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A Grounded Theory of Christian Public Administrators' Integration of Faith and Work

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About 28% of U.S. public administrators profess to be Christians who regularly attend church. Given potential impacts on public policy and services, it is important to understand how these administrators integrate faith and work. Following a constructivist grounded theory approach, this study presents a taxonomy of Christian public administrators' faith-work integration based on analysis of 30 in-depth interviews. The taxonomy's axes are: (1) purpose—pious versus instrumental, and (2) locus—personal, workplace relationships, or societal. All participants share faith-driven work motivation aligned with public administration values. Their mode of faith-work integration varies based on perceived religious liberty and orientations toward a sacred-secular divide versus a holistic Christian worldview. The model suggests individuals motivated by theonomic and proselytizing goals may self-select out of government service. This research offers implications for public sector leaders, educators, and Christian public administrators seeking insight into how to relate their faith and work.

Keywords: Christianity; religion; faith-work integration; public administrators; grounded theory

How do work and religious faith intersect for Christian public administrators? A range of possibilities can be imagined that suggest the importance of this question. Do Christian public administrators subvert public policy goals? Excel in self-sacrificial service? Smolder with Christian nationalist fervor? Exercise uncommon equanimity? Harbor prejudice? Champion justice? Such speculation is moot if Christians are uncommon among the ranks of public administrators. The 2021 General Social Survey included questions on respondents' sector of employment, supervisory role, religious affiliation, and religious service attendance. Of the 153 respondents who worked for government in a supervisory role, 93 (61%) described themselves as Christian, and 43 (28%) described themselves as Christians and reported attending church services more than once per month.¹ Granting a $\pm 10\%$ margin of error at the 95% confidence level for this small sample, a safe conclusion is that at least about one-half of government supervisors describe themselves as Christian, and at least one-fifth of government supervisors may be described as regularly attending Christian church services. Whatever the relationship between

¹ Author's analysis of 2021 General Social Survey data available at <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org>. The survey item asking whether respondent work for a government was not asked more recently than 2021. Seventeen respondents said they worked for both government and the private sector; these respondents were excluded from analysis.

their faith and work, the proportion of public administrators who are committed Christians is not trivial. We know that public administrators' personal values can affect their professional decisions (Frederickson, 1997; Gawthrop, 1998; Goodsell, 1989). We do not know, however, how Christian public administrators' religious values affect their work.

A large body of research has focused on the relationships between faith and work in the private sector and in nationally representative samples of workers (and, so, dominated by private sector employees' data). Christian belief does affect management, usually with positive effects for the worker and the organization (Buszka & Ewest, 2020, p. 85–94). When religious employees perceive a good fit between religious and workplace values, their faith is often a resource for work effectiveness, work unit cohesion, organizational citizenship, job satisfaction, job commitment, and handling workplace stress (Buszka & Ewest, 2020, p. 91–94; Héliot et al., 2020; Neubert & Halbesleben, 2015). Religiosity, especially church attendance, predicts greater adherence to ethical standards in workplace decision-making (Emerson & McKinney, 2010; Parboteeah, Hoegl, & Cullen, 2008; Vitell, 2009).

Some of these findings may apply to public administration, but faith–work integration may well look different in the government context. Christian doctrine is replete with government- and politics-infused themes that could affect government employees' thinking about their work differently than their private sector counterparts. The advent of the “kingdom of God” is a prominent theme of the New Testament (Strauss, 2020). Christian identity is likened to citizenship in heaven (Matthew 5:13–16, Ephesians 2:19, Philippians 3:20, Hebrews 13:14, I Peter 2:11–12). The New Testament epistles exhort Christians to submit to government authorities (Romans 13:1–5, Titus 3:3, 1 Peter 2:13–14) and describe even the non-Christian government official as “God’s servant working for your good,” doing “the work he has given them” (Romans 13:4–6; all Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version, 2001). At the same time, when religious conviction and government edicts conflict, the Bible’s teaching is clear: The Christian “must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). The Bible offers the examples of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, even as Babylonian officials, refusing to bow to King Nebuchadnezzar’s idol (Daniel 3) and Daniel, also a high government official, continuing to pray, despite King Darius’s prohibition (Daniel 6). It seems likely that these and other Bible passages about government would have an effect on Christian public administrators’ beliefs about work distinct from Christians in other professions.

In the United States, public administrators also have a different relationship to the First Amendment than private sector administrators (Bruce, 2000; Buszka & Ewest, 2020, p. 228–229; King, 2007). Like their private sector counterparts, public administrators enjoy religious exercise protections, but they are uniquely prohibited from working to establish a state religion. Moreover, as government employees, public administrators’ employers and supervisors are constitutionally bound to protect their right to free expression and to uphold the prohibition on establishment of religion. However, courts and legislatures might find a balance between public administrators’ right to free religious expression and the public’s right to be free of government-established religion (Cate, 2018; King, 2007), Christian public administrators’ *perceptions* of their constitutional rights and restrictions may affect how they bring their faith into the workplace (Bruce, 2000; Buszka & Ewest, 2020, p. 228–229).

A small body of research based on secondary survey data has found that government employees and private sector employees do differ in measures of religiosity. Government employees in the United States express a stronger commitment to and involvement in religion than do private sector employees (Freeman & Houston, 2010; Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Houston, Freeman, & Feldman, 2008), a pattern that holds in most other countries studied as well (Houston &

Freeman, 2022). The substantive impact of more religiosity among public sector employees has gone largely unexamined (Bednarczuk, 2019; King, 2007). Bednarczuk (2019) finds religiosity to predict higher job satisfaction among government workers. Bozeman and Murdock (2007) find religious public managers to have a more positive view of their agencies and coworkers than nonreligious managers. Buszka and Ewest (2020, p. 225–226) apply Miller and Ewest’s (2013, p. 405–411) theory of faith–work integration to briefly hypothesize that public sector employees tend to integrate their faith and work in three ways: (1) by viewing their work as a religious calling, requiring excellence and positive interpersonal relationships at work (the “process/activity orientation”); (2) by viewing their work as honoring God through service to society (the “outcome orientation”); and (3) by viewing their work as pursuing religiously formed ethical priorities that affect their organizations and the public (the “community orientation”). Beyond the work of these scholars, previous research has not explored how public administrators’ religious beliefs affect their work attitudes and behaviors. The present study is the first empirical research to depart from analysis of secondary survey data, instead using qualitative methods to develop rich descriptions and explanations of public administrators’ faith–work relationships grounded in their own reflections.

Research Design

Participants

This research followed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) to develop a plausible model of Christian public administrators’ understandings of the relationship between their faith and work, based on close analysis of 30 in-depth interviews. Study participants were recruited using network sampling. I first recruited participants from my own personal and professional networks by email, who then provided referrals to other potential participants. I also expanded recruitment by requesting referrals from professional acquaintances across the United States, mostly in academia. I sent 42 interview requests.

Potential participants were directed to a webpage with general information about the study, screening questions, and a consent statement. The webpage included the following statement about participant eligibility:

Christian public administrators in the United States are invited to participate in this study. *Public administrators* are unelected administrators, analysts, and managers in government agencies. For purposes of this study, I am seeking public administrators who would describe themselves as *committed Christians* as evidenced by regular (more than monthly) participation in Christian church services and affirmation of one of the historic confessions of the Christian faith, the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, or the Athanasian Creed, or a contemporary statement of faith consistent with these creeds, such as the Baptist Faith and Message, the Lausanne Covenant, or the National Association of Evangelicals’ Statement of Faith. I am interested in talking to Christian public administrators who have never given much thought to faith–work integration, those with deeply held beliefs about faith–work integration, those who believe faith and work should remain separate, and everyone in between. [The creeds and statements of faith had hyperlinks to those documents.]

These eligibility criteria limit the study to a somewhat narrow, management- and government-oriented definition of “public administrator” (following Denhardt, 1999) rather than broader definitions that might include people working in public service-related roles in the private nonprofit and for-profit sectors or government employees in frontline roles, such as case managers, teachers, or police officers. The religious criteria combine orthodox Christian belief, as represented by Christian creeds and statements of faith affirmed by Protestant, Catholic, and

Orthodox Christians, and religiosity, as defined by regular church attendance (following Bozeman & Murdock, 2007; Brotheridge & Lee, 2007). While broader definitions of “public administration” and “committed Christian” could have been used, these narrower definitions are intended to permit a focus on participants’ perceptions of the relationship between maximally distinctive public administration work and maximally distinctive Christian faith. For anyone who may prefer different definitions, this study may be considered more simply for what it is: an exploration of the faith–work relationship among government managers who subscribe to core Christian beliefs and attend church regularly.

The last sentence of the eligibility statement was also intended to connote neutrality toward different views on faith–work integration, a stance I sought to maintain throughout participant recruitment and interviews in order to maximize variation in participants’ perspectives on the topic. Participants had to check survey boxes affirming they met the definitions of “public administrator” and “committed Christian” as defined in the statement in order to be considered eligible for the study. Eligible participants were then directed to an online form to schedule an interview. Interviews averaged 40 minutes and were conducted and recorded via Zoom and transcribed (with subsequent manual cleanup) using Otter.ai. All interviews were conducted during 2022.

Data collection and data analysis, described below, proceeded iteratively, with tentative themes from earlier interviews, which I developed in analytic memos, suggesting paths for further exploration in subsequent interviews. Consistent with the conclusions of an analysis of 100 interview-based grounded theory studies (Thomson, 2010), I found that about 25 interviews were sufficient for fully developing themes and concluded data collection after 30 interviews. Table 1 summarizes salient characteristics of the study participants.

Data Collection

The semistructured interviews were designed to elicit participant-directed perspectives on the relationship between faith and work. At the beginning of each interview, I summarized the purpose of the study, my own motivation as a Christian with an administrative role in a public institution trying to sort out the relationship between my faith and work, and my desire to learn from other Christian public administrators. The intent of this introduction was to connote my genuine stance of “empathic neutrality” (Patton, 2002, p. 49–51), not seeking any predetermined answers but interested in learning from participants and “safe” to talk to openly about what some may consider a sensitive topic.

All participants were asked the same core set of questions, though question wording and order would vary somewhat to keep interviews natural and conversational. After asking warm-up questions about their work and church involvement, I asked: “Let’s start with a very broad question, and you can take it in whatever direction you’d like. How would you describe the relationship between your faith and your work?” The remaining standard questions were: “Is there anything about public administration that makes it hard to be a Christian in this field?” “On the other hand, is there anything that makes public administration especially well-suited for Christians?” “Are there ways you would like to integrate your faith and work differently than you do now?” “As we’ve been talking, has anything else come to mind that you’d like to share?” I prompted participants to elaborate on their answers and to provide examples in conversational follow-up comments and questions while consciously maintaining a neutral, nondirective, interested, empathetic stance.

Table 1. Select characteristics of study participants
(*n* = 30)

Level of government	<i>n</i>
Federal	7
State	12
Local	11
Years of government employment	
Less than 5	4
5–10	3
More than 10	23
Domain	
Defense	1
Economic development	2
Economic regulation	2
Education	2
Energy	4
Environment	2
General administration	6
Health	3
Information services	1
Justice	1
Parks and recreation	1
Public works	3
Social services	2
Church affiliation	
Anglican	4
Baptist	8
Catholic	1
Episcopal	1
Methodist	3
Nondenominational, evangelical	7
Presbyterian	6

Data Analysis

I open-coded all interview transcripts, assigning brief labels as potential categories for all phrases and sentences relevant for capturing the participants’ understandings of the relationship between their faith and work. I then grouped and renamed similar codes, employing the “constant comparison” method (Charmaz, 2006, p. 54), comparing codes to data and codes with other codes to develop a set of codes that comprehensively categorize the meaning conveyed in participants’ words. Borrowing from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 76–115), related codes served as the basis of themes constructed to identify broader categories or continua of meaning along which participants varied. Iterating between analysis and interviewing, I used “theoretical sampling” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96–104) to seek additional data to build out these developing themes. For example, I enrolled participants in other regions of the country to explore a potential theme related to geographic context, and I asked follow-up questions about using faith as a

resource for instrumental decision-making to explore variation in participants in relation to that developing theme.

I took a semantic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 57–58) to build the descriptive taxonomy presented below, building themes around participants’ own words and overt meanings that they, themselves, would easily recognize as their own. To develop the subsequent explanations for why Christian public administrators employ one type of faith–work integration rather than another, I also used a latent analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 57–58), with the explanations based not only on the participants’ own words but also on underlying meanings and assumptions inferred from the data.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research Design

Focusing on Christians in U.S. public administration roles allows for the development of a theory of their faith–work integration that is specific, richly described, and heavily contextualized—strengths of the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This narrow focus, though, also suggests limitations. This study may not wholly apply to faith–work integration in other countries or among non-Christian religious public administrators, areas that could be explored in future research. This study’s qualitative approach may also help move future quantitative research beyond reliance on the few relevant items available in secondary survey data. Future surveys could use this study’s findings to generate more robust, theory- and data-informed sets of questions to learn more about the frequencies of different types of faith–work integration identified in this study and to quantitatively test and describe this study’s explanations of variation in faith–work integration.

Findings

A Grounded Taxonomy of Christian Public Administrators’ Faith–Work Integration

Given their shared Christian faith and public sector employment, it is not surprising that the participants hold at least three core beliefs about faith–work integration in common. First, Christian public administrators hold a high view of vocation, i.e., the sense of being called to public service and belief that work has inherent dignity. “I truly believe that this is my calling” (Participant 19) is a common sentiment. Second, they see government work as legitimate for Christians, often alluding to the Romans 13 passage in which the Apostle Paul instructs the Roman Christians to submit to government authority, whom he describes as God’s servants working for the good of the people, and the Old Testament stories of Joseph serving as an Egyptian government official and Daniel serving as a Babylonian and Syrian government official. Third, Christian public administrators value the dignity of all human beings, who they believe are made in the image of God—the Christian doctrine of *imago Dei*, based on Genesis 1:27. Behaviorally, this belief translates into an intentional effort to treat people with respect, regardless of their choices or personal characteristics.

Figure 1. A Grounded Taxonomy of Christian Public Administrators' Faith-Work Integration

Purpose of faith-work integration	Locus of faith-work integration		
	Individual	Workplace relations	Society
Pious integration Work as context for fulfilling Christian duties	Privately pious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exercising and growing in personal piety in the work context ▪ Cultivating virtues of peace, joy, and patience at work ▪ Work as a vehicle for personal spiritual fulfillment 	Caring friend <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pursuing positive, caring, informal relationships with coworkers ▪ Engaging in lifestyle evangelism with non-Christian coworkers ▪ Enjoying fellowship and mutual encouragement with Christian coworkers 	Loving neighbor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fulfilling Christian command to love your neighbor, with service to neighbor as end in itself ▪ Engaging in public-facing lifestyle evangelism
Instrumental integration Faith as a resource for fulfilling professional duties	Virtuous worker <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Drawing on Christian belief as a resource for effective professional behavior and decisions ▪ Pursuing exemplary professional ethics ▪ Using God-given personal strengths to do good work 	Effective coworker <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Crafting positive, productive relationships with coworkers to achieve agency goals ▪ Adopting a distinctively Christian leadership style to elicit followers' best work 	Agent of social flourishing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Using Christian values to work toward a more just, equitable, healthy, prosperous society ▪ Stewarding God's creation

Christian public administrators do, though, vary in how they think about faith-work integration as well. Respondents describe their faith-work integration across three loci: within individuals; within workplace relationships; and with respect to the broader society. Christian public administrators may gravitate toward one of these loci, or they may operate within more than one, but they think distinctly about them, one at a time. Respondents also describe faith-work integration in terms of two purposes, which may be labeled “pious integration” and “instrumental integration.” Those who emphasize pious integration see their work as a context for fulfilling Christian duty, i.e., their duties to God and pursuing and enacting their own personal holiness. Those who emphasize instrumental integration see their faith as a resource for fulfilling their professional duties well. As with the loci, Christian public administrators may emphasize one purpose or the other or pursue both, but they think about these two purposes as distinct categories.

These two dimensions of faith, i.e., work integration and locus and purpose, are orthogonal to each other. Christian public administrators who emphasize either purpose may pursue that purpose within any of the loci, and those who tend to operate within any one of the loci may pursue either purpose or both. The different combinations of purposes and loci are depicted in the taxonomy of Christian public administrators' faith-work integration in Figure 1. At the risk of oversimplification, Christian public administrators integrating their faith in different combinations of purposes and loci are labeled “privately pious,” “caring friend,” and “loving neighbor,” for those pursuing pious integration in the individual, workplace, and society loci, respectively; and “virtuous worker,” “effective coworker,” and “agent of social flourishing,” for those pursuing instrumental integration within the three loci. Keeping in mind that a Christian

public administrator may integrate faith and work in more than one of these purpose–locus combinations, each combination is described below with representative quotes from the participants.

The *privately pious* see the workplace as an important context for their personal spiritual experience and growth. Christian public administrators see their work as honoring God: “We’re glorifying God by our work” (P6). Faith is a “bulwark” (P15) against work-related stress and an assurance that “this is going to work out however it’s supposed to” (P27), and you can “give your work stress over to God” (P4). Faith gives “peace in your heart” (P25). Prayer is a source of strength at work: “When the times get tough, I start praying” (P16). Religious priorities protect work–life balance: “God kind of directed me [...] What I’ve come to realize is, you know, I don’t want to work 60 hours a week” (P27). The privately pious also value the effects of work on their faith in addition to bringing their faith to work. “This is where God has placed me, for my own sanctification” (P22). This growth in holiness includes a deepening appreciation of human dignity, such as by developing greater empathy for the poor.

For the *caring friends*, faith–work integration is the intentional, faith-driven pursuit of positive, caring, informal relationships with coworkers, often emphasizing interpersonal communication centered around nonwork issues. “For the people I work with more often, it’s really important for them to know that I care about them as a person more than I care about them as an employee. And I really do mean that. [...] We’re dealing with personal crises in their life that had nothing to do with work. And they came to me and talked about it” (P1). “I still think the most important thing is to love people, because that’s what [Jesus] told us to do” (P10). Faith–work integration can simply mean being a pleasant coworker: “I need to be kind and respectful. I need to do what the word of God says there” (P21). Faith can shape conflict management: “Even if they’re continuously being antagonistic, I’m supposed to respond in a way that is courteous and kind to them, showing the love of Jesus [...] That’s part of being a Christian” (P18). Faith–work integration is a workplace ministry: “I feel like it’s, in a way, a ministry. I get to encourage people [...] I didn’t know I was going to counsel so much [...] I think that’s tied to my faith in a lot of ways, the ways I’m able to encourage them” (P2). Christian public administrators pray for their coworkers: “I pray over my coworkers” (P4). “I have prayer cards [...] I pray for the Board members all the way down to my team. So I do a lot of prayer” (P9).

This workplace ministry can extend into evangelism, i.e., efforts to persuade others to become Christians. Christian public administrators are reluctant to engage in aggressive, overt evangelism in the workplace: “I’m not inviting people to my office to like, open up the Bible and, you know, share the gospel with them” (P1). Instead, they engage in “lifestyle evangelism”—signaling their Christian identity and living winsomely before non-Christians to attract them to the faith: “I let my actions show my faith” (P8). Respondents gave many examples of such strategic self-presentation, which they perceive as contrasting with aggressive, overt evangelism: “I give my Christmas card that has, you know, some Scripture on it” (P10). “I would share the story of making the decision to come to [current agency], that I had to pray about it a lot” (P16). “I attend Bible study on Monday nights, and [...] they know that I’m off, like, Monday nights are sacrosanct [...] I can’t work late [...] I talk pretty freely about being involved in my church, when people are like, ‘how was your weekend, what did you do?’” (P22). “There are opportunities that I have to say certain things that may let people know that I’m a believer, like I [...] mindfully use the word ‘creation’ over ‘environment,’ you know, something like that, just to kind of let people know where I’m coming from [...] I think that it just opens the door for further conversations” (P3). This is commonly balanced by a recognition of the need for respect of diverse coworkers and a desire to avoid introducing any division in the workplace: “I didn’t want anyone to ever think I was trying to coerce them or preach to them or anything like that” (P16).

The *loving neighbors* see their service to society as fulfilling Jesus's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39), taking to heart the lesson of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), that anyone who needs help can be a "neighbor." "I'm called to be a good neighbor [...] and really, everybody's my neighbor" (P18). This love of neighbor is an end in itself, i.e., an act of Christian obedience: "You have a Christian duty of service" (P15). "I get my satisfaction in life from helping others, and one of the greatest opportunities to do that is through public service" (P11). "Servanthood is at the core [...] of Christianity [...] Jesus was a servant [...] For me, a large part of being a Christian [...] is just serving others" (P13). Loving one's neighbor can also extend to a public-facing lifestyle evangelism, signaling Christian identity publicly and seeking to have "people see Christ through how I live" (P1).

Turning to instrumental integration, the *virtuous workers* draw on religious belief to guide their individual professional behaviors and decisions. Christian public administrators frequently use the terms "integrity," "trustworthy," and "honest" to describe how faith shapes their professional character. "It is very important for me to conduct myself in a way, in all of my work, [...] that people realize that I'm different, that people recognize that I'm a person of integrity and don't have any questions about that. [...] I work really hard to maintain and preserve that" (P1). A strong work ethic is also seen as a Christian virtue. "I give my employer a full day's work every day. I think the Lord expects that of us. I do not cheat my employer" (P17). "If I say I'm going to work 40 hours a week, you know, I actually work 40 hours a week" (P3). Some see their work as a good fit with their God-given skills. "The opportunity to kind of use the gifts that I have [...] in a way that helps [...] make sure people are getting what they need [...] it's a very good fit for me. If God has given these skills, then it's good to use those skills" (P5). More generally, Christian public administrators believe it is important to do their work with excellence. "I need to be really good at what I do" (P21). "I think we are called to do things with excellence. We're set apart as Christians, and so our work product should match that. [...] I feel God's pleasure [...] when I do my best work here" (P7).

The *effective coworkers* apply religious convictions to cultivate workplace relationships that are productive and effective toward agency goals. Helpfulness, self-sacrifice, and servant-leadership are common themes: "[I] always try to put others' work before [...] my own work" (P29). "I am a servant leader [...] based off of Jesus in the Bible [...] a servant leader is someone who places the needs of others before their own" (P19). Some Christian public administrators bring skills developed in the church context to work: "I do a lot of shepherding in my church and Bible study contexts [...] and I have been able to take a lot of what I have learned in that context and apply it at work [...] The people under me don't know they're being shepherded. [...] It's one of the greatest secrets [...] when you're managing people, it really is shepherding honestly, if you're doing it well. And so, like, a lot of the things that I've learned over the years in the Christian context have been hugely helpful as a manager and when I'm working with colleagues" (P22).

The *agents of social flourishing* apply Christian values to work toward a more just, equitable, healthy, and prosperous society. These administrators believe that Christianity's distinctive values are good for all of society, Christians and non-Christians alike. They do not have in mind values pertaining to personal faith or private religious practice, such as faith in Christ and submission to church leaders, but rather "common good" values. Respondents gave examples of policy and service provision decisions that reflect three interrelated common good values they see as based in their religious beliefs: honoring human dignity; helping vulnerable persons; and prioritizing opportunities to maximize human potential. "Every client I meet, I tell them that they have endless talent and endless potential. And I say that you were born on purpose for a specific purpose, that you're here for a reason" (P19). "From a faith perspective, I do and always have had

a heart for those who are marginalized [...] I'm here to help the people who need the most help" (P30). Another (P28) recounted advocating for funds to be allocated for homeless services, and others (P1, P4, P5, P12, P13, P17, P22) described prioritizing help for widows, orphans, low-income persons, and persons with developmental disabilities, all citing the Christian virtue of caring for the vulnerable.

Others describe their work as pursuing societal peace and flourishing. An environmental protection inspector (P3) and an environmental research manager (P25) described their work as "stewarding" God's creation, ensuring that natural resources are protected as well as used for human welfare. A monetary policy administrator explained his agency's work to promote full employment and contain inflation as "glorifying God" (P24) by contributing to a right ordering of society, characterized by peace and prosperity, with people and natural resources directed toward their best potential. A workplace safety manager (P15) and a federal program analyst (P29) similarly described their work as pursuing "human flourishing." "I try to keep in mind [...] the goal of what I'm doing, you know, protecting the dignity of all people, [...] trying to build a better world [...] for human flourishing" (P15).

Explaining Variation in Christian Public Administrators' Faith–Work Integration

The preceding taxonomy organizes the participants' responses to describe and categorize the range of Christian public administrators' approaches to faith–work integration. Why, though, do public administrators gravitate toward one type of faith–work integration or another? Taking a more latent analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 57–58) to identify underlying meanings and assumptions present in the data, I identified two answers to this question. These two explanations are integrated with the descriptive taxonomy in Figure 2.

Explaining the Locus of Faith–Work Integration

The primary locus of integration is dependent on perceived religious liberty. The more Christian public administrators perceive constraints on religious liberty, the more they emphasize the individual locus of integration. The more they perceive broad religious liberty, the more they emphasize the societal locus of integration.

Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, U.S. law requires generous religious accommodations for employees of the federal government, state governments, and local governments that have at least 15 employees. These accommodations go so far as to permit proselytizing in the workplace (The White House, 1997; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2021), as long as it ceases "with respect to any individual who indicates that the communications are unwelcome" (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.) and does not otherwise "constitute harassment of coworkers" or impose "undue hardship" on agency operations (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2021). Regardless of *de jure* religious liberty, Christian public administrators' faith–work integration is affected by their *perceived* religious liberty, which may be shaped by informal workplace norms and cultural cues more than law.

Figure 2. A Grounded Theory of Christian Public Administrators' Faith-Work Integration

		Locus of faith-work integration			
		Individual	Workplace relations	Society	
Sacred/ secular divide mindset	Purpose of faith-work integration	Pious integration Work as context for fulfilling Christian duties	Privately pious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exercising and growing in personal piety in the work context ▪ Cultivating virtues of peace, joy, and patience at work ▪ Work as a vehicle for personal spiritual fulfillment 	Caring friend <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pursuing positive, caring, informal relationships with coworkers ▪ Engaging in lifestyle evangelism with non-Christian coworkers ▪ Enjoying fellowship and mutual encouragement with Christian coworkers 	Loving neighbor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fulfilling Christian command to love your neighbor, with service to neighbor as end in itself ▪ Engaging in public-facing lifestyle evangelism
		Instrumental integration Faith as a resource for fulfilling professional duties	Virtuous worker <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Drawing on Christian belief as a resource for effective professional behavior and decisions ▪ Pursuing exemplary professional ethics ▪ Using God-given personal strengths to do good work 	Effective coworker <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Crafting positive, productive relationships with coworkers to achieve agency goals ▪ Adopting a distinctively Christian leadership style to elicit followers' best work 	Agent of social flourishing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Using Christian values to work toward a more just, equitable, healthy, prosperous society ▪ Stewarding God's creation
Holistic Christian worldview					

Those who perceive religious liberty to be largely constrained in the government workplace lean toward the individual locus of integration, keeping their faith largely a private matter. A state executive perceived extreme constraints; speaking of her faith, she said, “The challenge, I think, especially in a leadership role, and being in the public sector, is you can’t talk about it ... you couldn’t bring God into [...] a public sector environment.” When asked how her faith affects her work, she emphasized an internal focus, “exhibiting grace under pressure” and doing her work “with good morals” (P16). This pattern is repeated throughout the data and in the inverse as well. A state regional planner (P18) said, with regard to faith in the workplace, “There’s no restrictions, as far as I can tell [...] I don’t feel like I have to hide who I am [...] I’ve actually had conversations with some of my coworkers, just talking about our beliefs.” When asked about his faith-work integration, he had an external focus, building caring relationships with his coworkers and serving the public as a “good neighbor.” This finding affirms Buszka and Ewest’s (2020) emphasis on the

importance of organizational type in shaping faith–work integration (p. 215–239) and, specifically, supports their hypothesis that perceptions of religious freedom would be especially salient in affecting workers’ faith–work integration in government agencies (p. 228–229).

Participants also respond to the perceived religious expression norms of their cultural contexts. “I have the luxury of working in the South, where discussions about faith are much more routine. You know, you go up to certain areas of the country, you don’t talk to people about faith [...] I think in certain places like D.C. [...] it would be more challenging to be more outright about your faith” (P8). Three participants from D.C., though, perceive a great deal of religious freedom, freely self-identifying as Christians in their public roles, offering invocations at public meetings where “everybody knows I’m a Christian” (P21), and “caring for widows and orphans ... looking out for the least among us” (P22). On the other hand, two employees of the same agency, working in the same building, perceive their organizational culture very differently. They both, unprompted, estimated the percentage of the agency’s employees who are Christians to be 90% and 30%–60%, with the former speaking of praying with coworkers and asking them “Where are you in your faith?” (P6) and the latter emphasizing that “You have to be careful; you have to make sure that you don’t do something that could upset people who are not Christians” (P9). Just as with the legal context, the Christian public administrator’s perception of the cultural context and its implications for religious liberty matter more than the accuracy of those perceptions. Whether accurate or not, perceived religious liberty leads to more externally situated integration, and perceived constraints lead to more internal, private integration.

Explaining the Purpose of Faith–Work Integration

The primary purpose of integration is dependent on beliefs about the relationship between the sacred and secular. The more Christian public administrators believe in a sacred–secular divide, the more they emphasize pious integration. The more they believe in a holistic Christian worldview, the more they emphasize instrumental integration.

The relationship between Christianity and culture is a topic of perennial debate among Christian theologians (see, for example, Carson, 2008; Hunter, 2010; Niebuhr, 1951), and the tensions underlying that debate are present in the participants’ decision-making about how to relate their faith to their work. Some Christian public administrators tend to enact a sacred–secular divide. The sacred–secular divide is a habit of mind that emphasizes distinctions between religious and nonreligious parts of our lives. In a strict sacred–secular divide, the sacred would include prayer, worship, Bible study, our spiritual formation, and unseen spiritual realities, like heaven and God; the secular would include everything else: human-made institutions; the physical world; and temporal concerns.

Some Christian public administrators adopt a “soft” sacred–secular divide. While still seeing their work as a calling, work as a public administrator is an opportunity for practicing and growing in Christian character and practice, whether in one’s private thoughts and behaviors, in relationships with coworkers, or in relationships with the public. Faith–work integration is largely indifferent to the actual substance of the work, whether ensuring traffic safety, increasing employment, or licensing medical professionals. To do the work well looks the same for the Christian as the non-Christian. As one theologian, who distinguishes between Christians’ dual citizenship in the “common kingdom” (the secular) and the “redemptive kingdom” (the sacred), puts it, “The moral requirements that we expect of Christians in cultural work are ordinarily the same moral requirements that we expect of non-Christians, and the standards of excellence for such work are the same for believers and unbelievers” (VanDrunen, 2010, p. 168). The Christian public administrator may have distinctively Christian work motivations and distinctively Christian interpersonal relationships at work, but there is no distinctively Christian way to do the actual

work of public administration. For the Christian public administrator who subscribes to a sacred–secular divide, faith–work integration is an exercise of Christian piety but not instrumental for accomplishing public administration goals.

In contrast, other Christian public administrators enact a holistic Christian worldview, seeking to apply Christian belief to all aspects of their lives, including decision-making and behaviors directed toward public administration goals. In Christian theology, the concept of “worldview” was popularized by the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century Dutch theologian and prime minister, Abraham Kuyper. A worldview is a set of foundational beliefs that serve as a stable starting point for answering life’s important questions: Who am I? What is my purpose? How should I relate to others? What is good? Kuyper’s Christian worldview is, indeed, comprehensive: “... no sphere of human life is conceivable in which religion does not maintain its demands that God shall be praised, that God’s ordinances shall be observed, [...]. Wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, [...] he is employed in the service of his God, he has strictly to obey his God, and above all, he has to aim at the glory of his God” (Kuyper, 1996/1898, p. 30). A Kuyperian worldview sees the world as God’s good creation but corrupted by evil; it is the Christian’s duty to steward all of creation—natural resources, human institutions, and individual lives—into ever better alignment with God’s intended purposes: “We must, in every domain, discover the treasures and develop the potencies hidden by God in nature and in human life” (p. 18).

This comprehensive worldview language resonates in some Christian public administrators’ reflections on faith–work integration: “My faith is just at the foundation of my life. So it’s going to be in work, it’s going to be in everything I do” (P31). “I’m a public service worker, I’m a Christian, and both of those things [...] are intermingled inside me. [...] I’m going to use that mindset and those skills to perform in my job” (P20). For these administrators, faith is instrumental for guiding decision-making and behaviors toward public administration goals. Participants avowing a Christian worldview commonly made a pointed effort to avoid the impression of wishing to impose Christianity on others. Instead, they see *Christian*-driven decision-making and behaviors as synonymous with *effective* decision-making and behaviors and thus instrumental for pursuing legitimate public goals.

Discussion

Nonintegration of Faith and Work

While the goals of the preceding theory are to describe and explain Christian public administrators’ faith–work integration, it also suggests what may lie outside the boundaries of the model, that is, what may constitute nonintegration of Christian faith and public administration. If we imagine what would lie outside Figure 2 to the top and left, we would be in the intersection of a strict sacred–secular divide (rather than the “soft” sacred–secular divide described above) and the perception of no religious liberty in public administration, and we would expect no integration. It is plausible that some Christian public administrators do occupy this space, but the participants in this study are not among them. Future research could explore whether some Christian public administrators do eschew all faith–work integration and, if so, whether this is due to an insuperable sacred–secular divide, misperceptions of religious liberty, or other factors unanticipated by this research.

Extending beyond the top row to the right, we might imagine a pious Christian public administrator with a perception of unlawfully expansive religious liberty, using work as a platform for aggressive proselytizing. Extending the bottom row to the right, we might imagine a theonomic public administrator, seeking to enact laws from the Bible or establish Christianity as the state religion (Smith, 1989). None of the participants in this research intend to be aggressive evangelists or theonomic operatives. Some participants do, however, say there are types of public

administration work they would self-select out of, with abortion-related work being the example most cited (P1, P3, P11, P12). Future research could explore whether individuals with proselytizing and theonomic goals similarly self-select out of public service careers or these tendencies are abated in some Christian public administrators when socialized by the profession's values of pluralism, rule of law, and respect for individuals' self-determination.

Implications for Practitioners and Educators

This study finds that Christian public administrators' religious beliefs contribute to their motivation to work with integrity and excellence, to be pleasant, caring, and effective coworkers, to view others as worthy of respect and dignity, and to devote themselves to serving others, consistent with previous research conducted outside the public sector (Buszka & Ewest, 2020, p. 91–94; Emerson & McKinney, 2010; Héliot et al., 2020; Neubert & Halbesleben, 2015; Parboteeah, Hoegl, & Cullen, 2008; Vitell, 2009) and the hypotheses of Buszka and Ewest (2020, p. 225–226) deduced from Miller and Ewest (2013, p. 405–411). As these values are consonant with public administration values (Johnson & Feldheim, 2002; King, 2007, 2017; King & Sellers, 2018), all public administrators should strive for workplace policies, practices, and cultures that foster these positive behaviors.

Public administrators should receive training in policies about religious expression in the workplace. Training should guard against two errors. On the one hand, Christian public administrators should know the limits of religious expression to avoid unwelcome proselytizing or any behaviors that could violate the Establishment Clause. On the other hand, Christian public administrators should not feel illegitimately restricted in workplace religious expression. To do so could decrease their own work motivation and satisfaction (Bednarczuk, 2019) and even limit their work effectiveness (Buszka & Ewest, 2020, p. 93; Héliot et al., 2020). Public agency leaders should ensure religious employees do not feel pressured to unnecessarily suppress their religious identities and motivations due to misinformed self-censoring, informal organizational norms, or misguided agency policies. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices should acknowledge religious belief as a common and positive source of diversity among government employees to be respected by coworkers. Religious belief is a central aspect of self-identity among a large proportion of government employees and, for many, a meaningful motivation to treat others with respect and compassion, i.e., a motivation well aligned with DEI goals. The “Clinton Guidelines” (The White House, 1997) remain the most thorough available federal guidance for managing the tensions between government employees' religious freedoms and the Establishment Clause (and is cited by more recent federal guidance, such as “Federal Law Protections for Religious Liberty” [U.S. Department of Justice, 2017]). Future research could explore how government agencies are actually navigating these tensions in practice.

The study's findings also have implications for Christian public administrators themselves. The proposed theory may be useful for Christian public administrators wanting to reflect on how they might be more intentional about faith–work integration, a common refrain among this study's participants. Christian public administrators may apply the theory to describe their own faith–work integration and to consider why they may favor one type of integration or another. Those wishing to integrate their work and faith differently than they do now may see more opportunities in the model. They may see reasons they may have felt inhibited in their faith–work integration and possible remedies, such as gaining a better understanding of their legal contexts and examining their beliefs about the sacred–secular divide and Christian worldview. And while most of this study focuses on the effects of faith on work, they may also reflect on how work affects their faith. The Christian doctrine of *imago Dei*—the belief that people are made in the image of God—may be particularly strengthened by reflecting on the dignity, potentialities, and diversity of the public they serve.

Conclusion

Given that at least one-fifth of U.S. public administrators profess to be Christians who attend church services more often than monthly, researchers, the public, and other public administrators would reasonably wonder how religious beliefs may affect the actions of this sizeable proportion of our public servants. This study concludes that Christian public administrators integrate their faith and work in different ways, depending on their perceptions of workplace religious liberty and their beliefs about whether the sacred and secular are distinct categories of the Christian life. Whatever their perceptions about religious liberty and beliefs about the sacred–secular divide, Christian public administrators integrate their faith and work in ways that are well aligned with public administration goals and values. Even if limiting their faith–work integration to pursuing personal piety at work, Christian public administrators are motivated to work with joy and patience, to care for their coworkers, and to serve the public as an act of Christian love. Those who see their faith as having more instrumental purposes strive to use what they believe to be God-given gifts toward public service goals, to use Christian values to work productively with coworkers, and to seek societal flourishing aligned with authoritative public policy and Christian conceptions of peace and justice. Christians with motivations outside these boundaries, such as those who seek a platform for overt evangelizing or who wish to make Christianity a state religion, seem to self-select out of public service. Public administration leaders should reinforce the legal boundaries of faith–work integration through policy and training, but they should also normalize free religious expression and motivation within those boundaries. Christian public administrators’ faith is an asset for work motivation, workplace relationships, and public service that benefit all of society.

Disclosure Statement

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