

Religious calling to a job can motivate employees but might result in mistreatment going unaddressed

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Feeling a religious or spiritual calling to a job can be a huge motivator, but it can also potentially result in employee mistreatment and exploitation going unaddressed, according to new research from Rice

University's Boniuk Institute for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance and the Religion and Public Life Program.

"Called to Work: Developing a Framework for Understanding Spiritual Orientations Towards Work" and "The Connection between Perceived Workplace Discrimination and Viewing Work as a Spiritual Calling" appear in recent editions of *Sociology of Religion* and the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, respectively.

In the first study, the researchers conducted 186 in-depth interviews with religious individuals in the U.S. They found four important ways in which these people feel "called to work":

1. As an [opportunity](#) to use [gifts](#) and [opportunities](#) provided by God.
2. As a chance to share or model one's faith in environments where the type of work allows.
3. Through producing goods or services that benefit society.
4. As a means to a higher calling by providing resources to serve others, such as family or church.

"These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and more often than not our respondents expressed conceptions that encompass multiple ways of thinking about their work as a calling," said Brenton Kalinowski, the lead author of one the articles. "What is significant here is that the way work is viewed as a calling is not always understood in the same way but is very much a process of individual interpretation and motivation."

This "call to work" was evident across religions.

"We did not want this work to be just about Christian experiences, so we also asked our Jewish and Muslim respondents if they saw the meaning of their work being represented through other terms more specific to

their religion, such as 'tikkun olam' and 'zakat,'" he said. "While some of our Jewish and Muslim respondents found the term 'calling' applied to them, several others did not but instead associated their work with these other specifically Jewish or Islamic terms."

However, in the second study, researchers noted that while religion and/or spirituality can be a powerful motivator for workers, it can also lead to burnout or employee exploitation.

Using data from a nationally representative survey of more than 9,000 individuals, the analysis shows that perceived discrimination at work due to race, gender and religion are all independently linked with less job satisfaction. However, workers who viewed their work as a spiritual calling had greater satisfaction and were less likely to feel discriminated against on the job.

"While it's encouraging that religion and spirituality have such a positive impact on [job satisfaction](#) and can help employees get through rough patches, it is concerning that it could potentially influence their [work experience](#) in a way that allows discrimination to go unchecked," said Elaine Howard Ecklund, director of the Boniuk Institute. "Because individuals feel a calling to their work, they may be more likely to overlook poor or outright illegal treatment and other issues that can create a toxic work environment."

The researchers hope the studies will shed light on how [religion](#) affects work experiences and raise awareness about how religious employees may be more vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination.

More information: Brenton Kalinowski et al, Called to Work: Developing a Framework for Understanding Spiritual Orientations Towards Work, *Sociology of Religion* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/socrel/srad010](https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srad010)

Christopher P. Scheitle et al, The Connection between Perceived Workplace Discrimination and Viewing Work as a Spiritual Calling, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/jssr.12842](https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12842)

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