

From Faith to Ethical Practice: A Qualitative Exploration of Islamic Workplace Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Islamic workplace spirituality, spiritual leadership, and faith-based learning interact to shape ethical practice in higher education. Conducted at Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa (UNTIRTA), the research addresses the gap between normative Islamic values and actual academic behavior in the teaching of Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Using a qualitative interpretive approach with multiple case studies, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal that spirituality (Taqwa, Trust, Ihsan, and Work as Worship) does not directly produce ethical behavior but requires internalization through faith-based learning processes—reflection, experience, and habituation. Spiritual leadership acts as a contextual enabler, reinforcing the integration of values into learning and practice. Ethical behavior emerges as a situational outcome influenced by academic pressures, peer culture, and leadership consistency. The study contributes a processual model, —From Faith to Ethical Practice, identifying faith-based learning as the missing link and repositioning spiritual leadership as a systemic enabler. These insights provide theoretical contributions to Islamic workplace spirituality and practical implications for redesigning PAI learning and building integrity-based academic culture.

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Introduction

Global higher education in the last decade has faced the phenomenon of an academic ethics crisis characterized by increasing plagiarism, low scientific integrity, and weakening of moral responsibility in learning practices (Pell & Amigud, 2023)(Gbadago et al., 2025). In the context of Islamic higher education, this challenge becomes more complex because there is a gap between the normative value of faith and real practice in the academic environment (Jusriadi et al., 2026). Recent studies show that cognitive-based educational approaches alone have not been able to internalize spiritual values into ethical behavior (Fatimah et al., 2025). In Indonesia, especially in the teaching of Islamic Religious Education

(PAI), there is still a tendency to learn that is normative-doctrinal and has not touched the dimensions of praxis spirituality and professional ethics (Sodikin, 2026). This shows the need for a more in-depth approach to understanding the relationship between faith, learning, and ethical behavior in higher education.

Preliminary data from the study reinforce the gap. Based on the results of the initial questionnaire of PAI students at Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University (UNTIRTA), around 62% of respondents stated that the Islamic values learned have not been fully reflected in daily academic behavior, especially related to academic honesty and task responsibilities. Exploratory interviews with lecturers revealed that PAI learning is still oriented towards knowledge transfer, not value internalization.

Meanwhile, observations of learning practices show that the integration between spirituality, leadership, and academic culture has not been systemically successful. These preliminary findings indicate that there is a gap between faith as a belief and ethical practice as real behavior in the context of higher education.

Previous research in the last ten years has shown significant progress but still leaves gaps. The 2015–2017 study emphasizes the relationship between workplace spirituality and organizational performance quantitatively (Garcia-Zamor, 2003) (Osman-Gani et al., 2013). The 2018–2020 period began to integrate the concept of spiritual leadership in the context of education (Yilmaz, 2026), but it is still limited to a structural approach. In 2021–2024, there is a focus on Islamic workplace spirituality and faith-based learning (Karim et al., 2025), but most studies still use a survey approach and have not explored the process of internalizing values in depth. Thus, there is a research gap on the aspects of process, meaning, and real practice of how the value of faith is translated into ethical behavior through learning and spiritual leadership, especially in the context of Islamic higher education in Indonesia (Chanifah et al., 2021).

Based on these gaps, this study contributes by using a qualitative interpretive approach (multiple case study) to explore in depth the relationship between Islamic workplace spirituality, spiritual leadership, and faith-based learning in shaping ethical behavior (Arar et al., 2022). In contrast to previous research that tended to be quantitative and generalized, this study focused on the internalization process, subjective experience, and real practice of academic actors (Wu et al., 2025). The novelty of the research lies in the integration of three main concepts—Islamic work spirituality, spiritual leadership, and faith-based learning—into an empirically-based conceptual model in the context of PAI teaching at UNTIRTA. Thus, this research not only closes the theoretical gap but also makes a practical contribution in building an academic culture based on spiritual values that is oriented towards integrity.

The objectives of this research are to: (1) explore the meaning and practice of Islamic workplace spirituality in higher education; (2) analyze the role of spiritual leadership in shaping ethical culture; (3) understanding the faith-based learning process in internalizing values; and (4) constructing a conceptual model of the relationship between spirituality,

learning, and ethical behavior. Because this study uses an exploratory qualitative approach, formal hypotheses are not the main focus; nevertheless (Casula et al., 2021), the initial proposition put forward is that the internalization of the value of faith through learning and strengthened by spiritual leadership contributes significantly to the formation of ethical behavior in Islamic higher education (Hadisi et al., 2025).

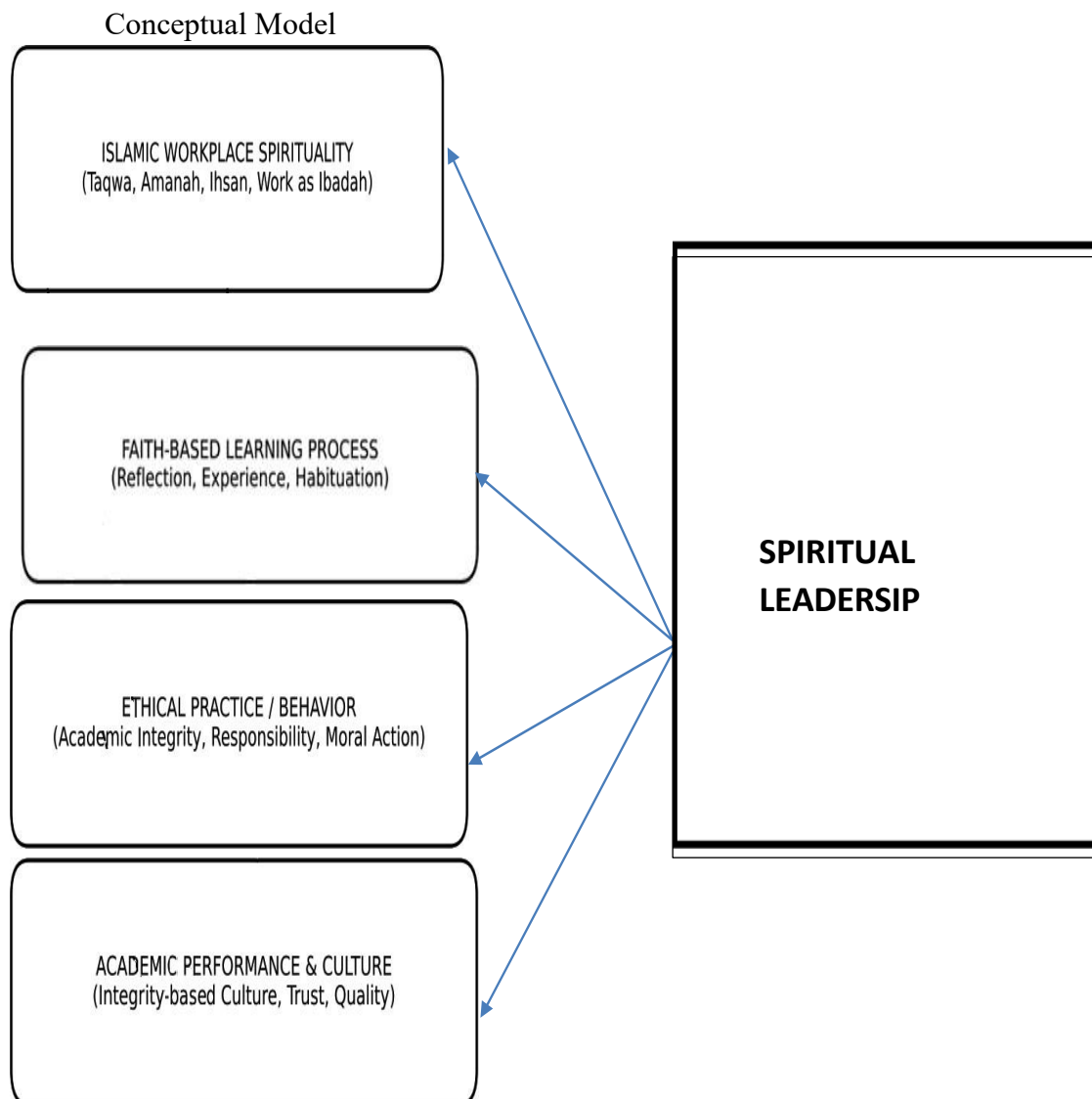


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Faith in Ethical Practices in Islamic UniversitiesAdd sentences: "This model is based on qualitative findings and reflects a process-based understanding rather than causal statistical relationships (Baars, 2011) (Love et al., 2026)."

Explanation of the narrative of the conceptual model

This model illustrates that the faith manifested in Islamic workplace spirituality is the main foundation that influences the learning process. Values such as taqwa, amanah, and ihsan do not directly produce ethical behavior, but through internalization mechanisms in faith-based learning (Santoso et al., 2026).

This process is reflective (reflection), Experience (experiential), and habituation. Furthermore, the internalization results in ethical practices, such as: academic honesty, moral responsibility and consistency between values and actions. The point of novelty directed at spiritual leadership does not stand as an independent variable, but as an enabler (systemic reinforcer) and context shaper (shaping an ethical culture). Spiritual leadership strengthens the entire process of spirituality → learning → ethics. The novelty of this model differs from previous research because: 1). It is not simple linear, but based on internalization processes: Integrating: spirituality (value), learning (process) and ethics (outcome). 2). Placing leadership as a system strengthener, not just a variable. 3). Based on a qualitative approach (meaning & lived experience), not statistics

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach so that the term —variable is not positioned as a statistically measured construct, but as a focus of exploration (analytical themes) that develop from field data (Sodikin, 2026)(Wu et al., 2025). The main focus of the research includes:

- 1) Islamic Workplace Spirituality, Identified through the practice of the meaning of work as worship, awareness of values (Fear, Trust, Courtesy), and transcendental orientation in academic activities.
- 2) Faith-Based Learning is identified through the process of internalizing values in learning, such as reflection, meaningful learning experiences, habituation, and integration of values in lecturer-student interactions.
- 3) Spiritual Leadership Observed through example, consistency of values in action, and the role of leaders/lecturers in building an ethical and religious climate.
- 4) Ethical Practice (Academic Ethical Behavior)

The Research Subject and Location was conducted on the teaching of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University (UNTIRTA). The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling taking into account direct involvement in the learning process and academic life.

The research informant consists of:

- 1) PAI Lecturer (5–8 responden)
- 2) Students (10–15 responden)
- 3) Academic/study program leaders (2–4 responden)

The total number of informants ranged from 17–25 participants, with the principle of saturation (data saturation) as the final determinant of the number of informants.

The main Research Instruments in this study is the researcher himself (human instrument) who plays a role in digging, interpreting, and constructing the meaning of the data.

Supporting instruments include:

1. Semi-structured interview guide, which includes:
 - a. Spiritual experience in work/study
 - b. The Value Learning Process
 - c. Perception of leadership
 - d. Ethical Practices in Academic Activities
2. Observation sheets, to capture:
 - a. Learning Interactions
 - b. Academic Culture
 - c. Real Practice of Ethical and Spiritual Behavior
3. Documentation, in the form of:
 - a. PAI curriculum
 - b. Institutional Visions and Missions
 - c. Academic Policy

Instruments are flexible and evolve according to field dynamics.

Research and Data Collection Methods in This study uses an interpretive qualitative approach with a multiple case study design, which allows an in-depth exploration of the actors' experiences and practices in real contexts.

Data collection techniques include:

- 1) In-depth interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore the experience, meaning, and reflection of informants.
- 2) Limited participatory observation Used to understand the social context, academic culture, as well as real practice in the learning environment.
- 3) Document analysis To strengthen understanding of institutional values and formal policies.

Results and Discussion

Based on the results of the study, it shows that:

- A. Islamic workplace spirituality functions as a system of meaning that guides behavior, not as a direct determinant of ethical behavior.** Thus, spirituality becomes an internal foundation that requires a learning process to be realized in real action. This research began with an exploratory survey of PAI students ($n = 68$). Descriptive results show that there is a gap between value understanding and real practice. The interpretation is that although the understanding of Islamic values is relatively high, it is not completely converted into ethical behavior, this indicates that there is a gap between knowing and being, which is the basis for further qualitative exploration. Spirituality as the Meaning of Work (Work as Worship). The findings show that spirituality does not stop at concepts, but becomes a framework of meaning in work and learning. Teaching is not just a transfer of knowledge, but a trust. If you are not honest, it feels like betraying worship itself (Ul-Haq, 2020). (Lecturers). However, not all actors

are able to maintain consistency between values and practices, especially under academic pressure. These findings expand on previous studies (Keshavarzi & Ali, 2019) (Bagis et al., 2024), with showing that spirituality in the context of Islam is transcendental as well as operational, not just psychological well-being.

- B. Faith-based learning emerged as the main mechanism for internalizing values through reflection, experience, and habituation. These findings explain why a high understanding of religion does not always result in ethical behavior without a meaningful learning process.**

Learning as a Process of Internalizing Values

Effective learning that involves, reflection, experience, and meaningful interaction. The most noticeable thing is when lecturers relate the material to life experiences, not just theories. (Students). However, most of the learning is still cognitive. this suggests that faith-based learning serves as a mediating mechanism, which explains why grades do not automatically become behaviors—findings that have not been widely discussed in previous quantitative studies (Papakostas, 2024).

- C. Spiritual leadership acts as a contextual enabler that strengthens the process of internalizing values through exemplary and academic culture (Hadisi et al., 2025). Leadership consistency has been proven to determine the success of transforming values into ethical behavior.**

Spiritual Leadership as a System Reinforcer The role of lecturers and leaders emerges as a key factor in: building culture, maintaining consistency of values, and creating an ethical climate. We are more influenced by what lecturers do than what they say (Wu et al., 2025). Inconsistency in leadership actually weakens the internalization of values. These findings confirm that spiritual leadership functions as a contextual enabler, not just an independent variable as in the Fry & Cohen model (Hunsaker, 2019).

- D. Ethical behavior is influenced by the interaction between personal values and academic environmental conditions.** Therefore, ethics is understood as the result of a contextual process, not just a consequence of understanding religious values. Ethical Behavior as a Non-Automatic Output (Pedersen & Johansen, 2020). Ethical behavior arises as a result of a long process, rather than a direct result of an understanding of values. I know cheating is wrong, but sometimes situations make people do it anyway.

Influencing factors: academic pressure, peer culture, weak control system. These findings confirm that ethical behavior is situational and contextual, not just based on internal values (Jiang et al., 2022). Integration of Findings:

Model—From Faith to Ethical Practice, Research Results are outlined as follows:

Spirituality→LearningProcess→EthicalPractice→Academic Culture

↑

Spiritual Leadership (enabler)

Key insights:

- a. There is no direct link between spirituality and ethics

- b. Learning is a key mechanism (missing link)
- c. Leadership serves as a systemic reinforcer

Original Contribution This research produced three main contributions:

- a. Faith-based procedural model (faith-process model)
- b. Identify faith-based learning as missing links
- c. Repositioning spiritual leadership as a strengthening system, not a single variable

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theories:

- a. Developing the theory of workplace spirituality in the context of Islam
 - b. Integrating learning theory and practical ethics:
 - c. Redesign of experiential PAI learning
 - d. Strengthening exemplary-based leadership
- Building an academic culture based on integrity

Discussion

From Spirituality to Ethics: Not a Direct Relationship, but a Procedural (a continuous process, procedure, or stage.) The findings of the study show that Islamic workplace spirituality does not automatically produce ethical behaviors, but rather works through a complex internalization process. This is in contrast to most previous studies that positioned spirituality as a direct predictor of ethics or performance (Santoso et al., 2026) (Jusriadi et al., 2026) (Osman-Gani et al., 2013). In the context of PAI teaching in higher education, spirituality is more accurately understood as a meaning system that provides direction, but does not guarantee action without a mediating learning process. These findings expand on the study of (Santoso et al., 2026) which emphasized the importance of spiritual values in Islamic organizations, by showing that such values require pedagogical transformation mechanisms in order to become real practices. Thus, the main contribution of this research is to shift the understanding of linear relations towards an internalization-based processual model, where faith is not only a source of value, but must also be cultivated through meaningful learning experiences.

Faith-Based Learning as a core mechanism in the internalization of values

One of the most significant findings is the role of faith-based learning as a key link between spirituality and ethical behavior. In contrast to previous research that focused more on outcomes (ethics, performance) or structural factors (leadership), this research shows that the learning process is a crucial space for internalizing values.

These results enrich the study of (Akdere & Egan, 2020) who still see learning as a supporting variable, by placing it as a core mechanism. Reflective, contextual, and experiential-based learning has been shown to be more effective in shaping ethical awareness than cognitive approaches alone. These findings are also in line with the

experiential learning approach but provide a new dimension by including the transcendental values of Islam as a source of reflection.

Thus, this research offers conceptual contributions in the form of: “ethical behavior is not taught, but internalized through faith-based experiential learning”

Spiritual Leadership as a Contextual Enabler

In contrast to the spiritual leadership model in the literature which is generally positioned as an independent variable (Yılmaz, 2026), this study found that spiritual leadership functions as a systemic enabler that influences the entire process.

Field data shows that the exemplary of lecturers and leaders has a significant impact on:

- a. consistency of values,
- b. formation of academic culture,
- c. and the legitimacy of ethical norms.

However, when there is a discrepancy between the values taught and the practices shown, the internalization process becomes disrupted. These findings indicate that leadership not only influences individuals, but also shapes the social context in which values are practiced.

An important contribution of these findings is the repositioning of the leadership of the: Drivers of behavior become: contextual condition that enables or constrains ethical practice

Ethical Behavior as a Result of Contextual and Situational Processes

This study shows that ethical behavior is not entirely determined by internal values, but is influenced by contextual factors such as:

- 1) Academic Stress,
- 2) peer group,
- 3) and evaluation system.

These findings criticize normative assumptions in many studies of Islamic ethics that assume that value understanding will directly generate behavior (Aydin, 2020). In the reality of the field, individuals are often in a dilemma between values and situational demands.

Thus, this study reinforces the perspective that ethics should be understood as:

- situated practice, not just internal conviction

This opens up a new space in the study of Islamic ethics, especially in the context of higher education, which has tended to be normative and less contextual.

Integration of Findings: Towards Model-From Faith to Ethical Practice

Based on the overall findings, this study produced a conceptual model that confirms that:

- 1) Spirituality → not a direct determinant, but a source of meaning
- 2) Learning → internalization mechanisms (core process)

- 3) Leadership → contextual enabler
- 4) Ethics → the result of the complex interaction between values and context

This model differs from previous studies in which it tends to:

- 1) linear,
- 2) reductive,
- 3) and variable-based.

On the other hand, the resulting model is:

- a. Procedural
- b. Contextual
- c. Experience-based)

Contribution to the Development of Research Science This contributes to three levels:

1. Theoretical Contributions

Develop a new framework in the study of Islamic work spirituality by integrating:

- a. The Theory of Spirituality,
- b. learning theory,
- c. and ethics in a procedural model.

2. Methodological Contributions

Demonstrated that a qualitative approach is able to:

- a. uncovering the meaning,
- b. explain the process,
- c. and generate models that cannot be captured by quantitative approaches.

3. Practical Contribution

Provides real implications for:

- a. PAI learning design,
- b. academic leadership development,
- c. Integrity-based campus culture development.

Conclusion

The most important findings in this study show that a high understanding of Islamic values does not automatically result in ethical behavior in academic practice. Although students and lecturers have a strong normative awareness of values such as amanah, ihsan, and taqwa, in reality ethical practices are greatly influenced by the internalization process that occurs in learning and the social context in the campus environment. In other words, the gap between faith and ethical practice is not caused by weak values, but by the absence of a mechanism for transforming values into actions. These findings confirm that ethics is not a direct output of faith, but rather the result of a process mediated by learning experience and reinforced by a leadership environment.

In terms of scientific contributions, this study not only confirms the importance of spirituality in shaping ethical behavior as found in previous studies, but at the same time challenges the linear assumption that spirituality directly affects ethics. This research contributes a new perspective in the form of a processual model—From Faith to Ethical Practice, which places faith-based learning as a core mechanism (missing link) and spiritual leadership as a contextual enabler. Thus, this study expands the study of Islamic work spirituality from a variabilistic approach to a more contextual, dynamic, and experience-based approach. In addition, the use of interpretive qualitative approaches also makes a methodological contribution by presenting a deeper understanding of how values are implemented.

However, this study has a number of limitations. First, this research is limited to one location, namely the teaching of PAI at UNTIRTA, so that the broader social and cultural context has not been accommodated. Second, the relatively limited number of informants and based on purposive sampling make these findings not intended for generalization, but for contextual understanding. Third, the variety of research subjects is still limited to lecturers, students, and leaders in one institution, without comparing across universities or different levels of education. Fourth, the approach used is qualitative, so it has not tested the strength of the relationship between concepts quantitatively. Therefore, further research is recommended to involve a wider sample.

Declarations

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence. Declares whether or not AI was used in the article.

Author contribution statement. Describes the contribution of each author to the conduct of the research and the preparation of the article, in accordance with the conventions of the specific field of study.

Funding statement. Lists funding sources and grant numbers, if applicable, or states that no funding was received.

Conflict of interest. Discloses the presence or absence of any conflicts of interest regarding the publication of the article.

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