

How world religions view business ethics

The world's eight major religions can offer formulas for positive action in business and life.



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Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism are the world's biggest religions. Each has its own organized system of beliefs, rituals and worship, and all offer formulas for positive action in both life and business: a key concept in the business environment.

IESE business ethics professor [Domènec Melé](#) affirms that the business world is no stranger to religion; on the contrary, it is a key factor for business management in an international context. In his chapter "Religious Foundations of Business Ethics" in the second volume of the book [The Accountable Corporation](#), edited by M. E. Epstein and K. O. Hanson, he studies the roots of business ethics in the great religions and how this knowledge can help to understand the ethos of other corporate cultures or even inspire cultural changes within organizations.

Most of the research on business ethics is approached from a philosophical rather than a religious point of view, "this may be because in many countries there is a strongly secularized culture and public sphere where religion is considered irrelevant to business," says Melé. However, the religious roots of business ethics are worth studying for many reasons: for example, centuries before philosophy dealt with business ethics, religions already offered standards of conduct and values to people engaged in business.

Melé first discusses the three great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – in which the relationship between the human being and the creator is of the utmost importance. He then looks at the five ancient Asian religions, which "link the path of life to very old traditions and are often characterized by great wisdom". Mele briefly describes each of the religions, their history, their ethics and, finally, their business ethics more specifically.

Judaism

Born from the original Covenant between God and Abraham around 1900 B.C, the main source for understanding business ethics in Judaism is the Torah. According to Mele, "whether a business activity is carried out within the framework of ethical and religious norms is one of the guiding principles of business ethics in the Jewish tradition". In Judaism, work is held in high esteem, as a form of human relationship with the divine.

Christianity

The religion with the largest number of followers – some 2 billion (including Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and other Christian faiths). Jesus of Nazareth is the central figure of Christianity. In his parables, Jesus makes positive mention of various merchants trying to make a profit, but warns against greed, excessive anxiety about future needs and the temptation to serve money instead of God. Human dignity and concern and love for people are crucial in Christianity. This religion also advocates a sense of justice in business, such as strict compliance with contracts, respect for rules and working for the common good.

Islam

The second largest religion in the world with more than 1 billion followers, its history began with Muhammad, who was born in Mecca around 570 AD. Muhammad believed in one God, Allah, and wrote his divine revelations in the Koran. A number of Islamic business scholars agree that tawhid, or oneness with God, is a central concept of this religion. Life is unified because it provides a practical model for developing all facets of human life in accordance with God's will. This includes business, which should be conducted according to the laws of nature, dictated by God.

Hinduism

The first of five religions based on ancient Asian cultures, Hinduism is a group of religious traditions that took root in India between 3,000 and 1,500 B.C. There are currently about 780 million Hindus, mostly in India. More than a theological system, Hinduism is a way of conceiving the universe. With regard to business, Mele points out that Hinduism maintains a positive attitude towards business and wealth creation, although the latter is not the supreme goal. Ethics (dharma) and salvation (moksha) are more important.

Buddhism

Based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, called Buddha or "The Enlightened One", Buddhism was born in India around 560 B.C. This religion aims to find relief from human suffering. In business, Buddhists seek "righteous livelihood" and are generally against companies that do not care for the environment or abuse animals.

Confucianism

One of the three traditional Chinese religions, along with Taoism and Buddhism, Confucianism is based on the teachings of the philosopher Confucius during the 5th and 6th centuries B.C. Approximately five million people practice this religion. According to Confucius, "a gentleman goes to as many lengths to find what is right as lesser men will go to see what they can get". Profits are acceptable so long as they are obtained honestly.

Taoism

Coexists with Confucianism in China and promotes people's inner peace and harmony with their environment. Tao could be translated as "the path" or "the way". It is a force that flows

through life and permeates all things. In business, Taoism exhorts companies to nurture people, and the goal should not be personal success or profit, but the common good. According to Lao Tse: "Fill your bowl to the brim and you will spill its contents. Do your work and take a step back."

Shinto

Finally, Shintoism is inextricably linked to the origins and history of Japan. The word derives from the Chinese words "shin tao", or "ways of the gods". Founded in 500 B.C., this religion centers on the worship of the kami, a host of supernatural and mysterious beings (natural deities) who can express themselves through forms, whether objects of nature or abstract creative forces, such as justice, or notable persons. In business, Shinto emphasizes benefits to the community, which is considered as family.

In a globalized business environment, interacting with individuals of diverse religions is becoming increasingly common. It is therefore crucial to understand different religious ethics, as ignorance or misinterpretation of these can lead to problems. For Domènec Melé, religious ethics propose a series of coherent and reasonable principles with respect to business; a different approach that opens new horizons and knowledge about the societies in which companies operate; and encourages tolerance and mutual understanding within and outside organizations.

MORE INFO: *The Accountable Corporation: Business ethics (Vol. 2) was edited by Marc J. Epstein and Kirk O. Hanson (Praeger, London 2006).*

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