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11-1-2013

# Religious Observance and the Workplace: Considerations for Employees and Employers

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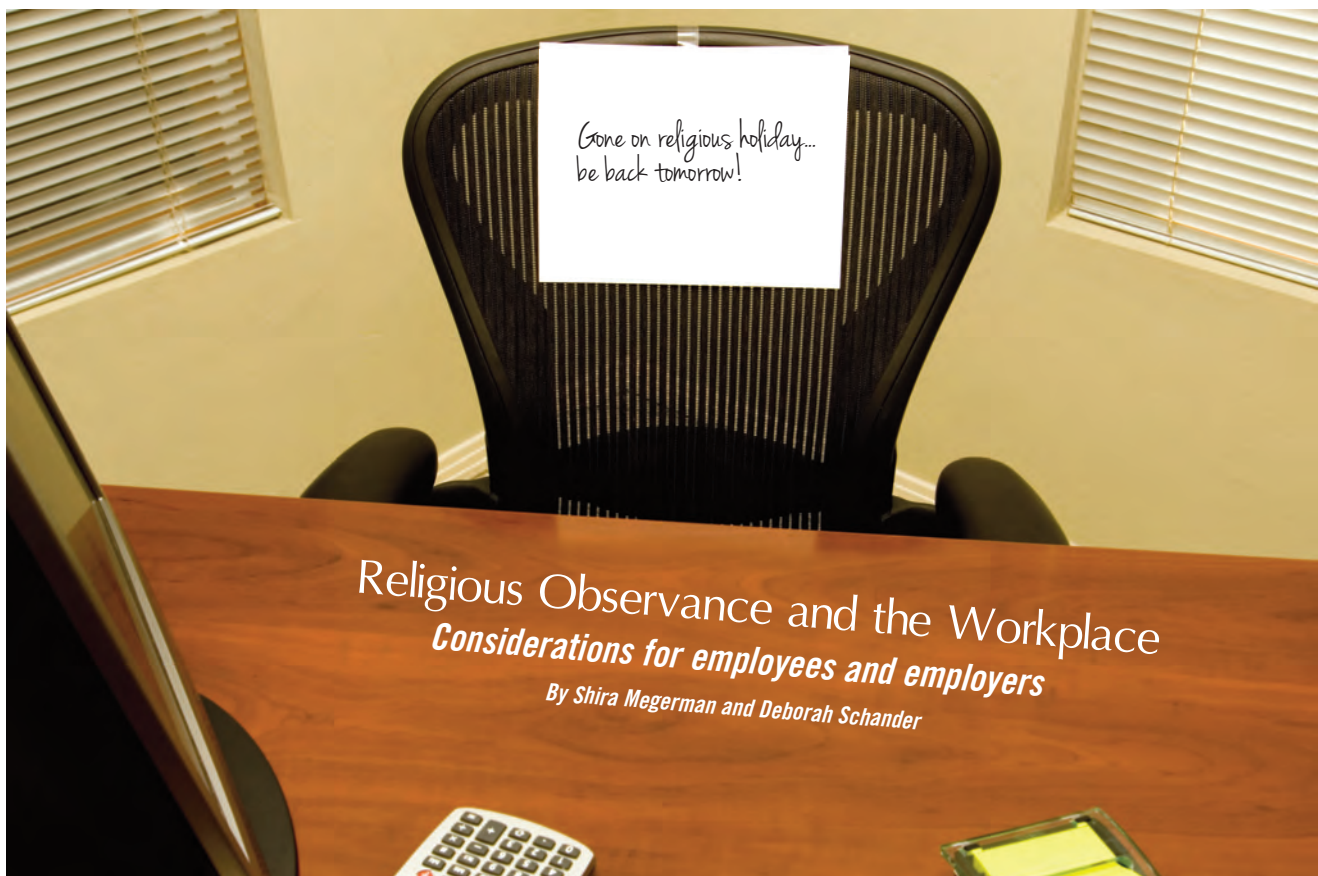
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### Recommended Citation

Shira Megerman & Deborah Schander, Religious Observance and the Workplace: Considerations for Employees and Employers, *AALL Spectrum*, Nov. 2013, at 17.

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## Religious Observance and the Workplace *Considerations for employees and employers*

By Shira Megerman and Deborah Schander

We learn a lot about librarianship in classes and on the job, but there are always questions that don't come with textbook answers. This is especially true when aspects of our personal lives intersect with our work lives. While pregnancy and illness often become unavoidable topics of discussion at work, religious beliefs typically remain a private matter. It's not until an employee can't fill certain reference hours or attend a professional event that it becomes a workplace matter.

Our profession includes a wide range of religious practice. While we can't address the intricacies of each religion represented in our staffs, this article is intended to answer basic questions about religious observance and the law library workplace for both employees and employers. Responses from various librarians may represent their personal methods of addressing the issues involved rather than a standard response for the entire religion.

### Job Interviews and Hiring

The first time religious observance may come up at work is during the hiring phase, primarily regarding scheduling. Candidates need to consider what to tell a potential employer and the best time to address the topic. For some candidates,

scheduling is generally not an issue. For example, Phoebe Ruiz-Valera, catalog librarian at Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP in New York, and Meldon Jenkins-Jones, library associate II at Richmond Public Law Library in Richmond, Virginia, both Christians, observe Christmas and Easter; because these are major holidays in the United States, time off is rarely an issue, and neither "officially" inform their employer about their beliefs. But for Mari Cheney, a Seventh-day Adventist and digital resources librarian at Lewis and Clark Law School's Boley Law Library in Portland, Oregon, observance can affect her schedule because Seventh-day Adventists observe the Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. "During an interview, I always ask about Saturday work requirements," Cheney says. "I want to be upfront about what an employer is getting if they hire me!" Discussing the matter during an interview is always a good rule of thumb for those with ongoing possible conflicts.

For employers, the hiring process can be more nuanced. In most cases, the employer may not address the issue until the employee broaches it first. Galen L. Fletcher, a Mormon and faculty services librarian at Brigham Young University's Howard W. Hunter Law Library in Provo, Utah, recounts, "[A] Muslim

student employee was surprised that I did not ask him [about the subject] during his hiring interview, and I explained that was a topic for him to bring up, not me." It is typically only when the hiring institution is affiliated with a particular religion that the employer can begin the discussion; candidates may be required to list their church affiliation in an application, and preference may be given to applicants of the same religion. Interview questions about the school's religious mission and conduct policies are "fair game" too, states Robb Farmer, acting director at Faulkner University Law Library in Montgomery, Alabama, a school affiliated with the Churches of Christ.

What employers may not realize, though, is how a job posting could affect their applicant pool to begin with. A candidate who attends services regularly may skip right past a job that specifically lists "Sunday reference," for example, but have no hesitations about applying for one that lists "weekend reference" because they're available on Saturdays. When preparing a job description, it is important to always ask if it or an existing schedule can be made more inclusive.

### The Day-to-Day Environment

Unsurprisingly, scheduling can also be

affected on a day-to-day basis as well. Just as some employees like to go to team trivia or a movie during their time off, religiously observant employees may go to evening services, attend choir practice, or volunteer with a church group. In general, most employees do not find it too difficult to arrange their work schedules around these events. Time off for religious holidays is usually treated as vacation or personal time. Don Ford, foreign, comparative, and international law librarian at the University of Iowa College of Law in Iowa City and a Catholic, notes, “My employer simply asks that arrangements not be made at the last minute, when at all possible.”

**For more information about some of the religions represented in AALL, see these websites:**

Judaism: [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism)

The United Methodist Church: [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org)

Paganism: [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/paganism](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/paganism)

The Churches of Christ: [www.church-of-christ.org](http://www.church-of-christ.org)

Seventh-day Adventist: [www.adventist.org](http://www.adventist.org)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon): [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org)

Presbyterian Church: [www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org)

Catholic Church: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

The Episcopal Church: [www.episcopalchurch.org](http://www.episcopalchurch.org)

For shorter periods of time, more informal arrangements are made. “I obtain my own reference shift coverage,” says Jamie Marie Keller, a Pagan and reference librarian at Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville. “During our busy times, generally in the fall semester, obtaining coverage is a bit harder, but it is doable.” As with anyone wanting some time away from the office, sufficient notice and a general willingness to help out a fellow employee means there can be little disruption to the office environment.

Besides scheduling matters, religious beliefs may also be observed in an employee’s other actions. “My values come into regular conversation,” Jenkins-Jones notes. And Cheney most often finds she gets questions about not eating certain foods. Religious librarians often feel slightly apart from the rest of their colleagues but are also often used to the scrutiny. “I’ve been explaining this issue since high school, so it doesn’t feel onerous or burdensome,” Cheney says. “It’s just something I take in stride.”

**Professional Activities**

As for professional activities, participating while being religiously observant is not always easy. For Ford, attending conferences takes some planning. “I find the AALL experience quite challenging. I think it must be difficult for any observant Jewish or Christian librarian to properly observe their Sabbath during AALL’s Annual Meeting. In my specific case, I’ve found it pretty hard to attend the Sunday obligatory mass, though so far I’ve been able to do it. But it’s not easy and takes careful planning.” For example, leadership training, the conference opening ceremony, and CONELL always occur on a Saturday; therefore, those observing Sabbath on Saturdays miss out on a variety of events. This can be incredibly frustrating because networking is a big part of the conference, and it is not always easy to meet new people when overwhelmed by the expansiveness of the conference.

For others, it is the atmosphere that contributes to the challenges of attending. Fletcher “appreciate[s] library conference programs and events that provide alternatives to alcohol, coffee, or tea. Alcohol-drenched appetizers that are clearly marked help me avoid those, too.” Aside from noting what ingredients are in the food, it is always helpful to provide food in packages (like ice cream served at Exhibit Hall breaks) so those uncomfortable with bringing attention to their religious practices can see for themselves whether or not it is something that conforms with their religious dietary requirements. Fruit also is an option that is easy and something most people can enjoy!

There are also situations where people are unable or unwilling to attend the conference because of when it occurs. Tisha B’av, the Jewish holiday commemorating the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem, generally occurs in mid- to late July. This year, the holiday fell on the Tuesday of the conference, making it difficult to attend both the required services at synagogue and the conference programming and events. This is not to say that the conference should be rescheduled, but awareness of potential conflicts is something to consider when scheduling and planning a conference, webinar, or other event. Scheduling events is something that takes place well in advance, and looking at religious calendars and holidays is one more way to make sure everyone feels included and can attend.

**Community**

Luckily, AALL is full of accepting and tolerant members. Fletcher is “glad that most of our profession is tolerant and supportive of religiously observant

coworkers and colleagues. For example, I have spent the past two years as a long-distance mentor with another law librarian who is a practicing Christian of another faith. It’s been refreshing to be able to not self-censor my references to spiritual perspectives or activities because they are outside the scope of many law librarians’ life experiences.” A mentor-mentee relationship is an excellent way to bounce ideas off someone in a similar experience.

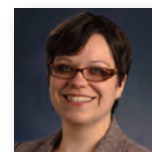
Becoming a member of the AALLNET community is another way to see what is available. There are many different options available for members, including those with minority interests. Recently, a Jewish Law Librarians Caucus was started after frustrations about having to find the Jewish hotspots each year in the different host cities. The caucus had its first meeting in Seattle; the board came up with great goals to achieve during this next year and is always open to new members and ideas. Not only does the caucus represent those interested in Judaism from a religious standpoint, but it also represents interests in Jewish law and Israeli law. Without the constant support AALL members show one another, this caucus would not have been created. Members’ willingness to speak up and share their religious interests with others has led to excellent strides in building community.

**Support and Understanding**

Never forget: we work in a world of customer service. We got into this field because we love to help others. To religiously observant librarians, we say: Give people the benefit of the doubt when deciding whether to share your religious beliefs. Odds are, people will be patient, understanding, and supportive of your practices. Do not be surprised by questions. People ask because they care and they want to understand, not because they want to judge you. To those who work with us: Thank you for your willingness to switch shifts, order different foods, and otherwise allow just a bit of our personal lives into work. Law librarianship truly is a community where we feel welcome. ■



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