

What role does Islam play in the professional lives of higher-educated Muslims in the Dutch work context?

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ABSTRACT,

The Netherlands has experienced a notable increase in higher-educated Muslim professionals entering its workforce. This study explores the role that Islam plays in the professional lives of higher-educated Muslims in the Dutch work context. Through qualitative interviews with five practicing higher-educated Muslim professionals born and raised in the Netherlands, this thesis aims to understand which Islamic values are relevant in professional settings, how these values influence behavior, and how tensions with Dutch workplace culture are navigated. For all the interviewees, Islam is not only a religion they practice at certain times in the day, but rather it is an all-encompassing way of living that influences their way of thinking, handling, and decision-making. The interviewees expressed that Islamic values are important guidelines for their professional behavior. The existing misunderstandings about Islam arise from ignorance or little knowledge of Islam, especially among non-Muslim colleagues. Asking for religious accommodation at work is strongly related to the degree of flexibility within the organization. The way organizations deal with accommodating religion differs strongly and is influenced by different factors like diversity policies, personal experiences of employees, and the overall culture within the organization. Combining work and religion is not only a possibility but is also seen as valuable by the interviewees. The findings show that higher-educated Muslim professionals have different strategies to avoid tensions at work between their religious beliefs and the expectations on the work floor. A new insight that emerged is the generational difference: compared to their parents, the interviewees practice Islam in a more reflective and knowledge-based way, showing how they combine their faith with Dutch values like openness and critical thinking. Dutch organizations can still gain a lot by dealing more consciously with religious diversity. Employers who recognize this not only create an inclusive culture but also strengthen the professional commitment of their employees.

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Keywords

Islam, Values, Ethics, The Netherlands, Dutch, Work, Professional, Higher-educated

“During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to refine text and translate transcriptions of Dutch interviews. After using this tool/, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work”.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem statement

The Netherlands has experienced a notable increase in higher-educated Muslim professionals entering its workforce (Enklaar, 2007). Most of these professionals are children of immigrants who initially only came for work in the 1960s (CBS, 2024) but ended up staying and building a life here. These immigrants mainly came from Muslim-majority countries like Morocco and Turkey.

Islam and being Muslim goes further than what is seen, such as wearing a headscarf, praying, and fasting during Ramadan (Arifeen & Gatrell, 2013; Berger et al., 2016). Islam is a way of living that influences people in all aspects of their lives. Islam is based on the following beliefs (Lange, 2025): Believing in Allah, his prophet Muhammad (and his teachings), and the Quran. Many aspects, like religious beliefs and moral conduct, are discussed in the Quran (Lange, 2025). In the context of work, Muslims derive ethical values from the Quran, which is regarded as a key source of guidance for work-related behavior (Yusoff, 2017; Kamri et al., 2014; Ahmed et al., 2013). The studies of Yusoff (2017), Kamri et al. (2014), and Ahmed et al. (2013) emphasize that the Quran provides a strong foundation for ethical conduct at work. Values like honesty, fairness, justice, and doing good are highlighted and not only viewed as moral principles but also as religious obligations.

This creates a new dynamic between the Islamic work values, which the Quran is the source from, and the Netherlands' predominantly secular environment (Kennedy & Zwemer, 2010). The Ministerie van Volksgezondheid (2022) found that most of Dutch people do not search for the meaning of life defined by religion anymore. Instead, they focus on finding personal meaning in their own lives, though this secular approach still corresponds with Christian values as described by Enklaar (2007).

Although there have been many of diversity initiatives, multiple studies show that higher-educated Muslim professionals frequently struggle with their Muslim identity in combination with workplace norms and expectations in Western societies (Al-Sharif, 2024; Waldring et al., 2014; Berger et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2022). In these studies, multiple concepts get introduced, like "boundary sensitivity" which refers to the strategic way Muslim professionals navigate social and cultural boundaries in the workplace. Also, identity negotiation and downplaying identity are mentioned (Al-Sharif, 2024; Waldring et al., 2014; Berger et al., 2016). On the one side, these findings reveal fundamental tensions in current approaches to workplace inclusion. On the other side, multiple studies found that Islam positively influences work ethic (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025; Al-Sharif, 2024; Enklaar, 2021). The interviewees of these studies find strength in their religion and believe that it shapes their values and professional behavior. Furthermore, in some studies, it was also found that when the organization provides an inclusive environment and accommodation of religion, the employees even perform better (Khan et al., 2022; Berger et al., 2016). Despite the recognition of diversity in the workplace, there are still critical gaps in understanding how Islamic values influence professional behavior in the Dutch work context.

1.2 Research gap

The existing literature shows that while being a Muslim professional may bring strong ethical values and internal motivation to the workplace (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025; Al-Sharif, 2024; Enklaar, 2021), their experiences are shaped by the cultural context and organizational environment in which they

work (Al-Sharif, 2024; Waldring et al., 2014; Berger et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2022). In inclusive workplaces, their religion becomes a source of strength and contribution. In less accommodating environments, they often need to carefully negotiate between their personal values and professional expectations (Berger et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2022).

Muslim professionals in Western societies often navigate in a complex space where Islamic values, cultural norms, and workplace norms come together. They use their faith as a strong source of motivation and ethical guidance, but expressing this openly in professional settings can remain a challenge. These dynamics are crucial to understanding Muslim professionals in Western work cultures. While the reviewed studies give valuable insights into the experiences of Muslim professionals in Western societies, there are still a few gaps. For instance, Enklaar (2021) offers us useful observations, but religion was not a central theme of his research. Zafar & Abu-Hussin (2025) do focus on religiosity and work ethic but not in a Dutch work context. Other studies like Al-Sharif (2024), Waldring et al. (2014), and Berger et al. (2016) highlight identity struggles or workplace challenges, but no research examines how Islamic values specifically influence the work ethic of higher-educated Muslims in the Dutch work context and how Dutch organizations can accommodate these values beyond superficial policies, or how such organizations could maximize the potential of their Muslim workforce.

Especially in the Dutch context, this is important, since Dutch organizations are increasingly operating in a multicultural labor market seeking higher-educated workforce but have a lack of cultural or religious literacy to engage in it effectively (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2025; Thijssen, 2023; Hays, 2018). Without a deeper understanding, Dutch organizations will risk missing out on ethical commitment, integrity, and sense of responsibility that many Muslim professionals get from their faith (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025; Al-Sharif, 2024; Enklaar, 2021). These gaps present a potential concern for businesses, because they often leave employers not well prepared to create inclusive environments that make use of the ethical strengths of Muslim professionals. This thesis addresses that gap by exploring how Islam shapes their approach to work and how Dutch organizations can support Muslim professionals in maximizing their potential in professional settings.

1.3 Research question

For this study, the main research question is:

- What role does Islam play in the professional lives of higher-educated Muslims in the Dutch work context?

This main question can be split up into several sub-questions:

1. Which Islamic values do higher-educated Muslim professionals consider most relevant in their work life?
2. How do these values influence their professional behavior and decisions?
3. How do they navigate tensions between Islamic values and Dutch workplace expectations?

1.4 Theoretical relevance

In the literature search, it was discovered that there is no literature about the role of Islam on higher-educated Muslims in the Netherlands. Though there were studies from which useful

insights could be extracted, there was no specific literature on this topic. The academic relevance is to advance the understanding of religion beyond its visible aspects of religion. This study also bridges the gap between Islamic work ethics literature and studies done in the Dutch context. Furthermore, this study contributes to theories of workplace integration by examining adaptation based on religious values.

1.5 Practical relevance

This thesis can help Dutch employers who have higher-educated Muslim professionals in their workforce to better understand what shapes the values of their higher-educated Muslim employees. The Dutch employers will be able to train managers to support religious diversity beyond visible accommodations based on the findings of this thesis. Also, Dutch employers can have an insight into how they can accommodate their Muslim workforce better. Following up on these findings will create an inclusive environment where Muslim professionals can thrive. This will result in employees who feel good at work and, because of this, perform better.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The presence of higher-educated Muslim professionals in the Netherlands has grown in recent years (Enklaar, 2021), making their experiences in the workplace, which differ from those of their parents, an important topic of discussion. In professional environments, one can observe male and female colleagues who are Muslim. This can be observed through visible aspects of Islamic identity like their appearance, for example, Muslim women wearing a headscarf (Arifeen & Gatrell, 2013), or Muslims in general praying at work or fasting during Ramadan each year (Berger et al., 2016). However, little is known about how Muslim professionals integrate their religious values into their careers. To what extent does Islam shape their professional behavior? And how do they navigate potential conflicts between religious commitments and workplace expectations?

Enklaar (2021) emphasizes that the only visible religion in the workplace is Islam (in the Netherlands), but not constantly throughout the year. Although religion was not the main focus of his study, he concludes that for the Muslim professionals he interviewed, religion plays a key role in shaping their values, ethics, motivation, and sense of integrity in the workplace. At the same time, some of them reported struggles in balancing these religious principles with professional expectations from their work. Enklaar (2021) also found that, for some Muslims, Islamic values can even reduce ambition: "When I ask Jalal, a Moroccan employee, why he has made more progress than most of his older brothers and sisters, he responds that they were more easily satisfied and had less ambition than he did. It also has to do with the fact that his brothers and sisters married young, had children, and started families, which became the main goal in their lives. That structured family life helps you in your faith, he says (Enklaar, 2021, p. 174). Jalal adds that forming a family and living an orderly life are prioritized over career development. In his view, Muslims often marry young, and they must make money to provide for their family, which leaves little room for further studying. Devotion to faith and family is therefore seen as more important than professional advancement.

2.2 Islam, work (ethic), and society in the Netherlands

2.2.1 What is Islam?

Islam is a monotheistic religion, like Christianity and Judaism. All three are based on the belief in one God, in Arabic known as Allah. Followers of Islam are called Muslims; they believe in Allah, his prophet Muhammad (the last prophet according to Islamic belief), the teachings of the prophet, and the Quran (the holy book revealed to the prophet Muhammad by Allah through the angel Gabriel). In the Quran, many aspects like religious beliefs, moral conduct, the afterlife, stories of past communities, and spiritual reflection are discussed. The interpretation of the Quran can be different: some Muslims read it very literally and others less literally and more symbolically. Also, words or phrases can be explained and translated differently. Next to the Quran, Muslims also follow the prophets' Sunnah (the traditional accounts of the prophets' way of living, called Hadith). Islam is not only a religion but also a way of living, which influences people in every aspect of their life. It is not only about the relation one has with God, but also relations between people, how societies are organized and how laws are shaped. Islam has influence over different cultures and communities around the world, but there are also differences between Islamic societies. These can be seen in how being Muslim is defined, how strict people are with their faith and to what extent Islamic values shapes them. Islam has different branches, the largest two are Shia Islam and Sunni Islam. Beyond these, other smaller groups exist as well. However, it's important to note that the way individuals practice their faith often depends on personal interpretation and lived experience (Lange, 2025).

2.2.2 Islam and work ethic

Work ethic in general, is the belief that it is important to work hard (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). In the Dutch context, the Protestant work ethic is very strong (Weber, 1905/2002). This is the belief that Protestant values will lead people to work hard, be disciplined, and be frugal (Wikipedia, 2019). In Islamic work ethic, the Quran is the key source to derive values from. A few examples of Quran verses with work are "Work, Allah will see your work" (Quran 9:105, Itani, 2014) and "Then, when the prayer is concluded, disperse through the land, and seek Allah's bounty, and remember Allah much, so that you may prosper" (Quran 62:10, Itani, 2014). Also, the following verse: "And that the human being attains only what he strives for. And that his efforts will be witnessed. Then he will be rewarded for it the fullest reward." (Quran 53:39-41, Itani, 2014). These verses remind Muslims that they should work hard and help themselves and others.

Ebrahimi and Yusoff (2017), Kamri et al. (2014), and Ahmed et al. (2013) all emphasize that the Quran lays strong foundations for ethical work behavior. In all the studies, values like honesty, fairness, justice and doing good are highlighted. These are not only moral values but also seen as religious duties. The studies explain that working ethically is not only good for society and organizations, but also a way to gain spiritual reward.

Zafar & Abu-Hussin (2025) support this by exploring the role of religiosity in shaping Islamic work ethic across Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority countries and examining how religious beliefs influence work-related values among Muslims in different cultural settings. They used data from the World Values Survey (including 11.811 working Muslim respondents across 40 countries). The study found that religiosity consistently affected the intensity of work ethic among Muslims, especially in countries where Islamic values are part of daily life and where

work is seen not just as a way to earn money but also as a moral and social responsibility. They found that high levels of religiosity are associated with devotion to values of hard work and duty towards society. This association, especially in Muslim-majority countries, was very strong. This shows that Islamic teachings are strongly part of the culture and can potentially boost work ethic. Furthermore, this study also highlighted that Muslims living in non-Muslim-majority countries change their ways to fit into the culture they live in. While Islamic work ethic is based on religious values, the way Muslims practice it can be influenced by the culture and society around them when they are in the minority. The findings show that religiosity plays an important role in shaping work ethic in such environments. Although the pressure they feel to integrate and assimilate in the culture they live in can weaken the intensity compared to Muslim-majority-countries. Muslim in non-Muslim-majority countries can face workplace norms that are different from Islamic values, which makes them negotiate between work ethic based on their religion or having to adjust to the norm of the society they are living in.

2.2.3 Religion and secularization in the Netherlands

Kennedy and Zwemer (2010) mention that the Netherlands has a long and difficult relationship with religion. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Dutch society still had a strong religious character, but today the vast majority is secular. This contrast shows how religion played a significant role in shaping the Dutch society, while over time, more and more people stopped seeing themselves as being religious (either Protestant or Catholic). The number of non-churchgoers in the Netherlands has been among the highest in Europe, also because the Netherlands has no state church. Historically, the Netherlands was a mainly Protestant country with a large Catholic minority. In the mid-twentieth century, the political power shifted to the Catholic party, even though they were in the minority. During colonial times, the Netherlands even ruled over the largest Muslim population in the world, yet they have difficulty accepting Islam now following immigration. According to research by the Ministerie van Volksgezondheid (2022), it was found that atheists and agnostics in the Netherlands are less concerned with finding a universal meaning of life defined by religion. Instead of this, they focus on finding personal meaning in their own lives; they do this by self-development, caring for others, and being part of a bigger community. This shift shows a more secular approach to meaning-making, though this “secular approach” shows that non-churchgoers still keep thinking according to Christian patterns as described by Enklaar (2007).

2.3 Experiences of Muslim professionals in Western societies

While the previous sections discussed the foundational aspects of Islam, its relation to work, society, and religion (in general) in the Dutch context, this section focuses on how Muslim professionals experience and navigate their religious identity in real workplace settings within Western, secular environments.

2.3.1 Religion as a source of strength and motivation

Al-Sharif (2024) researched how practicing Muslim professionals in England deal with stigmatization on the workplace, while they are maintaining religious authenticity. The study found that the religion of higher-educated Muslim

professionals is a source of motivation, resilience and ethical commitment for them. Participants reported that they get strength from their religion, specifically when they are navigating challenges that are related to stereotypes or misunderstandings. One participant noted that defending one’s religious identity in the workplace is not only a duty to oneself but also to educate colleagues and to correct misconceptions. In the Dutch context, Enklaar (2021) interviewed professionals with a migrant background, including Muslims and found that while religion was not always visible in the workplace, it strongly influenced the moral and behavior of some of the Muslim participants. One Muslim professional saw work as a form of worship and aims to be as just and fair as possible in their roles. He always wants to deliver high-quality work without doing it at the expense of others. The interviews showed that they are guided by values such as honesty, discipline, and respect. These insights show that religion is not just a private matter, but often a quiet but powerful force shaping professional behavior. This adds strength to the findings of Zafar & Abu-Hussin (2025).

2.3.2 Strategies for balancing religion with work

Adding further depth to the Dutch context, Waldring et al. (2014) found during interviews with higher-educated second-generation Turkish and Moroccan Muslims in the Netherlands that they try to balance their religion with their professional career. For instance, one participant said she constantly gets questions about her headscarf at work, which gives her the feeling she is seen as ‘the women with the headscarf’ and not as a for who she is. Another participant said he sometimes put on a mask at work about his religious identity in the sense that he says he is Muslim, but does not express it to adjust himself to the workplace. This study introduces the concept of “boundary sensitivity” which refers to the strategic way Muslim professionals navigate social and cultural boundaries in the workplace. They often focus on professionalism and similarity to gain acceptance while selectively downplaying cultural or religious identity markers that may be misunderstood. The research shows that this successful second generation does not want to become passive victims of discrimination, stereotyping, and remarks at their workplace. Although religion is not the main focus of the study, the findings show that identity negotiation is an important part of the professional experience for Muslim-background individuals in the Dutch labor market. This is supported by Berger et al. (2016), who found during interviews with higher-educated Moroccan Muslims in the Netherlands that the majority of the interviewees indicated that Islam plays a central role in their daily lives. Although the interviewees said being Muslim should not play a role at work, they did experience that the organization’s “white structure” constrained them. As explained in the study, “white structure” refers to workplaces where most people are Caucasian, and the rules, values, and ways of working are mostly based on Western, Caucasian, atheist, or Christian views. The Muslim employees at the same time actively try to engage in agency to align their professional careers with their Muslim identity. Their study makes clear that higher-educated Muslims often have to manage their identity in subtle ways, especially in places where religious expression is not always understood or welcomed. Al-Sharif (2024) also shows that Muslim professionals often experience different forms of pressure to downplay their religious identity to fit in.

2.3.3 The role of inclusive organizational climate

Khan et al. (2022) investigated how Muslim diaspora employees in Western countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada experience the workplace. This article

focuses on the concept of an inclusive organizational climate and shows that when workplaces are open to religious identity and promote fairness, Muslim professionals report higher motivation, engagement and performance. On the contrary, in less inclusive organizational climates the professionals cope by avoiding self-expression, trying to overcompensate through performance or hiding their religious identity to fit in. This study also emphasizes the role of leaders, it was found that when managers use inclusive leadership styles that value diversity and accommodate religion in an organization, Muslim professionals are more likely to feel psychologically safe and perform at their best. Berger et al. (2016) supports this by showing multiple interviewees who emphasized the importance of the management in creating an inclusive environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This thesis is about understanding what role Islam plays in the professional lives of higher-educated Muslims in the Dutch work context. The way individuals practice their faith depends on personal interpretation and lived experience and therefore can be different. Also, the Dutch work context can be experienced differently by people (in this case, higher-educated Muslim professionals) whose way of living and values differ from the Dutch way of living and its secular and Christian values. The focus in this research lies on the meaning, actions, and practices. To get an in-depth understanding of these aspects, an inductive qualitative research method is used because this approach allows the researcher to uncover how the participants construct meaning and engage in specific practices in natural settings (Silverman, 2024).

3.2 Data collection

The method of data collection that was used was interviews with semi-structured questions. This means that a set of questions was asked (see Appendix), which had an open end to ask further questions based on the answers of the interviewees to gain in-depth information. The data was collected through interviewing 5 interviewees who met certain conditions. First, they had to be raised in the Netherlands. Secondly, they had to see themselves as religiously practicing Muslims because this gives a higher probability that they actively follow Islamic values. Third, they needed to at least have a Master of Science degree because the research is about higher-educated Muslims. A Master of Science degree is one of the highest achievable degrees in the Netherlands. Fourth, participants needed to have a minimum of 1 year of experience working in big organizations with and without formal diversity and inclusion policies or initiatives. Including both types of workplaces allows for a richer comparison of how Islamic values are expressed and accommodated in different organizational environments. The interviewees were able to reflect on how their Islamic values were affected by the presence or absence of structured workplace inclusion efforts. These reflections also provided insights into the challenges that the interviewees encountered in the Dutch work context. An effort was made to interview both male and female Muslims. The participants were contacted through personal networks and LinkedIn. The interviewees were contacted through WhatsApp if known personally and invited to participate in the research. If not known personally, they were messaged on LinkedIn with a brief explanation about the study and the question if they wanted to participate. If they agreed, they were invited. The interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams or in person (in Dutch). In both cases, the interviews were

recorded and transcribed; this was done with Turboscribe. The names of the interviewees were replaced by fictitious names and kept confidential. This ensured that they could talk freely without having anything holding them back. The interviews lasted about an hour; and this was also reserved in advance with the interviewees to be ensured of enough time.

Interviewee number	1	2	3	4	5
Gender	W	M	M	M	M
Age	26	37	27	31	28
Educational background	MSc in Medicine	MSc in Accountancy	MSc in Accountancy	MSc in Accountancy	MSc Business Administration
Organization type (D&I policy)	No D&I policy	No D&I policy	No D&I policy	No D&I policy	No D&I policy
Position	Doctor	Audit professional	Audit professional	Manager of Financial Control	Project manager
Work experience	1 Year	15 Years	5 Years	8 Years	2 Years

Table 1: Information about the interviewees

3.3 Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2008), which is a method that is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in qualitative data. Since the aim was to understand how higher-educated Muslim professionals give meaning to their experiences in a Dutch work context, this method was the most suitable. The analysis was done manually, which means that the transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed, and overarching themes were sought. These were listed together, and each list of overarching themes was given a name that summarized the findings. Based on the overarching themes, the findings were written.

4. FINDINGS

This part of the thesis presents the main themes that were found in the interviews. The findings provide insight into how higher-educated Muslim professionals experience and navigate their faith in the Dutch work context.

4.1 Religion as a way of life

For all the interviewees, Islam is not only a religion they practice at certain times in the day, but rather it is an all-encompassing way of living that influences their way of thinking, handling, and decision-making. Their faith forms a moral and spiritual compass that guides both their personal and professional choices. The interviewees shared that Islam is deeply embedded in their daily lives, including their professional behavior and interactions.

Interviewee 1 explained: "I am constantly engaged with Islam. It is not only about praying five times a day, but also about the intention behind everything I do, including how I treat patients. I want to help them sincerely and hope that Allah accepts that from me". This statement illustrates how religious intention gives guidance for professional behavior, even when the behavior does not appear explicitly religious.

The other interviewees also emphasized that Islam is more for them than only rituals. Interviewee 2 called it an ideology that gives guidance to moral behavior, such as pursuing integrity and honesty in financial reporting: "I could manipulate the numbers if I wanted to, but Islam teaches me to act with honesty and truthfulness; it is a moral boundary that I will not cross".

Multiple interviewees described how faith gives them peace and the ability to put things into perspective, especially in stressful work situations. "Prayer gives me peace; it reminds me that no deadline is more important than my connection to God. That perspective helps me to stay calm under pressure" (Interviewee 4). This reflection shows that religious practice not only holds spiritual meaning but also has an impact on stress management and professional communication.

These insights show that Islam is not a separate aspect of the identity of these professionals but rather is a foundation that constantly shapes how they approach their work and life.

4.2 A generational shift in learning and interpreting Islam

All of the interviewees mentioned that they experience and interpret Islam differently from their parents. This comes primarily due to the different environments and contexts they grew up in. Where their parents learned their religion in predominantly Muslim countries where religion and culture were strongly mixed, the interviewees describe a more conscious, personal, and knowledgeable approach to Islam.

Interviewee 1 explains: "They often mix culture and religion, while we grew up separating the two. We search for the real Islam, and we look at how the Prophet did it, based on facts". This conscious separation between religion and culture was viewed as a significant generational difference. She calls it a blessing to critically examine what she practices and not just inherit her religion.

Interviewee 2 observed a similar difference: "My parents prayed five times a day and fasted, but they never asked why. I did start asking why. That's when I began to study Islam myself". He adds that were his parents still hold on to norms based on culture, he has adapted to Dutch values, such as openness, critical thinking, and individual responsibility (Enklaar, 2007), which do not conflict with Islam. This leads to a slightly different religious experience.

Interviewee 4 shared how this difference in understanding even changed his parents' view on religion: "When I asked my parents about the meaning of Surah Fatiha, they didn't know. But later, they started learning too. My mother now even gives religious lectures to other women". This shows that questions from the younger generation, which grew up in a different environment, can lead to positive change in older generations as well.

Interviewee 3 emphasized that younger Muslims in the Netherlands often adopt a stricter form of Islam: "We tend to prioritize the religion over culture when they clash. That's something I didn't see in the older generation".

Summarizing, Interviewee 5 described the overall shift as going from following to understanding: "We don't just do what we're

told. We want to know why we do it, and that changes everything".

The interviewees described a shift from inherited religious practice that is mixed with culture to an individual and more intentional interpretation of Islam that is based on knowledge. This generational difference shows how growing up in the Netherlands has led to a more reflective, knowledge-based, and consciously practiced faith.

4.3 Islamic values at work

The interviewees expressed that Islamic values are important guidelines for their professional behavior. Values like honesty, justice, integrity, sincerity, hard work, and fulfilling agreements came forward during the interviews. What is remarkable is that the values are not separate from their daily practice but are actively used in their interactions with their colleagues, decision-making, and their sense of responsibility.

Several interviewees said that work is seen as more than a way of earning money only. Interviewee 2 said it as follows: "It is not just about earning money. The money I earn must be deserved and halal". This statement emphasizes the importance of moral integrity in financial accountability, something that several participants emphasized, for example, reporting worked hours accurately or avoiding political games on the work floor.

Also, honesty was mentioned as a key value. "I could write more hours than I worked, but that would be dishonest. Islam teaches me not to lie" (Interviewee 2). This shows how Islamic values function as ethical borders, even if they would not be noted in the organization.

Besides that, justice plays a central role. Interviewee 1 mentioned that she treats every patient in the same way, regardless of their background, religion, or sexual orientation. "It does not matter to me who is in front of me, I treat everyone with the same level of care".

Finally, it became clear that Islamic values are not only internally experienced but also influence how one behaves in complex situations. "Even if it affects my bonus, I will not hide the truth. I follow accounting rules because that is what integrity demands" (Interviewee 2).

The findings show that Islamic values are a natural part of professional behavior and interaction. They function as guidelines in daily work and help maintain moral consistency, even in difficult situations.

4.4 Practicing during work

For all the interviewees, practicing their faith at work plays a visible role, especially the prayer. Interviewee 1 describes how she must actively plan around her hospital shifts to pray. Sometimes this is not possible, which leads her to feel guilty, but she tries to find a balance in this. Interviewee 2 tells us how he, in the beginning of his career, withheld his faith at work, but after his hadj-pilgrimage, he decided to pray openly at work. Interviewee 4 has a more positive experience: He is allowed to pray at work without problems, even if it means he must leave the meeting for it. The experiences for the interviewees are different and dependent on the organization they work. For example, the last interviewee mentioned working at a big organization, with D&I policies in an area which is more multicultural. The other two, who were mentioned first, work in smaller organizations with fewer multicultural people. There will be no discussion on this theme, since the insights are descriptive.

4.5 Misunderstandings at work

The interviews show that many Muslim professionals have to deal with misunderstandings about their faith on the work floor. These misunderstandings arise from ignorance or little knowledge of Islam, especially among non-Muslim colleagues. One interviewee mentions: “There are many misconceptions about Islam, even among higher-educated people. Simply because they know very little or have only heard something from the media” (Interviewee 4). The same sort of statement has also been made by the other interviewees.

All of the interviewees say that they understand this and want to help their colleagues. They see it as their responsibility to give nuanced information about Islam and to show the correct view of Islam. “It is our role to explain what Islam means. Many people only know it through the media”. It is an example of a statement made by one of the interviewees.

At the same time, there is an uncertainty about how deep they should go into these issues. Interviewees also mention that religion is something personal for a lot of Dutch people, which leaves little space for conversations about religion at work. However, more basic knowledge about Islam and its practices would contribute to mutual understanding and better collaboration. As one of the interviewees summarized it: “People often have misconceptions because they simply don’t know. If there were more awareness, it would make things easier for everyone.” (Interviewee 5).

4.6 Asking for religious accommodations at work

Asking for religious accommodations at work is strongly related to the degree of flexibility within the organization. Some interviewees mentioned they do not need formal changes if there is room to pray. Interviewee 1 said: “As long as I can pray on time, I do not need a special room. But if there is no space at all, then yes, I would ask for it”. This attitude shows that practical solutions are already enough sometimes.

Interviewee 4 mentioned that: “The advantage of the companies I have worked for is that I did not have to ask for any religious accommodations, since they were already there”. When such facilities are present, there is not only room for practicing your faith, but also to work with more motivation. Another interviewee (No. 3) emphasized that flexibility during the Islamic month of Ramadan is also an important form of accommodation: “During Ramadan, my organization gave us the flexibility to start work an hour or two later, which helped me combine my religion with my job.”

Summarizing as interviewee 2 said: “If you can practice your faith at work, it gives you a boost. You will also be more committed and perform better for your employer”. This underlines how practicing faith can contribute to the well-being and the input of employees.

4.7 View on how their organizations deal with accommodating their religion

The way organizations deal with accommodating religion differs strongly and is influenced by different factors like diversity policies, personal experiences of employees, and the overall culture within the organization.

Interviewee 1 mentions that the hospital environment in which she works is not diverse, looking at higher functions. She talks about a “leaky pipeline”, where fewer and fewer professionals of color are visible going higher in the hierarchy: “There is not a lot

of color, the higher you come, the less color there is”. According to her, this one-sided composition leads to misunderstandings about religious backgrounds and basic misunderstandings about Islam.

Interviewee 3 has another vision; he does not think that organizations must actively offer religious accommodation. For him, religion is something personal, and as long as he gets the freedom to fill it in for himself, that is sufficient for him: “The organization does not have to facilitate religion”.

Interviewee 4, working in a big organization with a multicultural workforce, experiences a culture of mutual respect, where everybody is free to live their life in their own way. He appreciates this open attitude: “They have the mindset of: Your life is your life, and we let each other be who we are”. According to him, there are sufficient facilities for everyone, and the focus is mainly on creating good conditions for good collaboration.

The findings show us that although some professionals need more knowledge and recognition of religion at work, others feel good in a culture where religion is seen as a private matter. As long as there is room to practice their faith. This indicates a tension between explicit recognition of religious identity and a more neutral approach that focuses on individual freedom and personal choice.

4.8 Combining work and religion

Combining work and religion is not only a possibility but is also seen as valuable by the interviewees. They gave examples where their religious identity helped them to connect better with others, made them feel more connected to their organization, or simply getting extra motivation from the space they get to practice their faith.

“If you, for example, say InshaAllah to a patient, it really means the world to them”. Interviewee 1 tells us that her religious background helps her to be more empathetic towards patients with the same religious background as herself. According to her, this shared frame of experience contributes to better care. At the same time, she shows how she adapts to the dress code at work, despite it not matching her faith: “I prefer not to, but for work, you just have to adjust yourself”. To further specify in her context, Islam does not allow women to wear short sleeves in front of non-mahram men (any men that is not her father, brother, son, uncle, grandfather, or nephew).

Also, motivation gets stronger when, for example, there is recognition of religious holidays. One of the interviewees (No. 4) tells us about his experience asking his supervisor for free on short notice for a religious holiday: “He said if this holiday is important to you, then just go ahead and take the day off”. Where the interviewee's reaction was: “It makes me want to work twice as hard for you”. This recognition did not give him only a feeling of euphoria, but also strengthened his connection to the organization

Faith can also function as a bridge between colleagues. Another interviewee (No. 3) tells us how his shared religious background helped him to welcome a new colleague: “Because of a certain sense of brotherhood or connection, you can help that person much more easily”. He sees faith as a way of connecting.

Summarizing the interviewees shows that work cannot only be combined with work, but also lead to stronger motivation, better care, and a deeper connection between colleagues.

4.9 Workplace tensions and navigational strategies

The interviewees described that tensions can arise between their religious beliefs and the expectations of the Dutch workplace. These tensions are not open conflicts, but subtle frictions that come from differences, a lack of understanding, or the pressure to conform. Asking to pray during work, explaining religious practices, or navigating expectations to socialize at work, such as joining colleagues for drinks before the weekend, were tensions that were mentioned multiple times during the interviews. These are some examples that can make higher-educated Muslim professionals feel different or misunderstood.

To navigate these tensions, the interviewees use different strategies. A recurring element is the balance between adaptation, assertiveness, and acceptance.

Interviewee 1 emphasizes that she has to adapt a lot to the dominant culture, to avoid unnecessary tension: “You cannot always be fully yourself, if you constantly go into conflict, you make it hard for yourself”. She describes how she assesses every situation and if it is necessary to speak out or to adapt. This shows that her religious identity gets adjusted to the context where avoiding conflict is central.

Another strategy is complete acceptance of your religious choices and letting go of what others think, mentioned by another interviewee (No. 2): “It doesn’t interest me anymore what they think, I just do it because it’s important to me”. His religious beliefs are central, and he communicates this clearly to his colleagues: “I just tell the team, I’m going to pray for five minutes, if you don’t mind”. This attitude is the result of personal development and religious turning points in his life.

Communication is also mentioned as a strategy by one of the interviewees (No.3): “If you explain it properly and calmly, you can often avoid misunderstanding”. Especially in an environment with higher-educated colleagues, he sees the space to use humor and tell why he, for example, does not dance: “You can always throw a little humor on top and say: “No, that dancing is not for me”.

Summarizing the interviews shows that strategies vary from silent acceptance to assertive communication. Interviewees choose to adapt themselves, clearly communicate, or actively avoid tensions depending on their situation or personal beliefs. These strategies enable them to maintain their religious identity without risking their professional position.

4.10 Insights for Dutch organizations to maximize potential

Dutch organizations can still gain a lot by dealing more consciously with religious diversity. The participants mention various suggestions that are relatively easy to realize, but can make a big difference for the job satisfaction and motivation of Muslim employees

A recurring theme is the importance of practical facilities, such as a prayer room or the possibility to perform ablution. Interviewee 5 says: “If you join an organization and they already have a place for prayer and wudu, it gives you a different feeling from day one”. According to him an employee will immediately feel recognized and valued, which strengthens the connection with the organization. It does not have to be a big adjustment: “All together it’s not even half an hour. Maybe twenty minutes a day. If that’s arranged, it already makes a big difference”.

Also, showing openness and curiosity about other cultures is mentioned. Interviewee 1 noticed that company parties are

focused on drinking alcohol (borrels in Dutch), which is not appropriate for Muslims. She wants more openness and adaptation in social activities, so that Muslim employees also feel welcome: “They should be more open and curious about other cultures and religions”.

Another interviewee (No. 3) says that an inclusive organizational culture does not necessarily ask for special treatment but rather takes reasonable needs seriously. He says: “If you have employees who need a prayer room and you have the space, just do it. You’ll get more grateful and harder-working employees in return”.

It is also emphasized that Islamic values like honesty and sense of duty contribute to good behavior of employees: “Islam makes me a more honest worker” (Interviewee 2). According to the interviewees, employers who recognize and actively facilitate this can unlock the full potential of their Muslim employees.

In short, small practical adjustments, genuine interest in religion and cultural backgrounds, and recognition of religious identity can strengthen the motivation, loyalty, and performance of Muslim employees.

4.11 Advice for beginning Muslim professionals

The interviewees shared valuable advice to young Muslim professionals in the Netherlands on how they can keep their religious identity on the work floor without feeling excluded. A recurring advice is to be conscious of the possible difference in treatment. Like interviewee 1 said: “There might be supervisors who treat you differently or give you an unfair assessment. You should be aware of that possibility, but not accept what is unacceptable”.

At the same time, it is emphasized that assertiveness is essential. When something is going in, you should talk about it with someone who can help you. Another interviewee (No. 2) advises discussing religious facilities even before starting a job: “Ask beforehand: is there a space where I can pray or make ablution? If you don’t ask, it will never be arranged”.

Another interviewee (No. 4) underlines the importance of working in a place where you are comfortable practicing: “Choose a workplace where you don’t feel limited in expressing your religious identity”. Especially for less confident people, selecting an inclusive employer can help lower the threshold for religious expression.

Finally, curiosity from colleagues is mentioned as an opportunity: “People are often more curious about your religion than you think. But it starts with speaking up” (Interviewee No.4).

In summary, the interviewees advise young Muslim professionals to take initiative in discussing their religious needs and to consciously choose inclusive workplaces that respect and support religious diversity.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical implications

The results of this study contribute to existing theories about religion at work, Islamic work ethic, and workplace integration in secular societies. The results confirm that Islam is not only a personal belief for higher-educated Muslim professionals in the Netherlands, but a way of life that directly shapes professional behavior. These findings connect to the literature about Islamic work ethic, where they emphasize that Islamic values like

honesty, justice, and good intentions are not only religious duties, but also give guidance to professional behavior (Yusoff, 2017; Kamri et al., 2014; Ahmed et al, 2013).

Moreover, the results show that religious values not only serve as moral boundaries but also function as sources of intrinsic motivation and responsibility. This supports the findings of Zafar & Abu-Hussin (2025), Al-Sharif (2024), Enklaar (2021), and Berger et al. (2016), who emphasize that religion is an important source of motivation and responsibility for Muslim professionals. Where earlier studies focused on visible religious expressions like headscarves or prayer, this research shows that religion is present on a deeper level in daily behavior and decision-making. Their faith works as their compass for morals, which aligns with Enklaar's (2021) observation that religion plays a key role in the workplace for Muslim professionals.

This reinforces the argument of Zafar & Abu-Hussin (2025) that religiosity contributes to a strong work ethic, which employers can positively utilize in their organizations. This offers a counterweight to the dominant discourse in secular contexts, in which religions are often reduced to something private. Instead, this research shows that religion can contribute to professional integrity, loyalty, and job performance.

Furthermore, this study broadens the understanding of the concept "workplace inclusion" as discussed in studies of Khan et al. (2022) and Berger et al. (2016). While earlier studies were mainly focused on visible forms of inclusion (like diversity policies and religious facilities), these results also show that the recognition of deeper, moral, and religious motivations is also important. The findings of the interviews align with the findings of Khan et al. (2022), who show that an inclusive organizational climate has a big influence on how Muslim professionals experience their faith at work. When there is a space to pray, employees not only feel accepted but also more motivated and involved. This underlines that religious space on the work floor not only fulfills a personal need but also contributes to better performance and enhances well-being. According to the interviewees, employers who not only offer practical space but also actively show interest in religious values create not only a safer working climate, but also strengthen the work ethic and motivation of their employees.

At the same time, this study confirms the concept of "boundary sensitivity" as described by Waldring et al. (2014), where Muslim professionals constantly adapt their behavior to social and cultural norms on the work floor. The findings show that higher-educated Muslim professionals have different strategies to avoid tensions on the work floor. Commonly mentioned approaches include adaptation to the dominant culture, communicating strategically, and accepting that one cannot be fully himself or herself. These findings support Zafar & Abu-Hussin (2025), who show that religiosity contributes to a strong work ethic, but in non-Islamic countries, this work ethic is negotiated with having to adjust to the norms of the society the Muslim professionals are working and living in. The results also show that there is a difference in strategies: Some interviewees chose to adapt or to strategically avoid conflict, while others assertively express their religious identity. This is in line with Berger et al. (2016), who describe how higher-educated Moroccan Muslims in the Netherlands working for organizations with a "white structure" must subtly manage their religious identity. One of our interviewees mentioned that the lack of diversity in higher functions can lead to a lack of knowledge about Islam. It is worth noting that this interviewee, who mentioned the lack of diversity, works for an organization with a less inclusive organizational climate. As Khan et al. (2022) point out, in less inclusive organizational climates, professionals deal

with this by avoiding self-expression. Berger et al. (2016) similarly show that organizations with a "white structure" constrict Muslims in their religious expression, which forces them to navigate their identity carefully. Also, Al-Sharif (2024) shows that Muslims sometimes downplay their religious identity to avoid negative reactions. While some of our interviewees confirm this, others show resilience through clear communication; they remain true to their religion without risking their position. These differences show that inclusion on the work floor is not only about adaptation in policies or rules, but also about giving space to people in choosing how they want to express their faith and fostering mutual understanding.

This study also contributes to ongoing discussions about religion in secular societies, and it shows that secularism does not necessarily imply neutrality. The Dutch work context, characterized by the expectation of keeping religion as a private matter, can benefit from making religious diversity visible, according to the findings of this study. This is because interviewees mentioned that they feel and perform better when they can combine their religion with work.

A new contribution of this study is the comparison of different generations of Muslims in the Netherlands. All of the interviewees described a difference in how they practice and understand Islam compared to their parents. Where the parents often learned their religion mixed with cultural traditions in their countries of origin, which have a Muslim majority. The interviewees emphasized a more reflective, knowledge-based, and consciously practiced faith. This generational shift has not been mentioned in the earlier workplace studies that were reviewed (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025; Al-Sharif, 2024; Enklaar, 2021; Khan et al., 2022; Berger et al., 2016; Waldring et al., 2014). It helps to explain how higher-educated Muslim professionals combine religion with Dutch societal values like openness, critical thinking, and individual responsibility (Enklaar, 2007).

Summarizing, this study shows that Islamic values are not only influential in the daily professional interactions and behavior of higher-educated Muslim professionals, but also the way organizations deal with this is crucial for job satisfaction, performance, and loyalty. This research adds (new) insights in three ways. The first insight is that it strengthens that Islamic values directly support professional performance (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025; Al-Sharif, 2024; Enklaar, 2021). Secondly, it reveals a generational shift; the interviewees have a more conscious and knowledge-based interpretation of Islam than their parents. Third and last, it further expands the understanding of inclusion by showing that it should only focus on visible religious practices, but also recognizing moral and religious values as a normal part of working life.

5.2 Practical implications

The results of this study show that Dutch organizations with relatively small, but thoughtful adjustments can have a big impact on the work experience of higher-educated Muslim professionals. First, facilitating practical matters like a prayer room or the possibility to perform ablution for the prayer not only meets religious needs, but also contributes to the feeling of recognition and connection within the organization. This supports the findings of Khan et al. (2022), which show that recognition of religious identity positively contributes to motivation, psychological safety, and better performance of Muslim professionals.

Furthermore, the interviews reveal that Muslim professionals appreciate it when their religious and moral values, like honesty,

justice, and doing good, are taken seriously. For many of them, these values are inseparable from their religious beliefs, and they function as guidelines in their daily work life. Employers who acknowledge and support these values help create an inclusive culture where they can expect intrinsically motivated employees who act responsibly, loyal, and with integrity. This, in turn, strengthens the professional commitment of their employees. This supports the view of Zafar & Abu-Hussin (2025), who argue that religiosity contributes to a strong work ethic.

This study also shows that it is important for organizations to create an inclusive work environment. This does not mean that organizations should actively offer religious accommodations, but that they create a working environment where everyone feels safe to express their religious identity, if they have that need. This asks for openness and curiosity about other beliefs.

In short, organizations that focus more on religious inclusion and take moral, religious values seriously can not only contribute to the well-being and professional development of their Muslim employees but also strengthen their position as an attractive employer in an increasingly diverse labor market (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2025; Thijssen, 2023; Hays, 2018).

5.3 Limitations and future research

In this research, there are some limitations, such as having a small sample size of five participants. The outcomes could be different if more diverse participants were involved. Future research can profit from a bigger sample size, where they can also consider differences in sectors, age, region, degree, and the level of religious practice. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of this research makes it hard to generalize the results for a larger population of higher-educated Muslim professionals in the Netherlands. The emphasis in this research lies in getting in-depth and context-specific insights. However, the results do provide an important first step for further research on this topic. Future research could explore how Dutch organizations themselves deal with religious diversity, for example, through interviewing HR-managers, managers, executives, and owners.

6. CONCLUSION

This study had the central research question: What role does Islam play in the professional lives of higher-educated Muslims in the Dutch work context?

The interviews show that Islam for this group is not a separate aspect of their identity, but it is a deeply integrated part of life that also shapes professional behavior, choices and values.

This main question was split up into several sub-questions:

1. Which Islamic values do higher-educated Muslim professionals consider most relevant in their work life?

The interviewees mentioned values like honesty, justness, integrity, responsibility, and doing everything with good intentions. They called these values as essential for their daily work life. These values are deeply ingrained in their faith and influence how they interact with colleagues, behave, and make decisions at work.

2. How do these values influence their professional behavior and decisions?

The Islamic values function as a moral compass. They withhold the professionals to handle unethically, even if there is no external control on it. Their faith motivates them to work hard, to be fair, and to contribute to a just working environment.

3. How do they navigate tensions between Islamic values and Dutch workplace expectations?

The interviewees developed different strategies to bring balance to their religious identity with the dominant work culture: from subtle adaptation to clear communication. Some choose for self-restraint and putting things into perspective, others show assertiveness or consciously seek inclusive employers. In all the cases, their faith is an internal source of power to continue to act professionally, even under pressure.

Answer to the main question:

Islam plays a central role in the professional lives of higher-educated Muslim professionals in the Dutch work context. Not only as a source of ritual practices like prayer or fasting, but about deeply rooted values that shape how they work and interact. For this group, working is not only an economic necessity, but also a way to bring their religious values into practice. This makes them loyal, honest, and engaged employees who take responsibility and strive for justice. These are qualities, which every organization can benefit from.

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8. APPENDIX

8.1 Question before starting the interview

1. Geef je toestemming om dit interview op te nemen voor onderzoeksdoeleinden?
2. Alle informatie die we verzamelen gedurende dit interview zal vertrouwelijk blijven, erken je dit?
3. Jouw deelname is volledig vrijwillig. Je mag op elk moment stoppen met het interview of een vraag overslaan, op het moment dat je je er niet comfortabel bij voelt. Erken je dit?
4. Heb je nog vragen voordat we het interview beginnen?

8.2 Interview questions

1. Kun je iets vertellen over je werk, de werkomgeving en hoe lang je er al werkt?
2. Hoe beïnvloedt de Islam jou als persoon zijnde? In de zin van hoe je denkt, hoe je leeft en hoe je besluiten maakt.
3. Welke Islamitische waarden zijn het belangrijkste voor jou in relatie tot je werk? Kan je uitleggen waarom dit zo is? Wanneer merkte je voor het laatst dat deze waarden je werk beïnvloedden? Kan je hier een voorbeeld van geven?
4. Hoe beïnvloedt de Islam jouw zienswijze op werk in het algemeen?
5. Kun je beschrijven hoe jouw werkdag eruitziet, en of en hoe je daarbij rekening houdt met je geloof? Bijvoorbeeld op het gebied van bidden, eten of kleding.
6. Verschilt hoe je over jouw geloof praat met moslim en niet-moslim collega's?
7. Welke ervaringen heb je met het vragen om aanpassingen voor je geloof op werk? Hoe waren de reacties vanuit werk vanuit collega's en het management?
8. Wat is het beroep van je ouders?
9. Wat voor carrière hebben je broers/zussen?
10. Is hoe jij jouw geloof beleeft en interpreteert anders dan hoe jouw ouders hun geloof interpreteren en beleven? Kan je hier voorbeelden van geven?
11. Wat vind je van hoe je organisatie omgaat met religieuze diversiteit?
12. Zijn er momenten geweest waarop je trots was op hoe je je geloof kon combineren met je werk? Zo ja, kan je dit ook toelichten?
13. Kun je een situatie beschrijven waarbij je merkte dat er wrijving was tussen je geloof en wat er van je werd gevraagd vanuit werk? Waarom was dit zo/waarom was dit niet zo?
14. Heb je bepaalde 'strategieën' ontwikkeld om met mogelijke spanningen om te gaan tussen de verwachtingen op werk en je geloof?
15. Als je iets zou kunnen veranderen aan hoe Nederlandse bedrijven omgaan met moslimwerknemers, wat zou dat dan zijn?

16. Hoe zouden Nederlandse bedrijven moslimwerknemers kunnen accommoderen om het maximale uit ze te halen?

17. Wat zou je tegen een beginnende moslimprofessional willen zeggen over werk en geloof in Nederland?

18. Is er nog iets wat je wilt delen over je ervaringen als moslimprofessional dat we niet besproken hebben? Zoals gedachtes, ervaringen of andere mededelingen die waardevol kunnen zijn voor het onderzoek?