

INSTITUTE MONTAIGNE REPORT

How Islam is changing the face of work in France

WORLD

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Every year since 2013, the *Institut Montaigne* - a liberal-leaning think tank very close to President Macron - has published its **report** to determine the impact of religion in the world of work in France. The in-depth study, signed by Lionel Honoré, professor of management sciences at the *Institut d'Administration des Entreprises de Brest*, shows that the space, influence and circumstances marked by faith in the workplace are clearly on

the rise compared to 2022, with Islam being the most represented religion. The report goes into detail and uses the term over-representation for Islam.

Honoré's research focused on the functioning of companies and the behaviour of managers and employees when religion is involved. These data, in turn, fit into a country where atheism is on the rise - around 40% of the population - with just under 50% still identifying themselves as Christians and between 8 and 10% claiming to be Muslims. According to the Institut Montaigne, 71% of respondents said they had experienced an incident in which religion had influenced the way work was done, up from 66.7% two years ago. This means that seven out of ten companies identify situations in their daily operations in which religion is involved, the highest figure since the report was published. Islam is present in 81% of situations, up from 73% in 2022. Catholicism is down, appearing in 19% of cases, and evangelical cults in 16%.

The comprehensive study, based on the responses of 1,348 managers and 1,401 employees, aims to provide an effective indicator of the evolution of religion within the company. While "in the majority of companies, the presence of religion is regulated and managed without major difficulties", notes the report's author, Lionel Honoré, "the tensions and conflicts recorded are increasing significantly".

And the over-representation of the Muslim religion is reflected in particular in the sharp increase in the use of religious symbols - 36% in 2024 compared with 19% in 2022 - but also in absenteeism and requests for changes in working hours: 52% of the requests come from Islam. On the other hand, 44% of respondents say that certain religious symbols are a cause for concern and disturb the peace at work.

Negative behaviour towards women is also cited as an important consequence of 'religious facts' observed in the workplace. In 2024, 15 per cent of employees surveyed witnessed unpleasant attitudes, compared to 13 per cent in 2022. According to the report, 'negative facts and attitudes towards women are exclusively linked to Islam'. More generally, "every transgressive incident in the workplace is related to Islam": in 91% of cases, compared to 89% in 2022.

Six per cent say they are changing their behaviour towards female colleagues for religious reasons and a further six per cent have already asked not to work directly with or under the supervision of a woman.

According to the survey, Judaism is the faith most affected by acts of discrimination. Frequent acts of stigma are reported by 15% (+2 points), while occasional acts are reported by 23%, an increase of 15 percentage points. These two figures are much

higher than in the 2022 survey (+2% and +13% respectively). In particular, stigmatisation of people of Jewish faith has increased from 16% to 32% since 2022.

The Institut Montaigne indicator also shows that the manifestation of current religious events is mainly a question of age. The vast majority of situations (79%) involve people under the age of 40. Cases of negative behaviour towards women, which the report attributes exclusively to Muslim employees, occur significantly before the age of 35 and then become less frequent after the age of 40.

The study thus highlights how the growing influence of certain religious beliefs in the professional world can condition behaviour, habits and consumption. The Paris think tank's report is therefore not *sui generis*. But it is meant to be a statistical snapshot of a country that is suffering in its relationship with Islam in the public sphere. You only have to go back about ten years, when the Institut Montaigne began its annual surveys.

A few days after the Islamic attacks on the Bataclan and the news that Samy Ammour, one of the suicide bombers, was a bus driver for the Parisian public transport company Ratp, concerns about Islamic interference in the world of work began to emerge. The bombing opened a series of investigations in France, and what was already known emerged: at Pavillons-sous-Bois - the headquarters of Ratp's bus and tram division - management was not in charge. The management recounted how, even then, the demands of the Islamic communities were in fact regulating the dynamics of the workplace: from the refusal of drivers to shake hands with women or to drive when behind a car driven by a woman, to buses stopping in the middle of the daily journey to recite prayers.

In the midst of religious expression, relations between men and women, the integration of new employees and even the fear of terrorism, ten years ago the RATP brought together in one and the same company all the issues of religious expression in the workplace that the Montaigne Institute is now analysing at national level.

It was in 2005 that a neutral clause was introduced in employment contracts in response to the first difficulties. And in 2011, the first code of ethics was published in France. But the initiative was more symbolic than real. It was at this time that France's historic trade union acronym, Force Ouvrière, was nicknamed 'Force Oriental' for appearing too open to the demands of the Islamic community. In 2014, Force Ouvrière suspended the membership of nearly 200 union members because they did not conform to the values of the state. It was a decision that came at a high price: at the end of 2014, the union won only 9.6 per cent of the vote and lost its representation in the

RATP. To the benefit of a new, newly formed union, the SAP, renamed by insiders as the 'Union of Muslims'.

The French chronicle of 2024 tells of couriers refusing to deliver crates of wine or beer, or even of home help companies responsible for shopping for dependent elderly people, with veiled employees crossing off pork from their shopping lists. And then there is the whole question of when, how and whether to work during Ramadan.

In 1987, Gilles Kepel proposed to speak of the 'expansion of the halal domain' to describe the transformation of forms of religiosity that have moved from the periphery to the centre with an unprecedented rigidity of identity, to the point of forcing them to regulate their existence and the world around them. In 1900, 0% of newborn babies in France had an Arab-Muslim name. In 2021, it was 21.1%. A dynamic that is not marginal and that has already profoundly changed the cultural face of France.

Houellebecq, the famous French writer, told the Corriere della Sera on 11 December: "When I left France in 1999, there was no talk of Islam. When I came back, 12 years later, it was all they talked about, all the time". Asked whether France had changed since the 2015 attacks, he added: 'The worst thing is that nothing has changed. Islamism has continued to advance'.

The core of the fictional political novel *Submission*, which probably made Houellebecq truly famous, is the penetration of Islam into society through the university. Which Islam has already done. Today, the report by the Institut Montaigne tells us that Islam has penetrated the French working world, and therefore society, and is shaping it.