational spirituality, on job commitment. However, this study is unique in its analysis of how *individual* level religious and spiritual beliefs may influence commitment. Second, the examination of the link between religious involvement and organizational spirituality is also a unique contribution. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this paper has sought to bridge the religious studies and organization studies literatures. Unfortunately, a significant amount of research on religion and spirituality conducted by organizational researchers does not make full use of the existing work published in religious studies and related fields. Hopefully, this paper helps to break this convention.

C. Concluding remarks

While organizations possess neither legal nor ethical grounds to attempt to intervene in their employees' religion, what is within the purview of organizations to try to alter is the spirituality of the workplace. If the trends concerning work and religion continue, and if it is indeed the case that a large and growing percentage of individuals see their work in religious or spiritual terms, then organizations may be able to improve the commitment of a significant number of employees by making their organizations more spiritual. From an organizational perspective this may be very appealing because, though it may require significant effort on the part of management, improving the meaningfulness of employees' work, creating a stronger sense of work community, and striving to satisfy workers' inner needs, may require less financial resources than most other types of organizational initiatives. More importantly, the decision to improve the

spirituality of a workplace is an action that can potentially have far-reaching benefits, which can be enjoyed by the religious and non-religious alike.

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