

RELIGION AND BELIEF BASED DISCRIMINATION IN WORKING LIFE: A CASE STUDY UNDER THE HEGEMONY OF SUNNİ İSLAM IN TÜRKİYE**Serkan ÇELİK**

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Özet

Din ve inanç, insanlık tarihi boyunca yalnızca yaşam ve ölüme dair anlayışları değil, aynı zamanda bireylerin ve toplumların gündelik pratiklerini de şekillendiren kalıcı toplumsal olgular olarak varlığını sürdürmüştür. Sanayi Devrimi'nin ortaya çıkışı ve kapitalizmin gelişmesiyle birlikte, İbrahimî dinlerin işe yüklediği anlamlar, dünyevi olan ile manevi olan arasında yeni ilişkilerin kurulmasına katkıda bulunmuştur. Dinsel referansların çalışma pratiklerine giderek daha fazla içkin hâle gelmesiyle birlikte din ve inanç, çalışma yaşamı ile işyeri ilişkilerinin kurucu unsurlarından biri olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Bununla birlikte, dinin işyeri ortamlarında giderek daha görünür hâle gelmesi, baskın din ya da inanç sistemine mensup olmayan bireylere yönelik ayrımcı tutum ve davranışları da beraberinde getirmiştir. Dinsel ayrımcılık olarak kavramsallaştırılan bu tür uygulamalar, yalnızca farklı din ve inançlara mensup bireyleri değil, aynı dini paylaşmakla birlikte ritüel pratikleri ve inanma biçimleri açısından farklılaşan kişileri de hedef almaktadır. Bu çalışma, Sünni İslam'ın baskın dinsel çerçeveyi oluşturduğu Türkiye'de işyerinde din ve inanç temelli ayrımcılığı incelemektedir. Nitel bir araştırma yaklaşımını benimseyen çalışma, tek durum çalışması olarak tasarlanmış ve bir katılımcıyla gerçekleştirilen derinlemesine, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeye dayanmaktadır. Çalışmanın amacı, çalışma yaşamında Sünni İslam'ın inançları ve ritüellerinden kaynaklanan ayrımcı tutum ve davranışların nasıl üretildiğini ortaya koymak ve işyerinde dinsel ötekileştirme ile dışlanmaya maruz kalan bireyler üzerindeki bu deneyimlerin psikolojik, toplumsal ve mesleki etkilerini incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dinsel ayrımcılık, İşyerinde ayrımcılık, Baskın din, Sünni İslam, Türkiye

Abstract

Religion and belief have accompanied human history as enduring social phenomena, shaping not only understandings of life and death but also the everyday practices of individuals and societies. With the emergence of the Industrial Revolution and the development of capitalism, the meanings attributed to work by Abrahamic religions have contributed to the formation of new relationships between the worldly and the spiritual. As religious references became increasingly embedded in work practices, religion and belief emerged as constitutive elements of working life and workplace relations. The growing prominence of religion in workplace settings, however, has also produced discriminatory attitudes and behaviors toward individuals who do not belong to the dominant religion or belief system. Conceptualized as religious discrimination, such practices target not only individuals from different religions and beliefs but also those who share the same religion while differing in ritual practices and modes of belief. This study examines religion and belief based discrimination in the workplace in Türkiye, where Sunni Islam constitutes the dominant religious framework. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study is designed as a single-case study and is based on an in-depth, semi-structured interview with one participant. The aim of the study is to reveal how discriminatory attitudes and behaviors rooted in the beliefs and rituals of Sunni Islam are produced in working life and to explore the psychological, social, and occupational impacts of these experiences on individuals who are subjected to religious othering and exclusion in the workplace.

Keywords: Religious discrimination, Workplace discrimination, Dominant religion, Sunni Islam, Türkiye

Introduction

In working life, discriminatory attitudes and behaviors that individuals encounter due to the religions or beliefs they hold and adopt have been gaining increasing importance. The dominance of the free market economy in national economies, the globalization driven expansion of production and consumption processes of goods and services on a global scale, and the mass migrations and large-scale demographic changes accompanying these processes have all contributed to an increase in religion and belief-based discrimination. Migrants and new citizens participating in working life and production processes have diversified demographic structures. In this period marked by increasing diversity in race, ethnicity, and religious belief groups, discrimination against individuals with differences has become more prominent. As with other forms of discrimination in working life, religious discrimination is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is closely related to other types of discrimination. In the literature, studies on religious discrimination have often addressed it in conjunction with racial discrimination, treating the two as intertwined issues. Discrimination experienced due to other characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, and disability has led individuals to face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Religious discrimination addressed in empirical studies, often influenced by racial discrimination, generally presents a limited picture focused on the discrimination and problems experienced by individuals belonging to Islam, Judaism, and different religious sects. The hegemonic influence of Abrahamic religions over countries, societies, and individuals has also contributed to the conceptualization of these attitudes and behaviours essentially forms of belief-based discrimination as “religious discrimination.”

Recent scholarship also suggests that religion- and belief-based discrimination in the workplace should be examined through intersectional and organizational lenses. Experiences of exclusion are rarely shaped by religion alone; rather, they may intersect with gender, class position, educational background, age, and organizational status. This is particularly important in workplace settings, where formal hierarchies and informal group dynamics often reinforce one another. From an organizational behavior perspective, discrimination may be reproduced not only through formal managerial decisions but also through informal norms, group cohesion, insider-outsider distinctions, silence mechanisms, and everyday interactions among coworkers. Therefore, understanding religion- and belief-based discrimination requires attention not only to legal and social contexts but also to organizational culture and power relations within the workplace.

Despite this belief centred conceptualization in the literature, according to the definition adopted by the United Nations in 1993, religion or belief encompasses not only institutionalized religions but also belief in God, non-belief, atheism, and the choice not to disclose one's beliefs. Another definition of religion and belief has been addressed in various international legal texts, which emphasize that, in addition to formally defined religions, belief systems that individuals are able to define themselves should also be included within this scope (Yıldırım, 2016, p. 1018). Individuals who share the same religious view but differ in rituals, modes of belief, or forms of affiliation also represent distinct groups in this context. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has stated that the law should protect against religious discrimination not only with respect to traditional and established religions, but also with regard to other religious, ethical, and spiritual beliefs (EEOC, 2019b). Indeed, this principle is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: *"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance, either alone or in community with others and in public or private."* Similarly, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights sets forth a broad framework regarding freedom of religion and belief:

"1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

In Türkiye, Article 10 of the Constitution establishes equality before the law, while Article 24 guarantees freedom of religion on the condition that it does not infringe upon the fundamental rights and freedoms set forth in Article 14. Article 24 provides as follows:

"Everyone has the freedom of conscience, religious belief and conviction.

No one shall be compelled to worship, or to participate in religious rites and ceremonies, or to reveal religious beliefs and convictions; nor shall anyone be condemned or accused because of his religious beliefs and convictions.

No one shall exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion, in any manner whatsoever, for the purpose of basing the social, economic, political, or legal order of the State, in whole or in part, on religious tenets, or for the purpose of securing political or personal benefit or influence."

The emphasis placed on the social and economic order in the final paragraph of this article is reflected in the former Labour Law No. 1475 and in Article 5 of the current Labour

Law No. 4857. In this provision, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of “philosophical belief, religion, or sect,” religious belief is defined broadly to include philosophical belief as well. The prohibition of discriminatory acts and practices is imposed as an obligation on employers.

Religious discrimination is defined in general terms as exhibiting negative behaviors toward a job applicant or an existing employee because of their beliefs (EEOC, 2019b). Religious discrimination includes behaviors and practices such as humiliating conduct by managers and/or employees toward individuals with different religions or beliefs, religious jokes, compulsory tasks that conflict with one’s beliefs, exclusionary religious rituals, avoiding interaction with others because of their religious beliefs, failure to develop alternative services for employees of other religions, and ignoring religious needs in work planning (Huang & Kleiner, 2001, pp. 129–130). Employees define religious discrimination as differential treatment, religious harassment, failure to provide conditions compatible with religious beliefs, and holding grudges against employees or applicants who claim to have been subjected to religious discrimination (Ghumman et al., 2013, p. 441). In this context, discriminatory behaviors may also be exhibited not only by managers and coworkers but by customers as well (McColgan, 2009, p. 13). The perception of differences in religious belief and lifestyle as a threat by a group and its members constitutes a significant factor in the emergence of discriminatory attitudes and behaviors (Forstenlechner & Mohammed, 2010, p. 770). Examples of religious discrimination include a manager pressuring an employee to attend services despite belonging to different churches within the same religion, or an individual being subjected to pressure from managers and coworkers because, although belonging to a particular religion, they hold different views regarding the performance of rituals (Ghumman et al., 2013, p. 444).

In addition to the general measures taken against religion- and belief-based discrimination in international and national legislation, various regulations have been introduced in labor markets to address religious discrimination. The International Labour Organization’s Convention No. 111 of 1958 and Convention No. 122 of 1964 prohibit religious discrimination alongside other forms of discrimination. In the United States, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employers from discriminating on the grounds of race, color, age, gender, religion, and ethnic origin in hiring, promotion, dismissal, wage increases, benefits, agreements, absenteeism, and all other employment-related relationships, and declares such discriminatory practices unlawful (Phomphakdy & Kleiner, 1999). In this context, a governmental body named

the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was established to investigate allegations of workplace discrimination based on race, gender, and religion.

Despite the efforts of international organizations and individual states, religious discrimination has become an increasingly salient issue due to the difficulty of proving it compared to other forms of discrimination and the insecurity brought about by increasing labor market flexibilization. Discriminatory behaviors developed by dominant religious and belief groups against minority views in the workplace have generally become visible through cases brought to the legal arena. The majority of studies on this topic have been conducted in the United States and European countries. While these studies have predominantly examined religious discrimination against Muslim minorities, research on religious discrimination experienced by individuals with different beliefs and views in Muslim-majority countries remains very limited (Forstenlechner & Al-Waqfi, 2010).

This study has been designed to contribute to addressing this limitation. It examines the difficulties, discriminatory behaviors, and experiences of othering encountered during the Ramadan period by a female employee in Türkiye, where Sunni Islam is dominant, whose beliefs are close to deism. Due to the limited number of studies in the field, an exploratory research design was adopted, and a single-case study was conducted. The study aims to address how discriminatory attitudes and behaviors experienced in working life by individuals belonging to belief groups other than Sunni Islam in Türkiye emerge, thereby contributing to filling the gap identified in the literature.

In this study, the expression “the hegemony of Sunni Islam” is not used to imply a monolithic or uniform religious practice among all Sunni Muslims in Türkiye. Rather, it refers to the relative dominance and normalization of Sunni Islamic references within social and organizational life, particularly in everyday expectations, informal control mechanisms, and workplace interactions. In this sense, hegemony is understood not merely as direct coercion, but as the production of consent, legitimacy, and normality around a dominant set of values and practices. This understanding is broadly informed by discussions on hegemony and power relations (e.g., Gramsci, 1971; Foucault, 1977). Such a perspective allows the study to analyze how workplace norms shaped by dominant religious references may operate simultaneously as social expectations, cultural codes, and organizational practices. Accordingly, the analysis distinguishes between religion as a system of belief, culture as a broader set of socially reproduced meanings and habits, and organizational practices as workplace-specific routines and forms of control through which exclusion may be enacted.

1. General Overview of Religious Discrimination in the Workplace Worldwide

The prevalence and increase of religious discrimination are shaped to a significant extent by countries and regions' legal, socio-economic, and societal dynamics. According to data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, religious discrimination accounted for 2.1% of all discrimination cases alongside race, sex, and national origin discrimination with 1,709 cases in 1997. This figure rose to 4,151 cases (4.2%) in 2011 and stood at 2,859 cases (3.7%) in 2018 (EEOC, 2019a). The reasons for this increase in the United States have been identified as legal ambiguities, growing religious diversity in labor markets, increasing pressure on religious beliefs, and the distinctive nature of religion compared to other forms of discrimination (Ghumman, Ryan, Barclay, & Markel, 2013, p. 447). The lack of comprehensive data on religious discrimination, the greater difficulty of proving it compared to other forms of discrimination, and its frequent association with other discrimination types hinder the visibility of such practices. To substantiate claims of religious discrimination, individuals often need to demonstrate practices such as being assigned tasks that contradict their religious beliefs or being placed at a disadvantage in the workplace as a result of such assignments (Yıldırım, 2016, p. 1020). At this point, countries' legal systems and social norms play a crucial role. In multicultural societies, societal responses to discrimination and legal regulations are particularly important for the disclosure and proof of discriminatory practices. For instance, in Canada, proving religious discrimination is considerably easier than proving other forms of discrimination (Sheppard, 2002).

The extent of discriminatory attitudes and behaviors in societies regarding individuals' lifestyles, clothing, accessories, or materials they use constitutes the basis of religious discrimination in the workplace. The visibility of religious symbols and rituals represents a key element reflecting an individual's beliefs. In the United Kingdom, a British Airways employee was dismissed for wearing a cross necklace on the grounds that it violated the company's dress code; however, in the subsequent process, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favor of the employee (Habertürk, 2013). Similar to the Christian symbol of the cross necklace, Muslim women who wear the headscarf experience higher levels of religious discrimination in the workplace compared to Muslim women who do not wear it (Ali, Yamada, & Mahmood, 2015, p. 154). Likewise, in the study by King and Ahmad (2010), discrimination measured following job applications submitted with photographs of women wearing and not wearing headscarves was higher for those wearing headscarves; nevertheless, a certain level of discrimination was also observed for those not wearing them. Another important issue here, as

discussed in the introduction, is the relationship between racial discrimination and religious discrimination within the context of multiple and intersecting discrimination.

Another major issue in working life for employees with religious beliefs concerns taking time off and absenteeism to perform daily religious practices (Ball & Haque, 2003, p. 316). Religious rituals represent a crucial link between everyday life and the divine for believers. For Muslims in particular, work activities entail responsibilities not only toward employers but also toward fulfilling duties to God (Ball & Haque, 2003, p. 325). Similarly, for Jews, working on the Sabbath—their designated day of rest creates significant tensions between daily life and the divine, and may expose them to discriminatory treatment (Gregory, 1990, p. 750). In various countries, legal struggles have emerged due to the obstruction of religious practices and rituals. In lawsuits filed over the failure to allocate time necessary for religious practices and rituals, some local authorities have ruled in favor of granting compensation to affected individuals (Ball & Haque, 2003, p. 324). However, a key issue here concerns the proof of discrimination through individual cases and whether accommodating religious practices imposes an undue burden on employers. In this regard, the U.S. Workplace Religious Freedom Act states that employers are required to provide reasonable accommodation for employees' religious practices and beliefs, provided that such accommodations do not cause undue hardship or excessive difficulty for the business (Huang & Kleiner, 2001, p. 130).

Even with regulations that also protect employers, claims based on religious discrimination have not always resulted in favorable outcomes for employees. In the United States in 2008, during the Ramadan period, Muslim workers requested that their meal breaks be moved 15 minutes earlier to allow them to break their fast and perform prayer rituals. Workers belonging to other religions objected to this request, and as a result, 86 employees were dismissed. In this incident, which took place at a meat-processing facility, it was argued that the tightly scheduled work plan required rescheduling for all workers and that a 15-minute change would impose an additional burden on the organization (Longo & Blauwkamp, 2011, pp. 3–4). Another important issue in this context is that individuals and groups claiming to be subjected to discrimination may, in their demands and expectations, develop a different form of discrimination by disregarding the rights and needs of individuals belonging to other religions and beliefs. In interviews conducted by Forstenlechner and Mohammed (2010, p. 776), one interviewee stated that leaving work one hour early on Fridays to attend Friday prayers would not harm the job or the workplace; however, no explanation was provided regarding who would compensate for this one-hour reduction in working time.

In countries where Islam is not the dominant religion, issues related to preventing discrimination against Muslims in working life extend beyond time, space, and dress codes to include the provision of food that complies with Islamic requirements (e.g., halal food) and sensitivity toward alcohol consumption at workplace and off-site events (Findley, Hayley, Hunter, & Ingram, 2014, p. 246).

Another dimension of religious discrimination by managers, coworkers, or organizations is related to religious doctrines' perspectives on working life. In a study conducted in Türkiye, Tanyeri-Erdemir et al. (2013, pp. 226–227) reported that one interviewee emphasized the Islamic injunction to “entrust work to those from among yourselves,” arguing that employing individuals of the same religion should not be considered discriminatory. An interviewee affiliated with the Turkish Religious Foundation (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı) similarly stated that in enterprises and companies financed by religious groups, considering religion as a preference in personnel selection is legitimate and does not constitute discrimination. An Armenian interviewee, in the context of experienced discrimination and minority status, did not regard the selection of employees from their own religion as discriminatory. Likewise, in recruitment for positions in religious education, religious discrimination may be perceived as a form of positive discrimination (Tomei, 2003, p. 405). Robinson (2016, p. 341) similarly noted that in the United States, women wearing headscarves face limitations in labor market participation and job choices based on their religious beliefs. She argued that working in companies operating within the sex industry, such as Playboy and Hooters, may be considered incompatible with religious beliefs, even when equal opportunity is formally provided. In this sense, religion itself may function as a structure that also produces religious discrimination.

2. Religion, Market Relations, and Religion- and Belief-Based Discrimination in the Workplace in Türkiye

In Türkiye, the presence of an official religion of the state in public and private life was introduced through an amendment added to the 1921 Constitution in 1923. This provision was removed in 1928 and ultimately terminated in 1937 with the incorporation of the principle of secularism. The state's adoption of a neutral position toward religions and beliefs played a significant role in the modernization process. Following the constitutional guarantee of secularism, secularism became a fundamental dynamic of social transformation. The policies implemented during this period of social transformation included the prohibition of religious practices and forms of dress in public services, as well as restrictions in the fields of press and broadcasting (Göle, 1997, p. 49). In this period, during which the state maintained distance

from all religions and beliefs, certain practices became more pronounced particularly in the functioning and operations of the public sector. In contrast, similar practices were not implemented in non-public enterprises and workplaces. Göle (1997) notes that during Türkiye's modernization process, as secularism became dominant among the middle class and those in managerial positions, a process of conflict also emerged between local communities and individuals with Islamic values. This conflict was broadly articulated in terms of dress, appearance, and everyday life practices, with secularism positioned in opposition to Islamism, which was examined within the framework of religious and daily practices and traditions. Similar opposing groups also emerged within the capitalist class and working life.

With the neoliberal transformation process that began in the 1980s, the replacement of state-centered investments with market-oriented investments and the development of the free market economy enabled capital groups with Islamic values—who had begun to gain political visibility since the 1970s—to become more influential in the market with the support of governments (Ayhan & Sağıroğlu, 2012). In the 1990s, as these capital groups increased their capital accumulation, they expanded their spheres of influence alongside the growing power of political parties with religious references in local governments and national administrations.

During the period of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, which came to power in 2002, the increasing visibility and weight of Islamic capital groups in the market ushered in a new era conceptualized as “market Islam.” The Islamic identities of entrepreneurs and businesspeople became intertwined with the free market economy and also played a role in the allocation of tasks and services that public authority transferred to the private sector through marketization (Durmaz, 2016, p. 160). Under AKP governments, which adopted anti-discrimination rhetoric, developments related to the prevention of religious discrimination and the rights of religious minorities in Türkiye between 2002 and 2005 were largely shaped within the framework of European Union accession negotiations. These developments included initiating dialogue processes with representatives of other religions and addressing issues related to educational activities in schools belonging to religious minorities (Beylunioğlu, 2015, pp. 140–142). However, in subsequent periods, these developments evolved into policies emphasizing Islamic values, nationalist discourse, and the inclusion of other religions under an Islamic umbrella (Beylunioğlu, 2015, pp. 145–146).

Following policies formulated with reference to Islamic values as a response to religious discrimination, discriminatory attitudes and behaviors toward other religions and beliefs in the societal context were largely overlooked. Similarly, religion-based discrimination in working

life manifested itself in parallel with religious divisions in social life, primarily through discriminatory practices carried out by the dominant Sunni Muslim population against other sects and religions (Kutunis & Ulu, 2016, p. 366). Emphasis on the fact that the overwhelming majority of society is Sunni Muslim, along with the fact that most source countries of migration to Türkiye share similar beliefs, has further hindered the visibility of religion- and belief-based discrimination. As a result, issues addressed under the scope of religious discrimination in working life have been limited to specific topics such as permission hours for Friday prayers, the use of headscarves in the workplace, and discrimination experienced by Alevi (Tanyeri-Erdemir et al., 2013; Yıldırım, 2016).

The fact that the work performed by Sunni Muslim employees in labor markets entails not only responsibilities toward employers but also the fulfillment of duties toward God (Ball & Haque, 2003, p. 325) has reinforced discriminatory behaviors toward coworkers with different beliefs. In Durak's (2011) study, workers' perception of their employers and their own labor as a form of divine test similarly reflects this mindset. Employer organizations such as MÜSİAD, which frequently articulate Islamic values, and labor unions such as HAK-İŞ, which have emerged as complementary actors in labor markets and the economy, have also reinforced the presence of religion as an element of the production process. Employers' and managers' instrumentalization of this situation as a means of control and domination within production processes has further intensified discrimination against those who differ in terms of belief.

The dominance of Islam in social structure and working life has produced an inverse situation to the problems discussed in the first section of this study. Religious rituals that are considered discriminatory practices and grounds for rights claims in the United States and Europe have, in this context, become sources that generate religious discrimination. In enterprises owned by Sunni Muslim businesspeople, discriminatory practices are observed during the Ramadan period against employees who do not fast or who belong to other religions and belief systems. In the study conducted by Toprak et al. (2008, pp. 48–49), examples of religious and belief-based discrimination included the confiscation of food carried by employees who did not fast at factory entrances, requiring employees who could not fast for health reasons to obtain medical reports and prove this to coworkers and managers, and assigning heavy workloads to non-fasting employees to force them to resign. In the same cities, it was emphasized that in enterprises prominently identified with Sunni Muslim identity, employees appeared to perform certain religious rituals even if they did not actually do so. A striking example in this regard is that some employers who were sources of discrimination

themselves engaged in the same behaviors as the employees they discriminated against, but concealed these behaviors. There are numerous examples of individuals who did not fast during Ramadan but behaved as if they did so in public spaces and working life. Indeed, it has been reported that in many provinces where the research was conducted, food and beverage services in public workplaces were suspended during the Ramadan period (Toprak et al., 2008, pp. 39–52).

The visibility of debates on religious discrimination in working life has increased not within the framework of multiculturalism and migration discussions, as in the examples in the first section, but rather in relation to the hegemony of religion—and specifically Sunni Islam—in social life. According to a report by KONDA (2017, p. 16), the rate of individuals in Türkiye who fasted for at least one day was 75.4%. In a ten-year social change report published in 2018, this figure declined to 65%. According to the same report, while there was an increase in other belief systems, the level of religiosity decreased to 51% (Euronews, 2019). Following the decline in the dominant belief system and the increase in other beliefs, issues of religious discrimination and anti-discrimination recommendations in working life have been increasingly addressed in various reports. In its report on Religious Discrimination in Türkiye, Mazlumder emphasized that employees should be able to perform their religious practices during working hours and that appropriate time and conditions should be provided. Drawing on the U.S. example, the report also stressed that the time allocated by individuals for worship should not impose a burden on other employees (Mazlumder, 2010, p. 553). Practices such as the suspension of lunch services in workplaces or employers refraining from providing meals due to their own fasting status in organizations that use meal cards or vouchers have been widely discussed in public opinion; however, legal authorities have not permitted such practices, considering them incompatible with anti-discrimination principles.

3. Methodology

This study examines religion- and belief-based discrimination experienced in the workplace by individuals holding views other than Sunni Islam in Türkiye, where Islam constitutes the dominant religious framework. The research problem focuses on how discriminatory attitudes and behaviors encountered by employees whose beliefs, worldviews, or ritual practices differ from dominant Sunni norms may emerge in workplace settings. Given the limited number of studies addressing this issue in the literature, the research was designed as an exploratory qualitative inquiry.

A qualitative research design was employed, and data were collected through an in-depth interview. Since experiences of discrimination are shaped by subjective perceptions, personal biographies, and context-specific workplace dynamics, the study was structured as a single-case study. This design was preferred not to generate broad empirical generalizations, but to provide an in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of how religion- and belief-based exclusion may be experienced and interpreted within a particular organizational setting.

The main rationale for using a case study design is that discriminatory attitudes and behaviors related to belief systems are often complex, multilayered, and embedded in everyday interactions. A case study allows the researcher to examine these processes holistically and to make visible the qualitative dimensions of exclusion, normalization, silence, and informal control that may remain obscured in broader survey-based approaches.

Within the scope of the research, a face-to-face in-depth interview lasting approximately 150 minutes was conducted. A semi-structured interview form was used. While the core themes of the interview remained stable, some follow-up questions were adapted according to the flow of the conversation in order to deepen the participant's account. The interview was audio-recorded with consent, transcribed by the researcher, and then analyzed through thematic analysis. The analysis involved repeated reading of the transcript, the generation of initial codes, and the grouping of related codes into broader themes and sub-themes.

In selecting the participant, purposive sampling was employed. Preference was given to an individual whose worldview and belief orientation differed from dominant Sunni expectations in the workplace. The interviewee described her belief orientation as follows: "In fact, I am a believer. I believe in a system, an existence, an order. This cannot be conceptualized for me as religion or God." She is a 26-year-old woman with a bachelor's degree and has been working for 11 months in the accounting department of a medium-sized enterprise in the food sector in the Marmara Region. The interview questions focused on the following themes: demographic background; understandings of religion and belief; the role of religion and belief in hiring and workplace relations; relations with employers, managers, and coworkers; experiences of exclusion and discrimination; coping strategies; and future expectations.

At the same time, this methodological design has important limitations. Since the study is based on a single participant and a single workplace context, the findings cannot be generalized statistically or assumed to represent all workplaces in Türkiye. The case should instead be read as an analytically significant example that sheds light on possible mechanisms

through which dominant religious norms may shape workplace experiences. In this sense, the study aims to offer contextual and interpretive insight rather than universal claims. Furthermore, the findings reflect the participant's narrated experiences and perceptions, which are central to qualitative inquiry but should also be understood within the limits of subjective interpretation. For these reasons, the conclusions of the study are presented in a cautious manner and should be evaluated as exploratory contributions to a relatively under-researched field.

4. Discussion: Religious Discrimination in the Workplace, Traces of Discrimination under the Monopoly of Islam in Türkiye

The findings presented in this section should be interpreted within the limits of a single-case qualitative design. Accordingly, the discussion does not claim that all workplaces in Türkiye reproduce religion- and belief-based exclusion in the same way or to the same extent. Rather, this case is analyzed as an example that makes visible how dominant religious norms may be experienced, negotiated, and reproduced in a particular workplace context. In addition, references to religion in workplace life should not automatically be reduced to theology alone; they may also operate through cultural expectations, collective habits, and organizational routines that acquire a religious character in practice. This case also illustrates how macro-level belief systems may be reproduced through micro-level organizational practices.

The first stage at which religious discrimination in working life emerges is the recruitment process. Individuals' beliefs, religious dress, and the accessories they use constitute the initial markers of discrimination in this context. The interviewee stated that during the hiring process, neither the employer nor the recruitment staff asked questions explicitly related to religion or belief. However, she interpreted this as an implicit assumption based on her appearance fitting the general profile of the workplace.

"In the end, they don't ask you whether you're Muslim or not, but I think of it this way—at least in the context of the people I work with—we're in Türkiye, it's already a Muslim country, people are already assumed to be Muslim, and they probably assume that I'm Muslim too. I don't think I reflect anything different in terms of how I look."

This initially positive situation during recruitment changed shortly afterward. The interviewee emphasized that being a young woman, having a secular style of dress, and possessing a higher level of education than other employees constituted her main points of difference. She stated that after being subjected to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors due to her gender and personal characteristics, her behavior in the workplace changed and she gradually distanced herself from her coworkers.

“I never defined myself as ‘I’m Muslim’ or ‘I believe this way or that,’ but when I first started this job, I was actually a very realistic person. I had a more outgoing lifestyle. But as I started to feel excluded or saw different reactions from people, I began to live my own style inwardly, or only around people I felt comfortable being myself with in my private space. You could say I went through that kind of change. Actually, like I said at the beginning, I believe in my own way but I respect others; since I didn’t receive that same respect for my beliefs from the other side, I turned inward and started behaving like them, or as if I were one of them.”

The interviewee stated that these experiences in the workplace had been ongoing for a long time and had gradually become normalized for her. She had been working at her current workplace for 11 months and experienced her first Ramadan period during this time.

“I wasn’t fasting, but of course I didn’t tell anyone that. I had certain practices and experiences, and because I thought I’d get a reaction, I didn’t show it. I acted as if I was fasting. I didn’t even say ‘I’m fasting’; they just assumed it. Since I didn’t eat or drink anything around them, they thought that eating or drinking in front of a hungry person would feel awkward that was actually my reasoning. They formed that perception, and I didn’t say anything about it. The hard part was that I’m a smoker. I didn’t go out for cigarette breaks. When I had to go out for work-related things, I smoked in hidden corners places where I thought I wouldn’t run into anyone, where no one would pass by. My options for going outside were very limited. For example, if you tried to eat outside, shopkeepers already know you, and even if you ignore that, someone would definitely run into you. So I drank water and smoked in deserted places. I didn’t eat during the day despite having a physically demanding job, I didn’t eat. I was working ten hours a day, and my job is very dynamic, yet I still didn’t eat. It was a strange period for me.”

Similar to the findings of Toprak et al. (2008), who note that employees may feel compelled to appear as if they are fasting to avoid discriminatory treatment even when they are not, the interviewee experienced the same pressure. She stated that this functioned as a tacit assumption among employees and that not eating or even not smoking was considered sufficient. However, this situation was not limited to the workplace; social pressure and fear of discrimination created a difficult process for the interviewee, negatively affecting her both physically and psychologically.

“In that sense, yes, my job is very dynamic, and when I got home I was completely exhausted. I’d lie down and try to sleep, but I couldn’t; I’d wake up. I’d get up in the morning with no energy. I had no energy during the day and was completely drained in the evening. In that sense, it was bad for me. But the worst part for me was the psychological side. I said for a few days that I wasn’t fasting, and that was somewhat accepted because I’m a woman. After a certain point, I openly said I wasn’t fasting. But strangely enough, while our main employer since it’s a partnership didn’t find this odd, the other partners really did. My coworkers knew that I fasted for about 20 days and didn’t for 10. But then it turned into comments like, ‘Well, you didn’t fast at all anyway.’ And that’s when I started to feel hesitant.”

The anti-discrimination struggles related to women's identities such as clothing and headscarves discussed in the first section produced the opposite outcome in the interviewee's case. In Sunni Islam, women are prohibited from fasting during menstruation, and therefore not fasting during that period is considered legitimate. The interviewee stated that her not fasting on certain days was initially normalized for this reason. However, this approach soon merged with discriminatory attitudes and behaviors from coworkers and managers, eventually escalating to her being blamed for not fulfilling religious rituals.

"They thought I wasn't fasting for five or ten days, but on the very first day I said I wasn't fasting, I was in the office eating. At that moment, a coworker from the company came in and saw the food. No one knew before that. It's not like I was going to announce it or shout 'I'm not fasting'—my situation didn't require that anyway. That evening it turned into, 'You're not fasting anyway.' Even though only one person had seen it, there was suddenly this huge commotion in the company. And you can't really say anything to people talking like that. Ramadan ended, we took holiday leave for the feast, and now there are people who think I didn't deserve that leave. There's a coworker in the same department as me who also took leave during the feast, but while they were very tolerant toward her, they thought that since I didn't fast during Ramadan, I didn't deserve the feast holiday either—after all, I ate, drank, and went out. Why should I be given holiday leave? Right now, three or four complaints about this have been made to the employer."

"During Ramadan, my coworkers were paid for the extra hours they worked, but I wasn't paid at all. I worked until eleven at night at times, but no overtime was recorded for me."

The discriminatory attitudes and behaviors she experienced during Ramadan continued afterward and led to discrimination in fundamental rights and entitlements such as wages and leave—core indicators of religious discrimination. Although labor law guarantees leave on religious holidays and payment for overtime, these rights were not granted to her during this period. Moreover, she was reported by coworkers for using leave to which she was legally entitled. This attitude reflects the relationship between religion and domination in the production process described by Durak (2011). The failure of all employees to equally share religious attributions toward work and employers reveals problematic areas in distinguishing between the divine and the human when it comes to basic rights.

"Yes, that's exactly it. From the middle of Ramadan onward, I started to feel this exclusion. I don't know people are strange. Wanting respect and showing respect shouldn't be this hard. We keep talking about religion, about Islam, but how much I actually live it is debatable and how much they live it is debatable too. Wasn't there supposed to be no compulsion in religion? I'm not obliged to fast. If God exists, this is between me and God. If it's my responsibility, it's mine. The burden of me not fasting isn't written onto you. But you can't say this, because there's no one who would understand. I also associate this with education level. These people don't see anyone beyond their family or the society they live in. And

another issue is that the ones doing this are the entrenched group the people who've been working there for 15–17 years, not the newcomers.”

“Yes, I think that's the case. There's a deeply entrenched structure in our company many employees have been working there for over ten years. They're already looking for reasons to exclude newcomers. And yes, based on their complaints, newly hired employees can be fired. To stay on good terms with them, so they won't complain to the employer that's probably why things happen this way. And our employers if not all of them, then the other partners actually talk about this with pride. One day, when I was passing by the boss's office, I heard him say, 'All our employees are fasting, mashallah.' I witnessed that myself. Being asked every single day, 'Are you fasting?' was awful for me. It was so strange. If you say you're not fasting, it's hard one way; if you say you are fasting, it's hard another way. If you say you're not, you're lying to yourself; if you say you are, you're lying to the other person. It's a double-sided lie mechanism. Who are you supposed to be honest with yourself or the other person? Obviously, you're trying to please the employer. And this shouldn't just be limited to Ramadan. In our company, even if Islamic feelings aren't internalized, they're very visibly displayed outwardly. How can I put it things are done just so people can say, 'I'm doing it,' not because they've internalized it. I don't believe religion is internalized in our workplace. It's only in words, in show, done just to be able to say it's done. The reason I'm not limiting this to Ramadan is that in our company, when it's a really busy day your feet hurt, your head feels like it's about to explode, you feel terrible you still can't talk about the stress or the intensity of the day. You can't even say it in the most human way. Instead, you're expected to say, 'Mashallah, thank God, it was a very good day, very busy may God always give us this kind of workload, may every day be like this.' You're forced to say that, because that's what the employer wants to hear 'let there be work, that's all that matters.'”

The long-standing workforce and the frequent emphasis on religious references in both work processes and everyday practices, independent of individual beliefs have positioned religion as a dominant force within the company. This example may also be interpreted in relation to the increasing visibility of religious references within market relations during the AKP period. While religious meaning plays a central role in shaping internal norms and relationships, external business relations are likewise embedded in the networks described by the concept of “market Islam.” The employer's statement about employees fasting constitutes a clear illustration of this dynamic.

“Yes, exactly. A teacher once gave me a book called *The Trust of Labor* as a gift. I read it back when I was a student, and maybe I couldn't fully grasp it then, but when I experienced this in practice, I realized how true it is—fate, gratitude, destiny. 'This must have been our fate' it really is like that. I studied I finished both vocational school and a bachelor's degree—but given today's conditions, I still say 'thank God,' whereas they say 'thank God' in a different sense. I say it because, at least, I'm not unemployed. If something happens, we say, 'At least this didn't happen, thank God.' For example, we were just talking about food our meals aren't very good, honestly but we still say, 'Well, at least we have food, thank God,' and we don't even demand anything better.”

The discriminatory behaviors and loss of rights experienced by the interviewee led her to abandon other forms of rights-seeking in the labor market and, over time, to adopt the religious discourse that had become normalized in the workplace in her own daily language. The fear of dismissal as a decisive factor in coping with discrimination also points to a process of alienation.

“It worries me every day, because this isn’t just about Ramadan it’s not going to change. It’s an entrenched structure. There’s this belief that if you genuinely say what you feel, you’ll be excluded, fired, and the employers won’t be satisfied with you. And we create this ourselves. If I don’t fast and this is accepted, it would actually be seen as something natural. But it’s the employees who exclude you first. If I’m not fasting, a coworker somehow takes this to the employer ‘she’s not fasting anyway’ and says it out loud. And inevitably, the employer is influenced by this.”

“How much I’m accepted in the company is what really matters. Because of Ramadan and religion, when I’m excluded, everything I do at work falls into the background. Even if I do the hardest job, even if I’ve worked there for a short time or supposedly know nothing, no matter how well I do my job, it doesn’t matter because I’m not accepted, I stay in the background. The worst part is this: if I make a small mistake, I get three or five times the reaction I should get, simply because of this exclusion. You mentioned equivalence what’s ironic is that there are only three or five people in our company with a bachelor’s degree, and two of them are supervisors. Do you think it’s possible to exclude them? Or even if you try, can you really show it?”

Research on discrimination frequently emphasizes the significant economic impacts of discriminatory practices on both individuals and organizations. In this case, the interviewee’s experiences led to increased errors in work processes, thereby generating costs for the organization. Another critical factor is the disparity between employees’ positions in work processes and their replaceability. The interviewee, working in accounting within the food sector, emphasized that dismissal from the accounting department was more likely, whereas dismissing chefs who play a critical role in production was much more difficult. Employers’ preferences between religious considerations and economic imperatives are evident here. Factors such as the limited number of skilled personnel and the necessity of maintaining production continuity demonstrate how structural problems in labor markets are reinforced through religious discrimination. While a broader reserve labor pool in accounting and relatively lower human capital investment increase employers’ discriminatory behaviors, the interviewee’s threshold for tolerating such behavior rises in parallel. At the same time, her individual attitudes toward religion have begun to take on a more negative tone. In this regard, the decline in religious belief, identification, and ritual practice reported by KONDA may warrant further investigation in connection with such experiences.

“There’s talk about ‘no compulsion in religion,’ about believing however you want, about respect and tolerance—but I’ve never seen this, either in our company or in society more broadly. In working life, I experienced this as exclusion. You’re excluded, you’re not accepted, but you can’t just pick up and leave. You have to do that job somehow. The work is interconnected. You know you’re excluded, you know these people are hostile toward you, but you still try to do the job with them, smiling.”

“I don’t think it will change. Maybe it’s better in the Aegean region—I haven’t lived there, I don’t know—but I think it would be better. But even moving from Central Anatolia to Istanbul, I don’t believe this would change. I’m an accountant now, but I have friends working in banking and logistics, and the situation is the same. So I don’t think it will change, because this isn’t about the city we live in or the sector we work in—it’s about our society. If you don’t believe, you’re not one of them. Or rather, if you don’t behave according to how they believe, that’s the real point—then you’re excluded. Based on my experience, that’s the most concise way I can put it.”

Conclusion

The continuous increase in cross-border migration and the growing diversification of societies’ demographic structures have led to more frequent interactions among individuals from different religious and belief groups. While this dynamic significantly shapes everyday life practices, another key domain in which it becomes particularly visible is working life. Beyond the Abrahamic religions, the increasing presence of individuals with different worldviews, beliefs, and religions—as well as those who share the same religion but differ in the ways they perform religious rituals—contributes to the enrichment of diversity. Although such diversity represents social development, it also brings new challenges. Discriminatory attitudes and behaviors constitute the core of these challenges.

In working life, these attitudes and behaviors are frequently encountered, yet their identification is more difficult than that of other forms of discrimination. Within the framework of multiple discrimination, religious discrimination is often overlooked under categories such as racial or gender discrimination, resulting in a more problematic and less visible picture. The diversification of religion, belief, and non-belief further complicates the detection of religious discrimination.

Although laws and legal texts address anti-discrimination measures within a broad framework, the sanctions and penalties they prescribe remain insufficient in practice. Moreover, the dominant religion and belief system in a given country can further reinforce religious discrimination. While Muslim employees in countries where non-Islamic religions are dominant struggle to claim rights related to their religious rituals, in countries where Islam is dominant, the same religious practices may become sources of discrimination.

Discriminatory attitudes and behaviors that emerge at the recruitment stage gain particular significance when dominant religious belief groups within organizations systematically impose practices on new members during work processes. The approaches attributed to dominant religions and beliefs by legal texts, lawmakers, and implementing authorities also shape market relations in countries such as Türkiye. As the level of religious reference among market actors increases, these references become embedded in work processes. Consequently, individuals who do not belong to the dominant belief system are exposed to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors not only within organizations but across the broader economic system.

In this process where psychological and physiological effects are also at play employees develop negative feelings toward employers, coworkers, and even other actors in the market. As work productivity declines, individuals who fear losing their jobs gradually distance themselves from their own beliefs and worldviews, leading to a sense of alienation. The fact that society, the legal system, and the market often reproduce similar attitudes outside the organization creates a barrier to leaving discriminatory workplaces. This barrier, in turn, leads employees to remain silent in the face of violations concerning rights and entitlements protected by contracts and legal regulations, such as overtime pay, leave, wages, and workplace meals.

As demonstrated in reports by KONDA, increasing diversification in religion and belief and declining frequency of religious ritual practices in Türkiye are likely to bring the issue of religious discrimination in the workplace further to the forefront in the coming years. Despite these changes in individual beliefs, Islamic capital groups that have expanded their influence alongside AKP governments continue to dominate significant segments of the market. Even organizations that are not directly associated with religiously oriented capital may, in some contexts, reproduce everyday practices shaped by dominant Sunni normative expectations. In this context, this may increase the likelihood that employees feel pressure to conform to dominant religious views and ritual expectations in certain workplace settings.

To reduce attitudes and behaviors associated with religious discrimination, the issue must first be addressed in detail within the Labor Law. During Ramadan, the continuation of workplace meal provisions should be treated as a legal obligation. In enterprises where meal vouchers are not used and food is provided on-site, continuity of meal services should be ensured regardless of employees' beliefs or rituals, and effective monitoring mechanisms should be implemented.

To prevent discrimination by employees adhering to the dominant religious view against others, education and training programs on different beliefs and worldviews should be introduced. Employment contracts should explicitly protect against religious discrimination, and administrative and disciplinary sanctions should be imposed on managers and employees who engage in discriminatory behavior. These sanctions should be reinforced with public service penalties aimed at fostering knowledge and understanding of other beliefs and worldviews.

Finally, young, highly educated employees who play a leading role in transforming dominant religious and belief systems within societies should be supported in promoting diversity. In this context, discriminatory workplace norms produced by long-standing employees who lack adequate information should be actively challenged and transformed.

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