

The many shapes of religious privilege in the workplace

*Religious privilege in the workplace can manifest itself in various ways. It is not exclusive to believers but can occur in organisations with a majority of agnostic or atheist workers. **Hannan Bader** writes that when religious privilege is made more salient to workers across the organisation, it is easier to handle the problem.*

Privilege in the Workplace series - [The Inclusion Initiative](#) - #TIIThursday

Privilege can take many shapes and manifest through various actions within a workplace, but it is often overlooked and difficult to pinpoint. An example in point is religious privilege, when an individual acquires a specific status within an organisation due to their religious beliefs (or lack thereof). This can be a serious concern, considering the UK's 2010 Equality Act, which looks to protect individuals in employment across various dimensions, including that of religious beliefs. Today, with people expressing and displaying their religious choices more openly, concerns surrounding religious privilege can be remarkably prevalent.

Religion can direct and inform an employee's contribution and choices in their career and within an organisation.

Religious privilege in the workplace can manifest itself in various ways. An instance commonly discussed in academic literature is when an individual is seen as being part of the 'religious ingroup', which can often vary in number. Examples of religious ingroups in the UK are generally atheism or Christianity but can also include others such as Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism depending on the general demographics of the organisation. Part of this privilege problem manifests itself in how specific minority religious groups are portrayed in narratives pushed through social media and discussed in the public sphere, resulting in individuals being viewed and treated differently than their co-workers ([Héliot, Gleibs, Coyle, Rousseau, & Rojon, 2020](#)). Here the value of social capital (networks of relationships between individuals) may play a role, as specific religious groups can be viewed as more socially attractive due to the 'ingroup' structure and shared belief systems. Naturally, the 'religious ingroup' is determined by a country's demographics but sometimes the 'religious ingroup' inside an organisation is not the same as the 'religious ingroup' of a country.

Interestingly, religious privilege is not exclusive to believers but also involves those who are agnostic or atheist. Empirical evidence has shown that agnostic or atheist individuals can be overlooked against their colleagues in the 'religious ingroup' in certain parts of the US where there is a preference for specific religious values and practices.

In a US survey of 10,000 individuals, participants who defined themselves as agnostic were 28 times more likely **than Christians** to perceive religious discrimination, whereas atheists were 12 times more likely to perceive it ([Scheitle & Ecklund, 2017](#)). This problem can be exacerbated when religious holidays and events arise. They create an opportunity for social gatherings and activities to take place, but some individuals may not take part due to their agnostic or non-religious beliefs. This is, however, dependent on the regional context of the organisation, and may differ across different countries and regions. In the given US example, Christian values may manifest more in the South than in the North due to social and political factors ([Scheitle & Corcoran, 2018](#)).

Instances of religious privilege can be found throughout the labour market, particularly in specific disciplines or areas of work. A notable example is the perception of religious scientists within the academic community ([Scheitle & Ecklund, 2018](#)), where the 'religious ingroup' are scientists with an agnostic or non-religious belief and those holding a religious belief are the outgroup. This, alongside the secular approach within science, may result in scientists who hold religious beliefs being looked down upon within the academic community ([Marsden, 2015](#)).

Religious privilege can be intersectional, with other forms of privilege such as race, ethnicity and other characteristics contributing towards a privilege problem. Religion may not be the sole reason why certain people may be disadvantaged but it can be a contributing factor.

The implications of religious privilege

The consequences of religious privilege vary. In recruitment, empirical studies have documented how displaying religious markers can affect the outcomes for candidates; most notably among the Muslim community in the UK, US, and Europe ([Weichselbaumer, 2020](#)). Here studies have identified that people with a “Muslim” sounding name (such as Muhammed or Maryam) had a call back rate 5 percentage points lower for the same job than those with traditional UK/US/European names and up to 15 percentage points when wearing a headscarf.

This can also be seen in various sectors, such as in accountancy, with the difference in call-back rate being 10% between a German and a Turkish name when an image of the participant is shown. This is further exacerbated when religious markers external to the religious ingroup are shown, such as a headscarf being worn. Whilst factors such as age, beauty and ethnicity need to be taken into consideration, these studies show how religion and religious privilege may influence employment. Low employee diversity within companies is a notable concern and contributes to the privilege problem ([Ghumman & Ryan, 2013](#)). Identifiable religious markers have shown to negatively affect the job prospects of groups of people. This effect has been replicated across other European countries ([Di Stasio, Lancee, Veit, & Yemane, 2021](#); [Golesorkhi, 2017](#)).

Within organisations, the opportunities to progress are another area of concern. Individuals who display religious markers or views that are different from those of senior colleagues — or those of most of their colleagues — can have lower opportunities for promotion. A notable example is the ‘Noyes v Kelly Services’ legal case, in which an individual outside of a Christian ingroup was passed over for promotion by their supervisor, who favoured employees that belonged to the “Fellowship of Friends” Christian religious group within North Carolina ([“Noyes v. Kelly Services, Inc.,” 2007](#)). This specific case indicated how the victim of religious privilege was passed over despite substantial experience and superior qualifications (specifically holding a master’s degree). The group described the person in the outgroup as “not being interested in the role” without presenting any evidence. The organisation lost the case.

Because of legal ambiguities relating to what is religious versus secular belief — or how intensely and sincerely a religious belief is held — issues pertaining to religious privilege might not be reported or examined as often as they should in the US ([Ghumman, Ryan, Barclay, & Markel, 2013](#)). This is in comparison with the UK or Europe, where organisations often write into company policy that wearing or showing religious symbols is against company policy due to their preference for a neutral appearance ([“Achbita v G4S Secure Solutions Case,” 2017](#)). This leads to fewer cases of religious privilege than in the US.

Finally, issues can arise with regards to religious observances and attempts to take days off from work. People in religious minorities (and by default outside of the ‘religious ingroup’ of the organisation) may struggle to book time off work for religious observances that employers may not be aware of. Employers may use arguments relating to economic constraints, such as “organisational feasibility”, “continuous service delivery” or “accommodating for this change” ([Adam & Rea, 2018](#)), referring to the context of staffing issues or delivery dates that they are undergoing.

Other concerns can arise in case-by-case regulation, in which workplace accommodation for religious observances may not be written in workplace policy. This can mean a specific case needs to be created to accommodate the religious beliefs of an individual, which can be stressful when people attempt to take time off for religious observances.

Improving the situation

There are many ways in which organisations can tackle religious privilege in different areas.

For instance, to reduce bias in recruitment, the most commonly used method is to hide the candidate’s name and picture from their CV. The idea is to preserve anonymity, with a greater focus on the candidate’s achievements and experience ([Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016](#)). This can be done alongside a structured interview process in which the candidate will undergo one or two possible interviews with a non-homogenous panel.

Behavioural science can help address religious privilege. It is possible to alter the method in which unconscious religious bias training is delivered. Evidence has indicated that, beyond content, an individual is influenced by who communicates the information ([MacLean, Buckell, & Marti, 2019](#)). Introducing a third-party organisation to deliver training may result in little to no change. There is a greater chance of success if someone who is well-known within the organisation leads the training sessions. Employee religious networks or affinity groups can be effective discussion leaders. Or, to avoid overburdening current employees, well-known public figures from outside the organisation may be invited to help.

Sessions can be conducted in a manner that leads to more nuanced discussions about various religious beliefs. This would help employers understand religious privilege better. Unlike unconscious bias training, these discussions would be a more direct approach to increase employer awareness of various faiths (or lack of). Academic articles have discussed the need for a more interpersonal approach in dealing with religious privilege ([Gebert et al., 2014](#); [Héliot et al., 2020](#)) and the need for 'respectful pluralism', which looks to resist favouring a specific religion while accepting all religious expressions within the workplace.

The use of defaults and norms can help address the difficulties some employees may face when taking time off during religious festivities. Many Christian holidays tend to be, by default, time off for the whole organisation. The Human Resources (HR) team may expand options in the holiday booking system to allow employees to automatically take leave for various religious observances. For instance, a Jewish employee could work during Christmas, but the leave system would automatically give them time off during Hanukkah. These pre-built options should ideally be available when the employee joins the company, with the option of changing the settings at any time according to their needs. This would be added to company calendars for all staff to be aware of specific dates and religious events.

Finally, HR managers can make religious privilege more salient to people across the organisation, with incentives for employees to express their concerns. Previous legal cases have shown the potential negative consequences of not tackling religious privilege. When HR managers are more aware of the issue, they may feel nudged to review current policies and implement more inclusive workplace practices.

The author acknowledges the support of the Aziz Foundation in his work.



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