

Religion in the workplace

The place for religion in the workplace is highly contentious, and regularly tested in the courts and employment tribunals. Everyone has the right to religious freedom, but there is no right to manifest religious beliefs in whatever way you wish, and in whatever setting, free from any consequences.

Wearing a cross or hijab at work may be perfectly acceptable in many (if not most) situations. But there will be circumstances where it is not, for reasons of neutrality, health, or safety. Broadly speaking, the law (and the courts) recognise this and strike the right balance between religious freedom and the other, legitimate interests of employers.

What's the problem?

The UK has some of the most comprehensive anti-discrimination laws in the world and is lucky to be a generally tolerant secular society. Despite this many people continue to experience discrimination because of their (or others') religion or belief (or non-belief). With our existing equality laws, common sense and good will, this can be stopped.

The media is generally poor at reporting on religious discrimination – some forms are ignored, while some religious groups feeling uncomfortable at not being privileged are sensationalised as discrimination.

A myth is being perpetuated that Christians in the United Kingdom face discrimination for their beliefs. This is false. Christianity has simply lost its privileged position in society (if not in the state). Losing a privileged position is not discrimination, and the former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams was right to criticise this rhetoric.

Many campaigners use this mistaken, but widespread, perception of discrimination to seek a legal duty on employers of 'reasonable accommodation' for religious belief. What is unreasonable about this demand is the fact that it would open the way to discrimination against gay people.

There is nothing necessarily discriminatory about prohibiting an employee from wearing a long-flowing religious garment in a nursery where it might be a trip hazard, or asking a TV news presenter to refrain from wearing overt religious symbols. Likewise, it is entirely reasonable to expect a teacher's face to be uncovered in the classroom, or for a worker to adhere to uniform policies.

Religious people should not face discrimination in the workplace, but neither should religion override everything else, including the needs of employers.

What you can do:

[Religious people should not face discrimination in the workplace, but neither should religion override everything else, including the needs of employers. I support a common sense approach to workplace issues.](#)

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More information

- [The unreasonableness of 'reasonable accommodation'](#)

A new workplace duty of 'reasonable accommodation' for religion and belief would risk new forms of discrimination.

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- [EHRC: Religion or Belief Report](#) (PDF, 426 Kb)

A major report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission says that a "common sense approach to managing religion" in the workplace is needed and that existing legislation is "generally effective". Published December 2016.

- [EHRC: Religion or Belief Guide to the Law](#) (PDF, 1.9 Mb)

The EHRCs 2016 common sense guide to the law for employers.

- [Position statement on the burka/niqab](#)

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While you're here

We're been challenging religious threats to equality and human rights for over 150 years. Our huge progress needs to be protected and there's still work to be done. Will you help?

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