

The Future of Religion in the Workplace

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When a Christian worker told his employer that shaving his beard to comply with company policy violated his religious beliefs, Triple Canopy, a Virginia-based federal contractor, called his beard a “[purely personal preference](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/national/article283609013.html) - (<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/national/article283609013.html>)” and forced him to resign. In December 2023, the company [was ordered to pay the former employee](https://www.eeoc.gov/newsroom/triple-canopy-inc-pay-110759-settle-eeoc-religious-discrimination-and-retaliation-lawsuit) - (<https://www.eeoc.gov/newsroom/triple-canopy-inc-pay-110759-settle-eeoc-religious-discrimination-and-retaliation-lawsuit>) nearly \$111,000 to settle a discrimination lawsuit.

In another recent [case](https://www.eeoc.gov/newsroom/chipotle-pay-20000-eeoc-religious-harassment-lawsuit) - (<https://www.eeoc.gov/newsroom/chipotle-pay-20000-eeoc-religious-harassment-lawsuit>), a Muslim teen who worked at a Chipotle restaurant in Kansas alleged that her supervisor repeatedly asked her to remove her hijab and eventually partially removed it himself. In April 2025, the national chain was ordered to pay the former employee \$20,000 to settle her religious harassment suit.

After years of decreases in workplace religious discrimination lawsuits, the [trend has reversed](https://www.workplaceclassaction.com/2023/07/spike-in-religious-discrimination-charges-stemming-from-covid-19-vaccine-mandates-fuels-increase-in-eeoc-charges/) - (<https://www.workplaceclassaction.com/2023/07/spike-in-religious-discrimination-charges-stemming-from-covid-19-vaccine-mandates-fuels-increase-in-eeoc-charges/>) in recent years, largely due to employees seeking religious exemptions from coronavirus vaccine mandates. In fiscal 2022, U.S. workers filed 13,814 religious discrimination charges with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, a massive increase from 2,111 the previous year and the highest number filed since 2018.

According to the SHRM [Q1 2025 Civility Index](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/topics/civility/starter-kit/shrm-q1-2025-civility-index-abstract.pdf) - (<https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/topics/civility/starter-kit/shrm-q1-2025-civility-index-abstract.pdf>), more than half of U.S. workers (52%) who experienced or witnessed incivility in their daily lives said at least one such incident occurred at work — highlighting the need for more proactive efforts to foster respect across differences, including religious ones. The data also shows that workplace incivility costs U.S. business over \$2.1 billion per day in lost productivity and absenteeism — underscoring the business case for fostering cultures where respectful dialogue, including about religion, is the norm.

As workplaces become more diverse, [religious inclusion - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/navigating-religious-beliefs-workplace \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/navigating-religious-beliefs-workplace) is an evolving aspect of employee expectations. With the rise of hybrid work, a shifting inclusion and diversity landscape, and changing social norms, such as a documented decline in religious affiliation in the U.S., as well as [shifts in government approaches to religious liberty - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/inclusion-diversity/workplace-response-to-trumps-executive-order-on-eradicating \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/inclusion-diversity/workplace-response-to-trumps-executive-order-on-eradicating), business leaders must adapt their policies to ensure that religious accommodations are handled equitably while fostering a culture of respect.

“When thinking about the plurality of identities that people are bringing to work, it’s important to remember that religion or lack of religion is one of those things,” said Elaine Howard Ecklund, professor of sociology at Rice University, director of Rice’s Boniuk Institute for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance, and co-author of [Religion in a Changing Workplace - \(https://academic.oup.com/book/58194?login=false \)](https://academic.oup.com/book/58194?login=false) (Oxford University Press, 2024). “This is not some side thing. Embracing it affects the bottom line and makes people better workers and more committed to the organization.”

Changing Workplace Dynamics and Expectations

The state of religious expression and inclusion in the workplace is evolving for a number of reasons. First, legal precedent has expanded companies’ obligation to do more than simply avoid discriminating on the basis of religion, said Susan Snipes, head of people at Remote People, a global recruiting agency. In its [2023 decision in Groff v. DeJoy - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/employment-law-compliance/supreme-court-sunday-sabbath-accommodation \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/employment-law-compliance/supreme-court-sunday-sabbath-accommodation), the U.S. Supreme Court expanded the standard for religious accommodation, stating that employers must make accommodations unless they can demonstrate that doing so would create a substantial financial hardship.

In addition, remote work has contributed to more diverse workforces, meaning companies may employ more people with disparate religious views and needs. “There are certain practical realities when working with global teams, such as employees in Muslim-majority countries not being able to work certain hours during Ramadan,” Snipes said.

While conducting research for their book, Ecklund and her co-authors surveyed more than 15,000 workers in the U.S. and conducted in-depth interviews with 300 about religion in the workplace. The pandemic came in the middle of their research, and the group found that people’s desire to bring their whole selves to work increased after the pandemic, Ecklund said.

“[P]art of bringing their whole selves to work includes bringing their religious selves to work,” she said. “It’s important to allow a certain amount of authenticity at work. Our religious selves overlap with other parts of our identities, such as our gender and our ethnicity. When workplace leaders tamp down religious selves, they’re tamping down other parts of selves too.”

Other research shows that greater restrictions on religion from either government or society [tends to harm economic growth - \(https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/economic-growth-slowed-by-decline-in-religious-freedom \)](https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/economic-growth-slowed-by-decline-in-religious-freedom), said Brian Grim, a former Pew researcher and founding president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation. “When you’re in business and there’s a restriction on religion, that dampens morale and productivity,” he said. “When companies allow people to bring their whole selves to work, people have more buy-in.”

Because most belief systems include a moral code of ethics, embracing workers’ religious selves at work encourages people to also bring their ethics and morals with them to work. That makes them better employees who are more likely to consider how their actions affect others, Grim said.

Challenges of Incorporating Religious Inclusion at Work

Since [workplace diversity efforts began during the Civil Rights era - \(https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-history-of-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-in-america \)](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-history-of-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-in-america), race and gender have typically been the focus. “Traditionally, religion was not a valued category of diversity,” Grim said. As a result, it’s often overlooked as an important issue for equity and inclusion.

Workplace leaders sometimes assume that allowing people to practice one religious observance “will open a Pandora’s box,” said Rice University’s Ecklund. “Where does it stop?”

Rather than expecting to recognize every existing religious holiday or observance, Ecklund recommends taking time to become familiar with your workplace and your region. “It’s part of our responsibility as leaders to understand the demographics of the region from where we draw our workers, and to understand our workplaces themselves,” she said. “That can be difficult because religion is a protected category and it can be hard to ask questions about religion, but a culture of openness can help.”

For example, when researching a small company in a highly Christian part of the Midwest, Ecklund interviewed a couple of Muslim workers who felt “highly honored” by their workplace. “This company had an openness to people’s personal lives and really encouraged people to get to know each other,” she said. “Workers met together during lunch and asked each other questions to learn about each other. The Muslim workers said they had learned more about their own traditions through those conversations, and they felt that they were doing better work because they felt honored by the organization.”

Another challenge is that religion is a sensitive topic, and it’s easy to offend people without intending to. “There is always the possibility that one person’s religious expression can make another person feel excluded, but we have to remember that the law protects freedom of religion, not freedom from religion,” Snipes said. “Employees need to feel like they have a safe space at work to express their religion if you want an inclusive culture.”

Because religion can be an intimidating subject, “the best approach is curiosity,” Grim said. “Instead of not mentioning a person’s hijab or their fast, ask about it.”

Finding a Balance

In a 2024 [Pew Research Center study](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/15/religions-role-in-public-life/) - (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/15/religions-role-in-public-life/>), U.S. adults were asked about the best way to proceed when someone disagrees with them about religion. While 41% said it’s best to avoid discussing religion altogether, 53% said it’s best to try to understand the other person’s perspective and agree to disagree.

Experts say workplaces should lean toward the latter, providing an environment where people feel comfortable discussing their religious preferences and needs for accommodation. When organizations lead with inclusion, they make space for a variety of religious perspectives, as well as secular worldviews. “If people feel that they have to keep their religious selves hidden at work, that engenders misunderstanding and mistrust,” Grim said. “There’s no way to overcome the bias because we can’t talk about it.”

Grim recently conducted a training session for middle managers at Accenture in New York, in which he talked about having a mindset of accommodation. For example, if a manager knew one of their employees was Jewish, having an accommodation mindset would mean they’d avoid scheduling meetings on Jewish holidays or make sure to provide kosher food options at workplace gatherings.

After the training, one manager went back and shared with his team that he wanted to acknowledge that religion was an important part of life, and they should feel welcome to share their religious preferences or needs. “He reported that every single person on the team had something they wanted to share in that meeting,” Grim said. “So, you can open a discussion without being confrontational or weird, and just let people feel comfortable sharing about their religion or non-religion.”

Best Practices for Religious Inclusion at Work

While the approach to religious inclusion may vary based on a workplace’s employee population, the first step is to ensure there is a [policy](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/policies/religious-accommodation-policy) - (<https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/policies/religious-accommodation-policy>) in place and that managers at each level understand their responsibility to accommodate religious needs.

Policies should fulfill the spirit of laws regarding religious accommodation and nondiscrimination, but they should also include details to help managers carry them out. That means including examples of what a policy looks like in practice, such as scheduling meetings around important religious holidays or paying attention to religious dietary restrictions when planning events.

“Organizations need to ensure that their religious inclusion policies go beyond compliance to promote understanding of different cultures and religions,” Snipes said. “Awareness is key.” She recommends [training for managers](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/organizational-employee-development/civility-training-for-managers-starts-with-a-neighborhood-menta) - (<https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/organizational-employee-development/civility-training-for-managers-starts-with-a-neighborhood-menta>) on religious holidays, requirements, and possible reasonable accommodations. Snipes also suggests including on company calendars all major religious holidays that affect the team to keep everyone informed.

Consider sharing announcements and reminders about religious holidays in a general communications channel with all team members, along with allowing employees to lead voluntary cultural awareness groups to share important cross-cultural information, Snipes added.

Continually tie your policy back to business priorities. For many companies, employee retention and productivity provide valuable business cases for religious inclusion. “It helps people feel they belong and also brings in the values that resonate with them, helping them perform better in their work,” Grim said.

Case Studies

Working with HR leaders at Fortune 100 companies, the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation has developed its Corporate Religious Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (REDI) Index, which evaluates various companies. The index is based on factors such as public commitment to religious diversity, employee resource groups, and accommodations policy.

In its [2024 annual report - \(https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/REDI-Index-Report-2024-FINAL-updated.pdf\)](https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/REDI-Index-Report-2024-FINAL-updated.pdf), the foundation ranked leading companies on the index, and organizations including Accenture, American Airlines, Dell, Intel, and Salesforce scored highly “by opening the doors to allowing faith to be part of diversity,” Grim said.

Here are two successful religious inclusion programs underway at companies on the REDI Index.

Tyson Foods. More than 20 years ago, Tyson Foods set up a chaplaincy program to ensure that the spiritual aspect of life was included in the workplace, Grim said. “All plants have a chaplain assigned to them, and the chaplains come from various faith backgrounds,” he explained. “A lot of the employees are first-generation immigrants or young people in their new jobs, and the chaplains are available to help with anything they need. Say a worker’s mom died and they can’t focus on work. The chaplain will pray with them and help with funeral arrangements and organizing time off. Managers at Tyson plants have said that if they had to make cuts, the chaplain would be the last employee to go because they are there to help all the other employees succeed.”

Texas Instruments. This company has active employee resource groups for Muslims, Christians, Jews, and members of other religious groups. In addition to providing community, these networks help inform company leaders about steps they need to take to be sensitive to their adherents, such as including kosher food options at events, Grim said. The groups are also free to develop resources that might be useful for all employees. For example, the Christian group developed a leadership discipleship program that drives spiritual innovation, helping participants determine how their faith can help them perform better and make a difference in the company.

These companies are just some of the ones developing creative solutions for acknowledging and welcoming religious diversity in their organizations, with positive business results. “With the evolving global workplace, religious inclusion is more important than ever,” Snipes said. “By addressing religious inclusion at all levels of the organization, companies will foster an open, educated work environment where employees of all different religions can thrive.”

Supporting the Religiously Unaffiliated

Religious inclusion should extend to those who are unaffiliated, including agnostics, atheists, and people who identify as spiritual but not religious. While they may not require specific accommodations, it’s essential that they feel equally respected and seen. Avoid assumptions about belief systems in team settings and ensure inclusive language in company communications. Creating space for open dialogue — without pressure to label or explain one’s worldview — helps foster an environment where everyone can bring their authentic self to work, regardless of faith or affiliation.

The Path Forward

As workplaces continue to evolve in response to shifting demographics, social expectations, and legal mandates, religious inclusion is emerging as both a challenge and an opportunity. Addressing it requires more than compliance — it demands curiosity, empathy, and a commitment to understanding employees as whole people.

In an environment where incivility costs U.S. organizations more than \$2 billion per day in lost productivity and absenteeism, building cultures of respect isn’t just a moral imperative— it’s a business one. Whether through thoughtful policies, open conversations, or intentional accommodations, organizations that make space for religious and nonreligious identities alike will be better positioned to retain talent, strengthen engagement, and foster authentic belonging.

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