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Special Issue Editorial

Rethinking Religion in Organizations: Unpacking the Interplay Between Visible Practices and Invisible Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Religion in organizations is understood as a dynamic continuum structured by two dimensions: its degree of visibility and its ambivalent role as both a resource and a constraint. This perspective foregrounds the centrality of invisible dimensions as constitutive of organizational life. Rather than opposing visibility and invisibility, this EMJ Management Focus section shows how they are continuously co-constructed and how their interplay shapes both individual experiences and collective regulation. The three contributions illustrate distinct positions within this matrix: religion as an invisible collective resource structuring coordination, as a negotiated and contested identity shaping individual coping strategies, and as a double-edged invisible resource influencing emotional regulation and performance. Across these configurations, religion does not occupy a fixed position but rather continuously shifts across visibility and constraint, actively shaping the conditions under which action and coordination become possible. This leads to a reconceptualization of management itself not as the governance of visible practices and behaviors, but as the regulation of invisible forces that sustain, orient, and constrain collective and individual actions.

Introduction

Religious expression in the workplace has emerged in recent years as a key management issue (Gaillard et al., 2022; Héliot et al., 2019; Honoré et al., 2019; Syed et al., 2017; Weaver & Agle, 2002). Demands and managerial challenges have become more frequent and intense in many countries worldwide (Cash & Gray, 2000; Gebert et al., 2014).

Several studies have explored the economic, sociological, organizational, and individual factors that explain why companies take this sensitive subject into consideration (Héliot et al., 2020; Cash & Gray, 2000; Hicks, 2002). To understand how employees seek spaces of conciliation between their beliefs and their work (Ecklund et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2021), other authors have studied the postures of employees (Cui et al., 2015), companies (King & Wertheimer, 2019; Galindo & Zannad, 2015), and managers (Cintas et al., 2020) facing various questions in different national, organizational, and individual contexts (e.g. Van Laer & Essers, 2024).

One of the main contributions of this Management Focus section is to show that far from being marginal or residual, the invisible constitutes a fundamental and structuring dimension of organizational life. Beliefs, identities, values, and inner experiences—often relegated to the

background—actively shape how individuals interpret situations, engage in action, and relate to others. The invisible also provides the symbolic, cognitive, and affective foundations through which organizational processes acquire meaning and coherence. Paradoxically, it is often when elements become visible—such as identities, beliefs, or differences—that tensions, misinterpretations, and forms of disruption emerge. Visibility can expose individuals to categorization, normative pressures, and contestation, thereby destabilizing what the invisible had previously allowed to hold together.

1. The ambivalence of religion in the workplace

While religion has emerged as a management issue, the ways of approaching it are marked by intertwined ambivalences. The sensitivity of this topic is also the subject of research interest in studying the intimate and the invisible facets of religion in the workplace (Clair et al., 2005) or work–faith reconciliation (Lynn et al., 2011). Religion is viewed as a source of risks and constraints while also seen as a source of benefits (Ahmad et al. 2021). These perspectives, which most often are examined separately in the academic literature, are in our view linked to another ambivalence: the oscillation between the visibility and invisibility of religion.

1.1. Ambivalence at the individual level

On one hand, the visibility of religion is often associated with risks at the individual level. While religion plays a central role in the identity of many individuals (e.g., Hicks, 2003), it immediately evokes an intimate dimension of identity, the *forum internum* or *inner forum* (Ragins, 2008). Displaying one's religion thus is often viewed as risky and a source of stigmatization or even exclusion (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006); however, religious identity has now come to the surface after its long confinement. At the same time, research in psychology has emphasized the positive consequences of religious expression at work, including involvement and satisfaction (Benefiel et al., 2014), well-being and commitment (Hamblen, 2016), positive individual behaviours, and better performance at work due to this source of enrichment (Hicks, 2003).

On the other hand, although keeping one's religion private might be viewed as easier to manage on an individual level—since it is a personal matter—it also has negative consequences. Keeping one's religion hidden can lead to a sense of disconnection and discomfort. Although concealing an identity deemed important to an individual may be beneficial in certain contexts, in the long term its effects prove to be more harmful than disclosure (Jones and King, 2014).

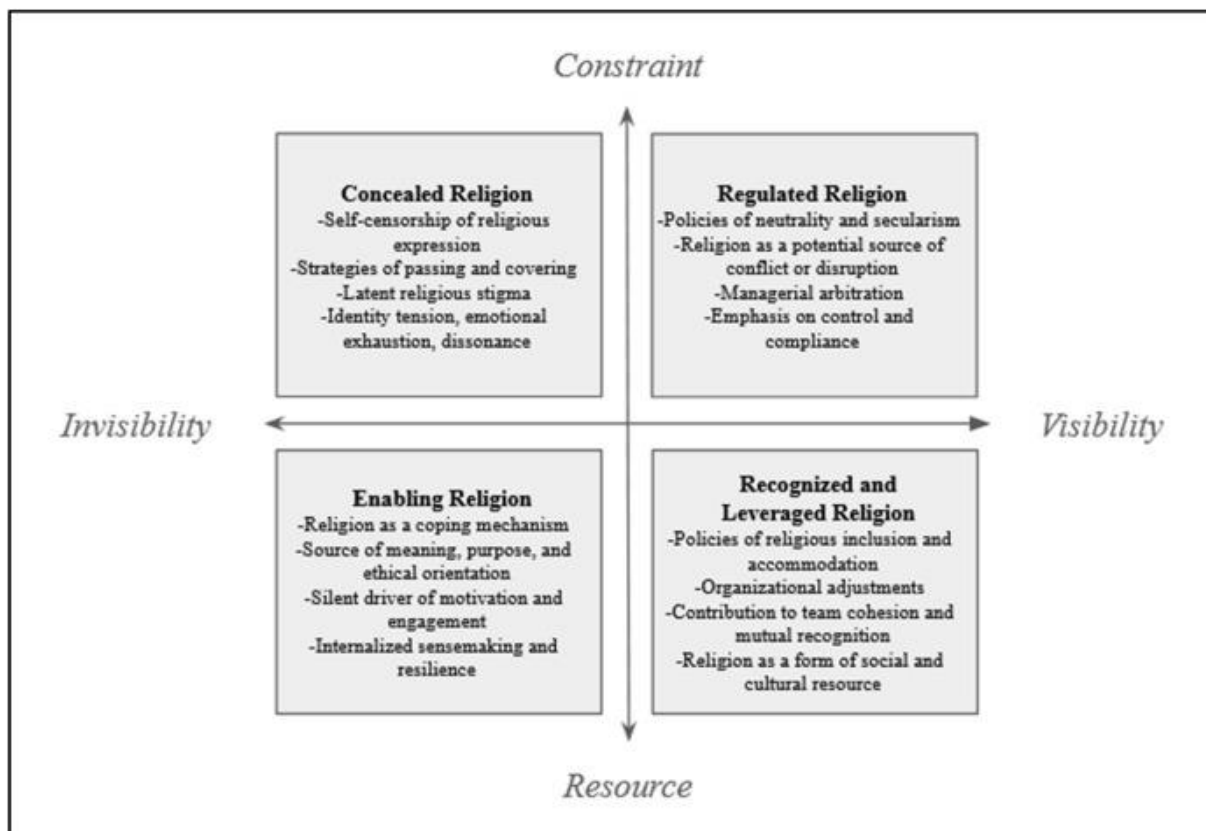
1.2. Ambivalence at the organizational level

Benefits and risks related to the visibility or invisibility of religious identity and diversity also have been studied at the organizational level. Refusing to address this issue and keeping it invisible lead companies to neglect religious identity as part of diversity management in theory and in practice (Héliot et al., 2019) and to consider it only in terms of a struggle against discrimination or a source of tension and conflict (Gebert et al., 2014; King et al., 2009). By doing so, companies may face three types of risks: the risk of excluding some of the company's religious employees, who might feel unwelcome in environments where stigmatization and mistrust are evident; the risk of discrimination when one does not know how, or does not want to, respond to the new requests of these “other” employees; and the reputational risk resulting when a lack of guidance leads employees to publicize the problematic situation outside the company.

Implementing dedicated practices and tools helps companies highlight religion in the workplace. Human resources departments have addressed this issue through constructing and implementing guidelines and tools for managers (Cintas et al., 2013; Gaillard, 2022). These tools provide a normative framework for regulating religious practices in companies (Galindo & Oiry, 2022).

Allowing space for religious issues while taking care not to encourage proselytizing helps defuse taboo topics and tensions that might arise among employees. Employees then feel the benefits, experiencing a sense of alignment between their religious identity and the company (Héliot et al., 2020). Some also find a shared identity or gain greater social support, which improves working relationships and increases social cohesion within the company, not just among employees of the same religious denomination (Ragins, 2008). The possibility of practicing religion in the workplace also reduces turnover intentions and employee turnover within companies. Indeed, it has been shown that in cases of concealment and identity threats, the intention to leave a company increases to protect oneself from this threat and to be true to oneself (Javadizadeh et al., 2023). Furthermore, demonstrating acceptance of religious practices encourages new applicants and enhances the company's appeal to people of faith (King and Franke, 2017), as well as to others who are more broadly receptive to this inclusive approach.

Figure 1 conceptualizes religion in the workplace as a continuum structured along two key dimensions: visibility and its ambivalent status as a resource or a constraint. Prior research on religious identity at work has concentrated on disclosure, concealment, and the conditions under which religious expression becomes possible or risky, rather than treating visibility and invisibility as a paired process (Héliot et al., 2019; Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2020; Gebert et al., 2014). Visibility may enable recognition and authenticity, yet it also exposes individuals to categorization, stereotyping, and relational conflict (Gebert et al., 2014; Ahmad et al., 2021). Conversely, invisibility may protect individuals from stigma, but it can also limit disclosure and recognition in the organization (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2020). The vertical axis captures the dual nature of religion emphasized in prior research. Religion can function as a resource by providing meaning, resilience, and a basis for collective cohesion, as highlighted in studies on spirituality, well-being, and faith-friendly workplaces (Koburtay et al., 2022; Ecklund et al., 2024). At the same time, however, it can act as a constraint by shaping norms, disciplining behavior, and imposing expectations that limit individual autonomy and intensify exclusion for nondominant groups (Gebert et al., 2014).



2. Introduction of the articles

The three articles featured in this Management Focus section reflect the various aspects of religion in the context of the workplace and, more broadly, within organizations.

The paper “*Regulate with the invisible: A study of the role of the Holy Spirit in the elective process of the Dominican order*” analyzes the ambivalence of religion at the organizational level. Delorme and Oiry show that in the Dominican Order, decision-making—especially leader election—relies on a close articulation between visible structures (rules, procedures, transparency) and an invisible spiritual dimension, embodied by the Holy Spirit. Conceptualized as a “floating signifier,” this invisible dimension does not dictate decisions but rather shapes how actors interpret situations and relate to one another. It guides their choices toward the collective good and acts as a powerful resource. This Holy Spirit fosters shared meaning, reinforces collective identity, and guides individual and collective behavior without prescribing it directly. By creating a common interpretive framework, it helps actors transcend personal interests, cope with uncertainty, and legitimize decisions, especially in situations when formal rules alone are insufficient. At the same time, it operates as a constraint; by structuring beliefs and expectations, it disciplines behavior, limits purely individual reasoning, and subtly guides decisions in line with communal norms. This article highlights the productive tension and ambivalence between visible and invisible dimensions, showing that organizational effectiveness emerges from their combination rather than their opposition.

The paper “*Beyond linear models: How (in)authenticity and identity asymmetry shape the visibility and invisibility of religious identity among muslim women who wear the hijab at work in France*” illustrates ambivalence on an individual level. Chenigle explores how the management of religious identity—specifically Muslim women wearing the hijab in France—reveals deep tensions between visibility and invisibility in organizations. It shows that religion cannot be reduced to a private subject, as it actively shapes individuals’ experiences and actions at work. When visible, religious identity often triggers stigmatization and stereotyping, leading to misrecognition and reduced professional legitimacy, but when kept hidden, this facet of identity can generate internal fragmentation, forcing employees into a painful “double identity” and a sense of inauthenticity. Despite these constraints, the invisible dimension of religion (faith, meaning, inner resources) also acts as a resource for action. Women develop coping strategies—endurance, resolution, or exit—to preserve their integrity, negotiate recognition, or restore coherence. At the same time, this invisible resource is shaped by strong organizational constraints. Managerial norms of neutrality impose symbolic and psychological violence, limiting self-expression and producing disengagement and suffering. The article highlights the ambivalence of invisible religion as a source of resilience and agency for individuals yet also constrained and suppressed by organizational practices that struggle to recognize identity complexity.

Finally, the paper “*Religious faith as a double-edged sword: Buffering and amplifying the negative effect of despotic leaders*” is both at the organizational and individual levels. Nauman, Imam, Le, and Otaye-Ebede explore the ambivalent role of religious faith in organizations by uncovering the largely invisible emotional mechanisms through which leadership shapes employee performance. Drawing on Conservation of Resources theory, the authors show that despotic leadership undermines performance via surface acting and emotional exhaustion, two hidden processes of emotional labor. Religious faith is conceptualized as a double-edged, invisible socioemotional resource that can buffer negative effects by reducing surface acting and supporting coping, but also can intensify value conflicts and amplify the detrimental impact of emotional labor on performance. The study aligns closely with the theme of the Management Focus by demonstrating that religion is not only a visible identity or practice but also an underlying, often invisible force shaping emotional regulation, coping strategies, and organizational outcomes.

These three articles invite us to move beyond a static view of religion as an object to be managed and instead to conceptualize a continuum through which religion reveals underlying organizational mechanisms. Each article sheds light on a different modality of the invisible, showing how it actively structures both collective regulation and individual action.

The first article conceptualizes the invisible as a collective regulatory resource through the notion of the “floating signifier,” highlighting how shared beliefs produce cohesion, meaning, and coordinated behavior. The second article shifts the focus to the individual level, showing how the invisible becomes a driver of action, mobilized through coping strategies (endurance, resolution, escape) in response to organizational constraints, while also revealing the ambivalent perceptions attached to religious expression. The third article further deepens this perspective by framing the invisible as a double-edged resource, simultaneously enabling individual resilience and subjecting individuals to normative pressures and constraints.

3. Toward a new perspective on the relationship between religion and management

We propose combining the key points highlighted in these three articles and summarize them in Figure 2.

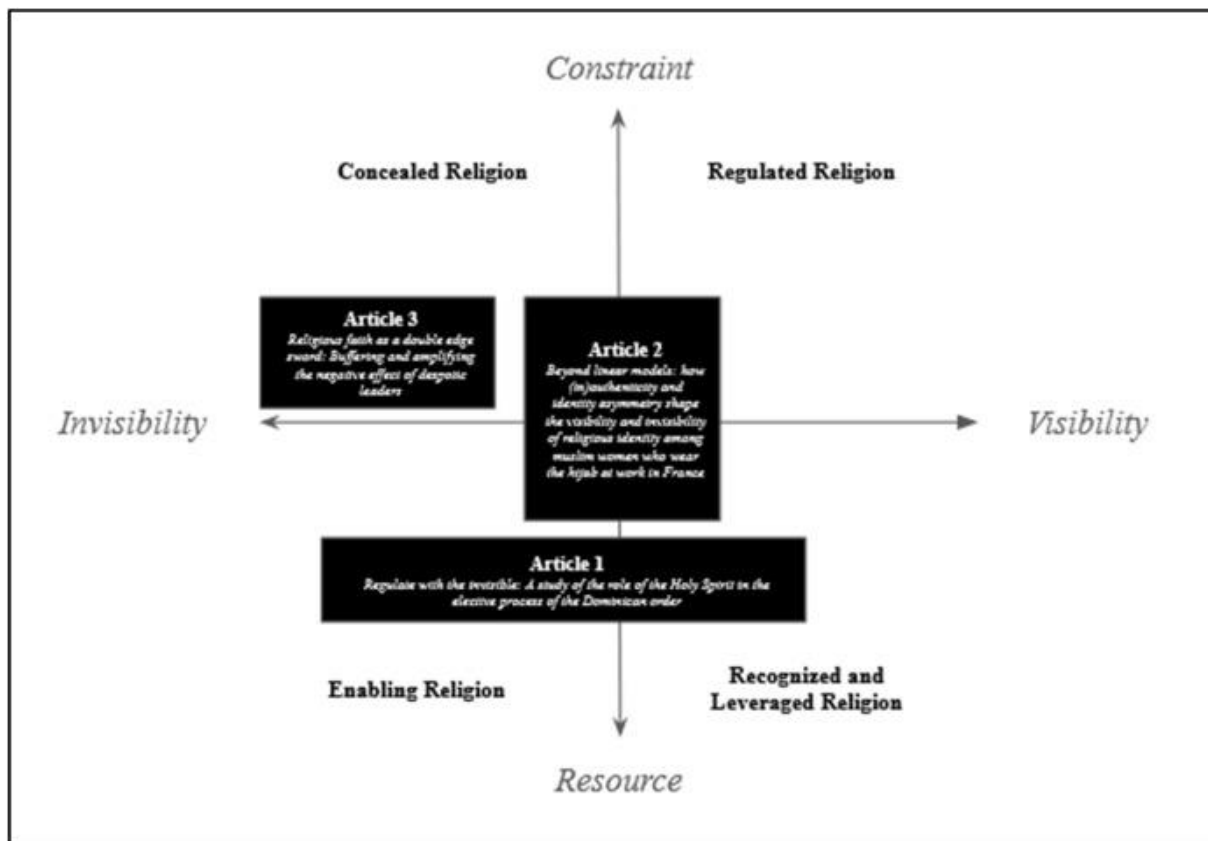


Figure 2. Religion in organizations: a continuum among visibility, resource, and constraint

This figure organizes the three articles along the two structuring dimensions: the degree of visibility of religion and its ambivalent status as a resource or a constraint. It thus highlights a continuum rather than opposing categories. At the lower level, religion appears as a resource but in different forms. In the first article, it operates as a collective and structuring invisible, acting as a “floating signifier” that enables coordination and shared meaning beyond formal rules. Religion here is largely invisible but highly enabling. Moving toward greater visibility, the second article shows how religion becomes a

recognized but contested resource, mobilized by individuals through coping strategies to navigate organizational tensions. At the upper level, religion increasingly appears mainly as a constraint. The third article illustrates how invisible religion can be concealed and constraining as individuals are forced to internalize norms and manage identity fragmentation, but that when religion becomes more visible, it often becomes regulated and problematized by organizations attempting to control or neutralize it.

At the center of Figure 2, the second article reveals the dynamic movement between these poles: religion is neither purely resource nor purely constraint, neither fully visible nor fully invisible, but constantly negotiated through action. Overall, the schema shows that religion circulates across these quadrants rather than remaining fixed within one quadrant. It is precisely this circulation that allows us to rethink management not as the governance of visible practices alone, but as the ongoing organization of invisible dimensions—beliefs, identities, and inner resources—that structure both action and collective life.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that the key issue is not only how organizations manage religion, but also how religion itself provides analytical leverage to rethink management and individual behaviors. From this perspective, management appears as a process of shaping, channeling, and regulating the invisible—whether in the form of beliefs, identities, or inner resources—rather than merely governing visible behaviors. Management uses visibility/invisibility as a mechanism for surveillance and normalization in the Foucauldian sense. In the first article, it ritualizes visibility to sanctify the Dominican institution; in the second article, it attempts to impose invisibility to normalize individual expressions of religion; and in the third article, in Pakistan, it imposes a feigned visibility to maintain domination.

4. Avenues for research

4.1. Rethinking the opposition between the visible and the invisible

Clair et al. (2005) distinguish between two strategies for revealing religious identity: concealment (passing) and disclosure (revealing), the latter of which can be further divided into selective disclosure and full disclosure. Ragins (2008), however, emphasizes that this process is not an “all-or-nothing” matter and proposes a continuum of strategies ranging from full disclosure to full concealment, with partial disclosure in between. He thus points to the fact that many employees tend to fall somewhere in between. Blonski and Galindo (2025) have shown that practicing Catholics neither want nor need to reveal their religious identity to everyone all the time in the workplace.

At both the individual and organizational levels, the visible and invisible aspects of religion in the workplace can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. They also depend on the choices made by these various stakeholders: whether to disclose or not and whether to implement certain practices or not. These choices are not without consequences and tensions. They also can lead to unforeseen situations of unintended disclosure or cases that become visible despite the company’s wishes. These contributions thus suggest the value of moving beyond simplistic views of religion as either visible or invisible and instead exploring the various possibilities along the visibility–invisibility continuum. They encourage scholars to examine specific contexts and to consider complementary levels of analysis: individual, organizational, and societal.

4.2. Toward a Research Agenda on Being and Doing

Another important insight for future research regards the role of the invisible in organizations, particularly in relation to the articulation between being and doing. Scholars are invited to investigate how managerial norms contribute to rendering the “being” of individuals invisible by privileging

neutrality, rationality, or instrumental roles over identity, interiority, and meaning. Future research could explore how this invisibilization shapes identity asymmetries, authenticity tensions, and forms of psychological strain in organizations. These contributions suggest examining the largely overlooked dimension of invisible “doing”—that is, the informal, internal, and often hidden practices through which individuals and collectives sustain action. These include coping strategies, emotional regulation, spiritual resources, and meaning-making processes that remain outside formal managerial frameworks but are essential to organizational functioning. This is a call to better understand how invisible mechanisms of regulation operate alongside—or even beyond—formal structures. Rather than being purely rational and procedural, organizational coordination may rely on shared beliefs, symbolic references, or moral frameworks that subtly orient behaviors and decisions. Finally, this Management Focus suggests a broader research agenda: to rethink management itself as a process that not only organizes visible tasks and behaviors, but also shapes, channels, and depends on invisible dimensions—such as identity, belief, emotion, and interiority—that underpin both being and doing in organizations.

4.3. Toward a contextual and processual understanding of religious (in)visibility

Future research on religion in organizations must move beyond universalist frameworks to embrace a situated and dynamic understanding of specific contexts—whether national, organizational, or sociodemographic. As emphasized by the call for contextualization, the primary challenge lies in conducting a granular analysis of the mechanisms of action and regulation that fluctuate across diverse populations (particularly minorities) and institutional arrangements (Gümüşay et al., 2020). Capturing this complexity necessitates a methodological shift from static observations toward processual and longitudinal approaches capable of identifying the “turning points” between visibility and invisibility. By prioritizing multilevel designs and reflexivity, researchers can better explore intersectionality (e.g., religion and gender; Koburtay et al., 2020) and the subjective tensions that structure the workplace experience. Table 1 synthesizes the methodological orientations required to apprehend these multifaceted dimensions:

Table 1. Capturing the visible, the invisible, and their interactions

Analytical focus	What is captured	Methodological approaches	Key challenges
Invisible dimensions	Beliefs, identity processes, emotions, symbolic frameworks	In-depth qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, narratives, ethnography, photo elicitation)	Accessing implicit, taken-for-granted or nonverbalized experiences Avoiding reduction of religion to observable or declared elements only
Visible expressions	Practices, behaviors, formal rules, organizational devices	Observations, surveys, document analysis, quantitative measures	
Interactions between visible and invisible	Dynamics of disclosure/concealment, identity regulation, coping, meaning-making processes	Processual and mixed-method designs (e.g., longitudinal studies, diaries, combined qualitative–quantitative approaches)	Capturing shifts, tensions, and feedback loops over time

This framework highlights that studying religion in organizations requires not only capturing what is visible or invisible but also understanding the continuous interactions between the two. It is precisely in these movements—between expression and concealment, regulation and experience—that the organizational effects of religion emerge.

Conclusion

This Management Focus underscores a pivotal insight: religion in organizations cannot be understood solely through its visible manifestations, despite the prevailing focus of current research on such observable situations. The contributions gathered here demonstrate that the invisible constitutes a structural dimension of organizational life, operating through beliefs, identity dynamics, emotional processes, and meaning-making systems that guide both behavior and interaction.

Figure 2 synthesizes these contributions by articulating two fundamental dimensions: the degree of religious visibility and its ambivalent character as either a resource or a constraint. The three articles map onto this framework, illustrating distinct configurations of this dynamic. Taken together, these studies show that religion does not reside in a fixed quadrant but rather circulates among these configurations depending on organizational contexts and social interactions. The visible and the invisible are not opposing states but interdependent dimensions that are continually co-constructed. This analytical shift invites us to move beyond a static view of religion as an object to be regulated and to instead treat it as a lens that provides a deeper view of organizational mechanisms.

In line with these contributions, this Management Focus proposes a repositioning of management itself. Rather than being confined to the administration of visible practices and observable behaviors, management can be understood as the process of organizing and regulating invisible dimensions—beliefs, identities, emotions, and systems of meaning—that underpin individual and collective action. Religion thus emerges as a particularly heuristic prism for analyzing these mechanisms, bringing to light the tensions, trade-offs, and dynamics that structure organizational life. It serves as both the object of study and the revelatory lens.

Ultimately, this Management Focus suggests that the invisible is not marginal but rather is the very heart of organizational functioning. Studying religion within this framework does not involve merely analyzing a specific topic; it also includes renewing our broader understanding of management by centering the invisible processes that make organized action possible.