

The evolutions of religion in the workplace in France

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In France, the principle of laicity is a [pillar of society](#), and it is unusual to display one's spirituality and religiosity in the workplace. However, since the early 2010s, the succession of cases leading to court decisions both on a [national international](#) levels has contributed to the perceived complexity and conflict of this issue.

In 2012, I established an observatory of religious issues at work with the aim of providing reliable data on these issues and in particular on the impact of religion on work and the management of such situations. To this end, we conduct an annual survey of French corporate [managers \(1,110 questionnaires 2018\)](#). The main questions we are trying to answer are: How important is this phenomenon? What are the religion and related behaviours at work? Is this an issue for management? What are the impacts on the organisations?

Religion at work: a real issue for managers in France?

The proportion of managers who encounter issues related to religion at work rose sharply between 2013 and 2016, from 40% to 64%. From 2016 to 2018 it remained stable. In 2018:

- 29.5% of managers encountered religious issues regularly (every day, week or month)
- 35.5% occasionally (every quarter)
- 35% rarely or never (once a year or less).

Thus two-thirds of managers encounter issues related to religion in their work environment. But what are the facts and what is their impact on the organisation?

The most common facts are requests for absence and changes in work schedules (36%), the wearing of visible religious symbols (19.5%) or prayers during breaks (10.5%). These facts correspond to personal demands and behaviours that do not in themselves call the organisation into question. They form a first category that includes two thirds of the situations. The second category, which represents one third of the situations, includes facts that call into question the functioning of the

organisation. For instance, refusal to perform certain tasks (4.5%), to work with specific individuals (8.3%), especially women (7.4%), stigmatisation (7.4%), proselytism (5.3%) or prayers during working hours (6.5%).

More than one out of two facts (51% in 2018, a steady increase since 2013) gives rise to management intervention. And when management intervenes, 17.5% of cases are marked by tensions and/or conflicts. The proportion of conflict cases is also increasing steadily. It was 6% in 2013, 12% in 2015 and 16% in 2017.

Thus, one manager in two in France encounters the question of religion at work. The phenomenon is therefore widespread. It has become common in recent years. It has also become a management issue. Indeed, more than one case out of two requires management intervention (to respond to a request, reframe a behaviour, authorise a behaviour, plan absences, etc.), which results in conflicts and tensions in just under one case out of five.

From one manager to another: what types of situation and problems?

To further the analysis we have constructed an indicator of the religious density of the [workplace](#). For this purpose, we have combined five variables strongly correlated between each other: the frequency of religious facts and its evolution, the importance given to the religious fact in the workplace by managers, the diversity of facts and of the types of facts, either dysfunctional or not. This allowed us to distinguish three situations marked by high (19.1%), moderate (25.6%) and low (55.3%) density levels.

This density of the religious fact in the workplace is a determining factor

in the frequency of managerial intervention and the emergence of conflicts and tensions. Density of the religious fact in the workplace leads to more [management intervention](#), which leads to more frequent occurrences of conflicts.

Density is also correlated with individual's behaviour. Managers who are in high-density environment are also those who report the most demanding behaviours on the part of employees considered to have a negative attitude, those who make unreasonable demands and frequently refuse to adapt their religious practice to the constraints of corporate procedure.

In the same way, we have constructed an indicator for the disruption of the management situation generated by the religious fact. The objective is to refine the analysis by going beyond the notions of blockage and conflict to measure the impact of the religious fact on the complexity of managerial action. This indicator summarises four measures: the frequency of conflicts and blockages related to religious events, the evolution of this frequency, the frequency of challenges to managerial decisions concerning religious events and, finally, the frequency of sanctions related to religious events. This allowed us to identify three types of situations according to their low (65%), moderate (24%) and high (11%) degree of disruption.

Four main disturbance factors are identified:

- Density is the main factor: The more the frequency of religious events and their diversity increase, the more blockages, conflicts, sanctions, challenges to decisions appear...
- Managerial action: The ability of managers to balance respect for rules and religious freedom is crucial.
- The behaviours of individuals: The more they question the functioning, the more disrupted the situations are.

- Organisational arrangements: The company rules and discourses that govern religious expression in the workplace play an important role. They allow employees to adapt their behaviour, and managers to define their action.

Two realities and a paradox

There is a strong link between the religious density of the situation and its degree of disruption. The 19.1% of situations with high density have the highest degrees of disruption and concentrate cases of blockages and conflicts. When the [density](#) is low or moderate, the rate of [conflict](#) is greatly reduced as well as the rate of dysfunctions. Two realities are emerging for managers and companies. In the first case, which is the vast majority, the religious fact is not very disruptive. In the second, a minority, it is much more so. Paradoxically, our results also show that it is in the second case that managers receive the least support from their organisation, must more often manage cases alone, and companies implement tools to manage religion at work the least often.

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