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Religious Discourse & the Reproduction of Injustice Against Marginalized Workers

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A B S T R A K

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Kata kunci: Wacana Keagamaan, Ketidakadilan di Tempat Kerja, Pekerja Marjinal.

A B S T R A C T

This study investigates how religious discourse is employed to reproduce injustices against marginalized workers within contemporary workplace settings. Aimed at identifying discursive forms, analyzing the factors that facilitate the reproduction of injustice, and exploring its consequences, the study adopts a literature-review approach that traces news coverage, public opinion, and social-media discourse as primary data sources. The findings reveal three principal forms through which injustice is reproduced: (1) the ideologization of moral values that reframes structural problems as personal failings; (2) the sacralization of hierarchical structures that grants moral legitimacy to managerial authority; and (3) the instrumentalization of religious symbols and rituals as mechanisms of social control. Factors reinforcing these processes include conservative religious interpretations, entrenched structural power relations, the psychological internalization of religious values, and cultural norms promoting compliance. The implications comprise an erosion of workers' critical consciousness, the reinforcement of socio-economic inequality, increased psychological and spiritual burdens, and a weakening of labor solidarity. The study concludes that religious discourse can operate as a tool for conserving the status quo rather than as a catalyst for social justice.

Keywords: *Religious Discourse, Workplace Injustice, Marginalized Workers.*

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INTRODUCTION

Religion is often regarded as a source of ethics, solidarity, and the reinforcement of social identity (Restu & Fahrozi, 2025). However, in the practical demands of modern organizations, religious values can also be deployed as a narrative instrument to regulate employment relations and to frame expectations regarding worker behaviour. In many workplaces, religious discourse permeates policies, internal communications, and corporate activities, shaping how workers interpret working conditions and the boundaries of collective action (Romashova, 2020). Empirical observations indicate that the introduction of religious symbols, rituals, and interpretations into workspaces can lead to the delegitimization of structural claims and a weakening of marginalised workers' bargaining capacity.

This phenomenon warrants careful examination because it positions religion in a dual role: both as a source of moral legitimacy and as a mechanism for safeguarding the economic status quo. When religious values are construed normatively within organizational contexts, structural issues such as wage inequality, unfair working hours, or inadequate social protections tend to be reframed as matters of individual ethics or personal trials. Consequently, the impetus for advocating collective reform is diminished, and unequal power relations are maintained without the necessity of formal coercion. Preliminary findings from this material suggest a close relationship between the management of religious discourse within firms and a range of socio-economic implications for vulnerable worker groups.

Although scholarship on religion and work has expanded, there remains a gap in systematic research that unpacks how discursive mechanisms, namely the ideologization of moral values(Mukhlis et al., 2021), the sacralization of authority, and the instrumentalization of religious activities operate simultaneously to reproduce injustice against marginalised workers. Some studies tend to focus separately on theological dimensions or on economic aspects (Jati, 2018), leaving the discursive dynamics that link religious values to managerial practice insufficiently mapped. This lacuna calls for research that integrates discourse analysis, organizational structure, and the psychosocial experiences of workers to produce a more holistic understanding.

In response to these problems, the present study is formulated to: (1) identify the forms of religious discourse that contribute to the normalization of unjust labour practices; (2) analyse the factors that facilitate the reproduction of injustice through discourse; and (3) explore the social, psychological, and political consequences of these practices for marginalised workers. This focus aims to bridge empirical and conceptual gaps among religious studies, labour research, and theories of discursive hegemony.

The study's significance is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of an analytical framework linking religious discourse to the reproduction of power relations in the workplace. Practically, the insights produced are expected to inform corporate policy recommendations, trade union advocacy, and empowerment programmes that respect freedom of religion while protecting workers' rights. Thus, the research situates questions of religious ethics within the broader context of social justice and fair labour governance, and it provides a foundation for culturally and normatively sensitive intervention strategies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a literature-review (desk-study) method with an emphasis on tracing and analysing various news reports, public opinion, and social-media discourses as the primary data sources. This approach was selected because phenomena involving the use of religious discourse to legitimize injustice against marginalized workers frequently emerge and are widely discussed in digital spaces, making social media a relevant and data-rich arena for representational analyses. Data were collected through the compilation of news articles, public comments, institutional statements, and online coverage from widely circulated platforms. Sources were selected using purposive sampling, i.e., by choosing content that directly documents cases, narratives, or discussions concerning the use of religious symbols, doctrines, or rhetoric in the context of employment relations and their impacts on marginalized workers. Data collection was followed by processes of categorization, screening, and cross-platform verification to ensure relevance and accuracy.

All collected data were analysed by combining discourse analysis and thematic analysis, enabling the researcher to identify linguistic structures, legitimizing strategies, forms of symbolic hegemony, and recurring argumentative patterns within digital discourse. Discourse analysis was used to trace how religious authority is mobilized as a tool of legitimation in news coverage or user commentary, while thematic analysis served to group key issues such as discursive forms, facilitating factors, and their implications for marginalized workers.

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation—comparing narratives across social-media platforms, online news portals, and other digital publications—and through an audit trail documenting the data-collection and analysis processes. With respect to research ethics, the study ensures that only publicly available material is used, excludes irrelevant personal identifiers of users, and avoids reporting sensitive data that could pose risks to particular individuals. By employing this method, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how religious discourse operates and is reproduced in digital spaces and how this reproduction contributes to the legitimization of injustice against marginalized workers.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Forms of the Reproduction of Injustice toward Marginal Workers within Religious Discourse

1. Ideologization of Moral Values

Within the context of religious discourse in the workplace, moral values such as sincerity (ikhlas), patience (sabar), reliance on God (tawakkul), and obedience are frequently ideologized into devices that cultivate a passive work ethic. Appeals to accept unjust working conditions are often couched in religious language, so that criticism of exploitative practices appears to be an act of noncompliance with religious teachings. Expressions such as "accept it with sincerity" or "patience is part of faith" become normative instruments that naturalize inequalities in employment relations (Schneider et al., 2024). This framing reduces structural problems to matters of personal ethics that workers can easily internalize. Employers or managerial actors who deploy this discourse thereby obtain moral legitimacy to continue exploitative practices.

The ideologization of moral values within corporate practice does not occur spontaneously but through the systematic shaping of discourse. The use of religious terminology in internal policies, corporate documents, and mass communications is intended to create an emotional resonance that dampens reformist interests. When low-wage policies or extended working hours are packaged as a "test of patience" or an "opportunity for charity," resistance to such policies decreases because it is countered by moral arguments. Moreover, this religious framing narrows the space for labor organizations to formulate rights-based claims, since such claims can be easily labeled as forms of disobedience to religious values (Schneider et al., 2024). In these circumstances, workers are trapped between material needs and internalized moral pressure. Firms exploit this ambiguity to reduce the costs of social and political conflict within the workplace.

2. Sacralization of Hierarchical Structure

The sacralization of hierarchical structure is an additional strategy that strengthens the position of superiors or capital owners by appealing to religious norms. In many corporate narratives, the figure of the leader is positioned as someone to be respected and obeyed (Kakavelakis & Edwards, 2022). Such references are often anchored to verses or hadiths that emphasize obedience to authority (ulil amri) without critical contextualization. Portraying supervisors as embodiments of religious honor augments symbolic legitimacy that shields managerial practices from public scrutiny (Xu & Ma, 2022). Consequently, asymmetric vertical relations come to be seen as normal and even sacred thereby reducing the likelihood that exploitation and rights violations will provoke controversy. Critique of authority is reframed not merely as a political issue but as a theologically sensitive matter, which tends to place workers in a subordinate position where policies are accepted without negotiation.

The sacralization of leadership within corporate domains also affects organizational culture by privileging personal loyalty over collective solidarity. Rituals that honor superiors, praise for corporate vision, and narratives of the "blessed leader" serve to instill deferential values that suppress workers' critical initiatives. When moral legitimacy is fused with economic authority, internal oversight

mechanisms loosen because criticism is construed as a betrayal of shared religious values. Furthermore, such sacralization provides symbolic protection for decisions detrimental to marginalized groups within the company.

3. Utilization of Religious Symbols and Activities

The use of religious symbols and activities by corporations is an increasingly common practice as part of image-management strategies (Maali et al., 2024). Programs such as routine religious lectures (pengajian), communal prayers, and corporate charity drives are promoted not merely as forms of spiritual care but as tools for producing emotional bonds between workers and the company. These activities present narratives of moral solidarity that are readily internalized, redirecting workers' religious identities to strengthen organizational loyalty. When religious activities are controlled by management, they can be repurposed as mechanisms of social control that suppress resistance. Additionally, religious symbols displayed in the workplace can delimit the discursive field by making criticism of corporate policy appear to be an attack on a shared religious identity.

The relationship between religious activities and managerial practice is not always deterministic; however, in many instances it reinforces forms of emotional capture that benefit employers. Worker participation in rituals organized by the company can generate a sense of indebtedness that subsequently affects how workers evaluate demands for their own rights. This phenomenon is evident when calls for improved welfare are perceived as threatening the spirit of togetherness cultivated through collective ritual. Corporations adept at leveraging religious moments can redirect collective energy from structural advocacy toward nonconfrontational social activities (Alemayehu et al., 2023). Such practices may also create a moral hierarchy that marginalizes those who do not participate, labeling them as "less enthusiastic" or "less devout."

Factors Causing and Supporting the Reproduction of Injustice Based on Religious Discourse in the Workplace

1. Ideological Factor: Conservative and Hierarchical Interpretations of Religion

Religious discourse in the workplace is frequently shaped by conservative and hierarchical interpretations in which sacred texts are read normatively and literally. Such readings elevate obedience, sacrifice, and patience as central virtues that workers are expected to uphold. Consequently, attention to social welfare and the equitable distribution of justice becomes attenuated within organizational practice. Moral narratives that stress the duty to obey leaders and to work sincerely help to sustain imbalanced power structures (Javaid et al., 2020). In some instances, organizational leaders explicitly cite religious texts to legitimize managerial decisions that disadvantage workers. This form of legitimacy tends to blur the distinction between genuine ethical imperatives and instrumental demands. Ultimately, rigid and authoritarian religious interpretation closes off spaces for critical dialogue that might correct unjust practices.

Moreover, religious discourse presented without historical or sociological contextualization facilitates one-sided interpretation. Emphasis on moral compliance is often divorced from considerations of human rights and economic equality. When religious teachings are reduced to rules of individual conduct, the institutional dimensions of injustice are neglected. Practices that valorize "sincerity" (keikhlasan) can be construed as justification for low wages or extended working hours (Smith & McBride, 2021). This discourse also elevates norms of personal piety as the measure of a worker's morality rather than structural justice. As a result, criticism of corporate policies is perceived not as a legitimate demand for reform but as a betrayal of religious values.

2. Structural Factor: Power Relations in the World of Work

Power relations in contemporary workplaces are often hierarchical and capitalist in character, placing marginal workers in weak bargaining positions (Hafiz, 2020). Such economic asymmetries create conditions in which moral discourse can be readily deployed to regulate worker behaviour without recourse to physical coercion. Firms may formalize religious values within internal policies or training programs as a method of soft control (Kholis & Rini, 2023). Workers with low levels of education and minimal wages typically have limited access to legal information and social protection mechanisms. These limitations heighten their vulnerability to religious framing that emphasizes patience and sacrifice. In many contexts, employers and management exploit such economic dependence to negotiate

disadvantageous working conditions. Thus, organizational structures and labour market dynamics operate synergistically with religious discourse to reproduce injustice.

Furthermore, imbalanced economic relations enable religious discourse to function as an instrument legitimizing unjust managerial policies. Examples include uncompensated overtime framed as a "test of patience" or voluntary work programs celebrated as acts of worship (Smith & McBride, 2021). In daily practice, workers are often forced to choose between economic survival and the moral demands advanced by their workplaces. When organizations integrate religious symbols into corporate culture, criticizing policy becomes increasingly difficult. These institutional norms close off avenues for the restoration of rights through either internal or external mechanisms.

3. Psychological Factor: Internalization of Religious Values in Workers' Consciousness

At the psychological level, the internalization of religious values such as patience, tawakkul (trust in God), and sincerity plays a significant role in reinforcing injustice. Many workers incorporate these values into the core of their identities. Consequently, experiences of unfair treatment are frequently interpreted as spiritual trials to be endured rather than issues to be collectively remedied. This orientation diminishes motivation to claim entitlements such as a living wage, social security, or overtime compensation. In everyday discourse, expressions like "what matters is that it is halal and barakah" or "just be patient" absorb claims for material justice. The deployment of religious rhetoric thus cultivates acceptance of harmful conditions by framing them as forms of worship. Therefore, this psychological transformation is not merely passive acceptance but an adaptive mechanism that preserves the status quo.

Social pressure and the need to maintain a religious reputation within the workplace further reinforce the internalization of these values. Workers who question unjust practices risk being labelled as less pious or disrespectful of group norms (Stamkou, 2019). Such stigma functions as a subtle but effective social sanction that dampens protest and collective action. Consequently, workers tend to prioritize job retention over contesting their rights. Economic uncertainty, including the threat of dismissal, strengthens the preference for endurance rather than resistance.

Major Implications of Religious Discourse That Reproduces Injustice toward Marginal Workers

1. Implications for Workers' Critical Consciousness

Religious discourse that emphasizes patience, sincerity, and obedience can erode critical consciousness among marginal workers (Wong & Vinsky, 2009). In the workplace context, these values frequently function as moral pacifiers that reframe injustice as fate or an individual trial. Consequently, workers tend to interpret experiences of exploitation not as structural problems but as spiritual matters to be endured. This condition minimizes collective reflection on the root causes of inequality and diminishes the impetus for collective action.

The perception that occupational suffering forms part of a religious duty diverts attention away from analyses of production relations and corporate policy. From the perspective of hegemony theory, this constitutes an internalization of domination in which interiorized consent becomes a tool for consolidating power. The process thus produces compliant subjects rather than critical subjects capable of identifying and resisting structures of injustice. Therefore, an emphasis on moral resilience without social contextualization can weaken workers' capacity to demand substantive change.

The decline in critical consciousness has not only theoretical but also practical consequences for collective behaviour in the workplace. Workers who have internalized discourses of resignation rarely mobilize around basic claims such as living wages or social protection. Instead, individualized survival strategies such as seeking spiritual reinforcement or resignation become the primary options. Over the long term, these practices reduce the likelihood of forming strong, autonomous worker organisations.

2. Implications for Workplace Power Structures

Religious discourse in the workplace has direct implications for the power structures that organise relations between superiors and subordinates. When obedience is construed as a religious obligation, managerial authority obtains moral protection that impedes rational critique (Gebert et al., 2014). Such legitimization transforms employment relations into semi-feudal hierarchical patterns despite their modern corporate guise. In practice, detrimental managerial decisions can be couched in moral language. Employees who express objections are frequently portrayed as ungrateful or uncouth, thereby

disqualifying them from the domain of moral legitimacy. This situation broadens the divide between decision-making spaces and the internal public sphere where critique might otherwise emerge.

The integration of religious values into corporate practice creates a subtle yet effective form of power. Concrete examples include policies that frame overtime or additional tasks as tests of patience or opportunities for worship. In such circumstances, moral pressure substitutes for rational negotiation over compensation and worker protection. Policy instruments cloaked in religiosity may also hinder the development of independent dispute-resolution mechanisms. Moreover, the discourse increases workers' dependence on employer goodwill rather than formal legal protections. The weakness of collective representation such as labour unions is felt more acutely when religious norms reduce the moral rationale for organising.

3. Implications for Socio-Economic Inequality

Religious discourse that normalizes compliance contributes to the perpetuation of socio-economic inequality at both micro and macro levels. Marginal workers who feel obligated to accept poor working conditions seldom press for economic improvements. The absence of collective demands permits disproportionate accumulation of profits by capital owners. Consequently, the distribution of income and access to resources remain skewed. This phenomenon also impedes the political-economic shifts necessary to reform wage structures and social safety nets. Over time, the reproduction of inequality reinforces intergenerational cycles of poverty among marginal worker communities (Aiyar & Ebeke, 2019).

The economic implications of religious discourse are also evident in workers' access to educational opportunities and social mobility. When resignation is valorized as a virtue, incentives to pursue training or collective advocacy decline. As a result, workers remain trapped in low-skill, low-wage occupations that are difficult to escape. Employers may exploit this condition to preserve a flexible, precarious labour force. Neglect of these dimensions strengthens wealth concentration and reduces social investment in worker capacity development.

4. Implications for Psychological and Spiritual Well-Being

The instrumental use of religion to legitimate work can impose psychological burdens and spiritual exhaustion on marginal workers. When occupational suffering is constructed as a form of religious devotion, a dissonance emerges between spiritual obligations and material needs. Feelings of guilt, shame, or fear of being judged insufficiently pious act as barriers for individuals seeking redress. This condition may lead to chronic stress, diminished mental well-being, and a loss of spiritual meaning. For female workers in particular, religious demands can add to the burden of double duty arising from domestic responsibilities and moral pressures at work (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2024). Spiritual fatigue also affects productivity and quality of life, rendering the consequences both moral and economic.

The inner conflict generated by religious discourse also affects social relations within the workplace community. Workers who maintain an attitude of resignation often experience alienation from colleagues who are more critical or who attempt to organise (De Clercq et al., 2024). Such divisions weaken the informal solidarity networks that frequently underpin collective action. In addition, the mismatch between religious rhetoric and economic reality can produce disillusionment that undermines trust in religious institutions. That disappointment may transform into religious apathy or a form of practical secularization that does not necessarily translate into organised resistance.

5. Implications for Conceptions of Religion and Social Ethics

Using religion to justify injustice obscures the social-ethical core present in many religious traditions (Afrianti & Andreastuti, 2024). Across denominations, religious teachings commonly foreground justice, compassion, and the protection of the vulnerable as central values. However, when religious discourse is instrumentalised, these values are reduced to personal behavioural norms that fail to address structural issues. This distortion produces the paradox of institutions that are highly religious in appearance yet act as agents in the reproduction of injustice. Selective readings of sacred texts often neglect redistributive principles and social solidarity. As a result, religious discourse loses its critical capacity and becomes an apparatus for conserving the status quo.

Distortions of religious meaning also have implications for corporate ethics and corporate social responsibility. Firms that claim religious values while neglecting workers' rights place institutional ethics in a paradoxical position. Consistency between value statements and operational practices becomes a key

measure of an institution's moral credibility. The absence of accountability mechanisms that test such consistency enables corporations to claim normative legitimacy without consequence.

6. Implications for Labour Movements and Social Solidarity

Religious discourse that emphasizes moral individualism erodes the class-based solidarity that anchors labour movements. When occupational suffering is categorized as a private matter between an individual and God, the public space for collective action narrows. Advocacy strategies grounded in individual moral narratives are less effective for building collective, structural claims. Weak labour movements result in diminished pressure for policy change and enforcement of worker protections (Kvart et al., 2022). Moreover, fragmentation of religious identities within the workplace can pose an additional barrier to forming cross-group solidarity.

Depoliticization of the workplace through religious rhetoric carries long-term consequences for industrial democracy. Limited worker participation in deliberative processes reduces the quality of organisational decision-making. When workers' voices are muted, corporate policies tend to reflect the interests of a narrow set of economic actors rather than the collective good. This creates a feedback loop that reinforces inequality and erodes institutional legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing, this study affirms that the invocation of religious references in the employment context frequently serves to uphold unequal social structures rather than to ameliorate disparities. Such practices shift attention from demands for collective improvement to individual accommodation, thereby constraining the prospects for structural change. The effects extend to the erosion of workers' bargaining power and the normalization of unfair workloads. Accordingly, policies and empowerment initiatives are necessary to re-centre attention on distributive justice and organisational accountability.

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