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LIGHTS - Human/Well being

Religion in the workplace: time to turn a negative into a positive?

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Géraldine GALINDO & Sarra CHENIGLE
ESCP Business School

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Géraldine Galindo*
Sarra Chenigle **

ESCP Business School

Abstract

Religious beliefs in Europe today are diversifying in spite of the continent's cultural history rooted in Christianity. This development is bringing religious claims to the surface in tandem with persistent fears and negative views about the role of religion. The world of business is not immune to these tensions. Here we re-examine two aspects of religion in the workplace: on the one hand, people's desire to be themselves in every walk of life is forcing companies to address the issue of religion (sometimes with difficulty) and look for regulations. On the other, we center on a more positive interpretation about integrating religious issues into the world of work, looking at the question from the perspective of performance, physical and/or mental well-being, and better-quality human relationships.

Keywords: Religious identity; discrimination; inclusion; positive outlook; paradigm.

* Professor, ESCP Business School

** Post-doctoral student, ESCP Business School

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Introduction

“Europe had the highest share of countries with property attacks tied to religion in 2020” (Pew Research Center, 2023). Every attack on or damage to public property provokes debate and generates more fear and suspicion of religion and religious adherents. Religion is – and always has been – a sensitive issue within countries or among individuals (Gaillard, Galindo & Honoré, 2022). Media and political debate about dress that could be described as religious is monitored closely in French schools on a regular basis.

Countries in Europe, however, sometimes have widely differing ideas about the role of religion in society. The study by the Pew Research Center (2018), for instance, points out that the relationship to religion differs between eastern and western European countries. For example, the former are less inclined to host Muslims or Jews in their family or neighborhood compared to countries in the west. Eastern countries are also more split about the separation between the state and religion, whereas most of their western counterparts generally believe that religion and government should be kept apart. Notwithstanding these differences in thinking, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) protects the right to freedom of thought, belief and religion for everyone both in society and in companies.

It is an issue that has also taken hold in another space: the world of work. Some sectors require that employees remain neutral (the Belgian state or the public sector in France, for example) and that religion is “invisibilized”. Private companies, on the other hand, have greater freedom and repeatedly encounter problems managing religious matters. A number of representative cases have left their mark on the world of work in France, Germany and Austria, on occasion going as far as the Court of Justice of the European Union with challenges to the ban on wearing headscarves in the workplace. These examples illustrate the complexities of managing religion, which is viewed more often than not from a negative perspective, and which can sometimes result in conflict or excessive media exposure, even though it does not raise any major problems in the majority of cases (OFRE Report, 2023; Gaillard et al., 2022).

We organize our Impact Paper around this contrasting view of religion in the workplace. We begin by introducing the problems and tensions experienced or felt in the face of religious expression at work. We then show that, above and beyond the fears and misgivings, religion can point to a bright future and create individual and organizational effects.

Religion as a source of fear and taboo in companies.

Religion in the world of work is surrounded by considerable uncertainty and sometimes fear.

It has long been recognized that religion plays a key role in the identity of many individuals (e.g. Hicks, 2003). While religion falls within the jurisdiction of *forum internum* – the internal forum – , it can also be manifested verbally on a voluntary basis or by wearing certain signs or religious items, when it then belongs to the *forum externum* – external forum (Ragins, 2008). Since religion is at the outset invisible, it is extremely difficult to predict this

disclosure, which may be contingent on private factors, personal interactions, work relationships and places of work or changes in the importance of faith in an individual's life. Every believer undertakes a cost/benefit analysis of the risks involved in this disclosure (Jones and King, 2014), often employing special strategies. It follows that advertising one's religion is often thought to be fraught with danger and the source of stigmatization or even exclusion (e.g. Kreiner et al., 2006).

The diversification of beliefs also breeds numerous fears in company settings. Religious practice is based on exteriorizing certain symbols such as the kippah, veil, cross or the Sikh turban. This visibility means reckoning with the diversity of religious manifestations: in European contexts, where different religious practices are accepted to varying degrees, this is heavily influenced by Christianity. It raises several questions such as: Can an employer in France ask one of its employees not to wear the veil in response to a request made by one of its customers? Or, in England, can a Sikh policeman or soldier wear a turban at work? The rise in the number of believers, and of religions other than Christianity, means that some people are afraid of the demands and expectations of these "other" believers. The latter, meanwhile, have to face the implications for their health, their way of life and their values (e.g. Tarakeshwar et al., 2003).

These areas of uncertainty and fears create three types of risk for organizations:

- The risk of excluding some believers from the company, who could then feel unwelcome in organizations where stigmatization and mistrust are apparent.
- Discrimination: when we do not know – or do not want to know – how to cater to the new demands of these "other" employees.
- The company's reputation is also compromised when the difficulties and lack of a framework result in employees publicizing the problematic situation outside the company.

In addition to these three organizational risks, there is a further risk for managers. They are on the front line of these religious issues, and they may respond to demands of the members of their teams with their own beliefs if they are not given help and the proper tools.

Accordingly, religion in the workplace is often perceived in a negative light and as anxiety-inducing, and not just in the specialized literature but also in the media. The problems accepting religious signs at work or organizing working hours or workplaces are symbols of the mistakes made by some companies or their slowness to react at a given time. This view has all the more significance since it is an issue shrouded in a culture of secrecy. Even organizations that draw up a general policy designed to help their managers balk at sharing it and being cited as an example. This then entrenches the sensitive, taboo and risky nature of managing religion in a professional environment.

Notwithstanding these negative aspects and the fear of religion at work, perceptions about the behavior of practicing employees in the workplace are positive in overall terms. Sixty-five percent of French respondents to the OFRE Survey (2023) answered that religious actions and conduct do not interfere with the performance of their work duties. In other words, religion in the workplace does not have to have exclusively negative associations. In addition, it is possible to tackle these issues without systematically viewing them as something negative. This then means trying to find a way to value religious diversity rather than be afraid of it.

Religion points to a bright future beyond the workplace

It is our opinion that the positive effects of religious expression in the workplace can operate on three levels: among employees, among management and within the company as a whole.

First of all, employees need authenticity more than ever, which means they need to be themselves in the workplace. They expect that their core values will be acknowledged in every sphere of their lives, including in the world of work (Javadizadeh et al., 2023). Our research on Muslim women in France who wear the veil, and on practicing Catholics, points to the importance of religion in the self-concept of the people we interviewed. For example, women who wear the veil are no longer reluctant to disclose their identity throughout the process of accessing employment and then when they are in work. They do this by looking for a welcoming company that shares the same values of inclusion.

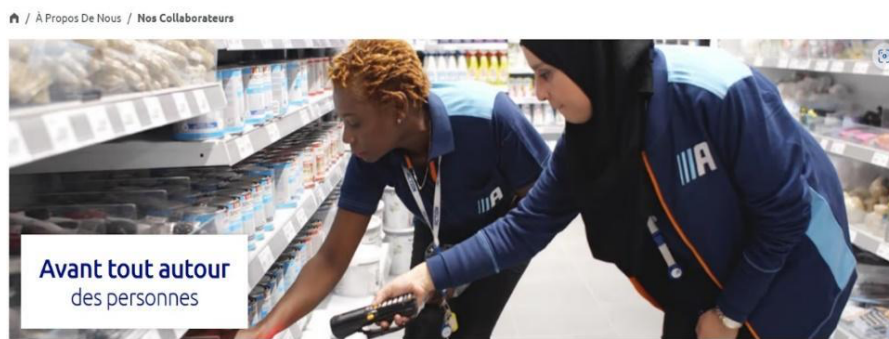
The positive effects, it follows, are potentially vast (Héliot et al., 2020). Religion becomes a source of well-being and a recourse in the face of work-related problems, when it can be a way of overcoming hardship. It also leads to better recognition and higher self-esteem. Furthermore, religion increases the feeling of belonging to a group and in broader terms to an organization (Ragins, 2008). Lastly, the literature shows that even though it may be advantageous in some environments to conceal an identity that an individual deems important, the effects prove more harmful in the long run than if this identity is disclosed (Jones and King, 2014).

At organizational level, it is crucial to point out that companies must provide evidence of an active policy for a positive perception of religious expression in the workplace to be accepted (Héliot et al., 2020). This means acknowledging the identity of employees without automatically excluding some of them on the basis of their beliefs. Organizations need to think about how to include employees who have suffered discrimination (real or alleged) because of their religion or religiosity – and then implement that policy. There can be many benefits. Making room for religious issues, while taking steps not to encourage proselytism, helps take the heat out of taboo subjects and tensions that could arise between employees. They then feel the full benefit: they experience a congruence between their religious identity and the company (Héliot et al., 2020). Some also find a common identity or receive more social support, which then makes for better working relationships and pushes up social cohesion in the company – and not just between employees of the same faith (Ragins, 2008). In addition, the possibility of being able to practice their religion in the workplace also reduces turnover and plans to leave a company. In fact, it has been shown that when there is concealment and identity threat, more employees plan to quit their company for self-protection and so they can be themselves (Javadizadeh et al., 2023).

Moreover, at a time when information – true or false – circulates at great speed on social networks, integrating religion into the workplace may have a positive effect on the image of a company. Contrary to the cases often covered in the media, inclusion then becomes a reputational lever. When a company advertises the fact that it embraces religious expression, it encourages would-be employees to apply, boosting its attractiveness not just to believers (King and Franke, 2017) but also to other individuals who are more generally sensitive to this inclusive vision.

This holds true in particular for the companies Action, Technip Energies and H&M. These firms allow their employees to wear a religious symbol at work, including for positions that are in direct contact with customers. But this choice of corporate policy is not without

consequences. In France, Action has had to deal with pressure from customers and even the mayors of some cities asking it to ban employees from wearing the veil.



Picture 1. Inclusion: The Action group opted for inclusion when it showed employees wearing the veil on its official website.

Technip Energies celebrated Women's Rights Day by sending out a clear message on its professional social network (LinkedIn): "As we celebrate International Women's Day, we believe that diversity and inclusion are not just values we uphold, they are critical drivers of innovation and success in our business". Alongside this message is an image highlighting that religious attire is acceptable at work. This sends a strong signal not just to future job candidates but also to employees: come as you are – the company leaves you free to express your identities in the workplace.



Picture 2. Technip Energies celebrates Women's Rights Day by clearly displaying that it embraces religion in the workplace.

Last but not least, at managerial level, factoring in religion in the workplace means choosing to take up a pro-active strategy that minimizes conflict between employees and managers. When company policy in this area is clear, managers know what they have to do. They feel less isolated and powerless when confronted with various situations regardless of whether or not they are conflictual. They do not have to come up with solutions, but to know the solutions for handling the issue calmly. This has the effect of limiting indirect discrimination inside teams against colleagues who are not believers or do not wish to disclose their beliefs, and who could potentially be victims of arbitrary arrangements decided on by their managers. It also means that some managers know they can give social support to employees who want to make the choice to reveal their religious identity (Jones and King, 2014). Looking at religious expression in the workplace in a positive light ultimately means it is possible for management to consider handling religious matters peacefully.

Accordingly, religious expression in the workplace makes it possible to conceive of a positive scenario that contributes to:

- Work performance, since it recognizes the core values of individuals, who are then more prepared to commit themselves to their work or to adhere to a certain code of ethical conduct.
- Managerial performance, when managers have answers and the means for dealing with religion in the workplace.
- Organizational performance, in that businesses find new sources of attractiveness, retention and reputation.

Conclusion

The aim of this Impact Paper is to look beyond the heated, divisive perception of religious expression in the workplace. It is an issue that is of special importance following recent world events. It is also a subject that business must tackle now more than ever so it can avoid the negative consequences of non-management or management that is excessively hasty and rash.

We are neither naive nor idealistic, and acknowledge that some cases are hard to manage. Here our aim is to provide balance by looking at the issue from the opposite side. Our goal is not to promote religious expression in the workplace but to concentrate on its positive aspects, which are very often overlooked in analyses. We have pointed out that the non-integration of religious identity at work may have negative consequences at various levels: individual, organizational and managerial. Conversely, religious expression in the workplace may also be a force for good at each of these levels. And here we have been intent on identifying and analyzing these positive effects.

Our study highlights a number of organizational and managerial implications. First, companies have to provide evidence of an active policy of inclusion and not gloss over the question of religion in the professional arena. The failure to acknowledge religious identities in the workplace may result not just in stigmatization and discrimination against practicing employees but also motivate them to leave the company. An inclusion policy needs the active involvement of managers backing up their company's position. In addition, resources must be directed to training and management tools so that all employees know what is permissible in the work context, and how to fulfil expectations while maintaining the attitude of a manager. If this policy is conveyed on social networks, it needs to be precise and fully adopted in order to avoid any disinformation. And, if we need to learn how to incorporate religious diversity, we equally need to know how to set limits on anyone who is guilty of proselytizing behavior or who prevents colleagues carrying out their work.

Following previous trial and error in this area, let's hope that policies and practices will succeed in making religion a management issue (almost) like any other.

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