



Mission, then religion, in the federal workspace

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Being aware of the theory of "intelligent design" as a conversation topic in the general populace: good idea. Trying to convince co-workers that your idea is *the* correct one: bad idea. Doing that while working at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California: you might wind up on Federal News Radio.

A press release on a suit [filed by the Alliance Defense Fund](#) states David Coppedge worked "team lead" technical specialist on JPL's Cassini mission to Saturn.

He claims he is the victim of religious discrimination because issued a written warning, and later demoted, on the basis of "pushing [his] religion." Coppedge was told by his manager his discussions with co-workers about intelligent design were "unwelcome" and "disruptive" even though the co-workers didn't say anything to him directly.

At this point, Bill Bransford, a partner at the D.C.-based law firm Shaw, Bransford and Roth, told Federal News Radio, "it's not clear to me who's right."

Bransford said Coppedge apparently "believed he was talking to willing people about his theories, but apparently some of these people complained."

In a workplace where, especially like the Jet Propulsion Lab where they're working on federal money on federal projects, if you're spending a lot of your work time talking about a scientific theory that some people think is like a religion and you're told not to do that, well I think maybe management has the right to make that kind of requirement in the workplace.

Bransford said that when federal managers have an employee "engaging in this kind of behavior, first of all be very careful." People do talk about these things in the office. "People do talk about religion from time to time. You have to be careful when you do that that you're not offending anybody and you're not taking away from the performance of duty, and I think the manager should be looking for the mission. To what extent is the employee's activity detracting from the accomplishment of the mission."

Keep in mind that accomplishing the mission is the goal. "To simply bar any discussion from religion," said Bransford, "is wrong, but to place reasonable limits is okay."

And to figure out what reasonable limits are, joked the attorney, "that's where the lawyers come in."

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