

# Spirituality and Ethics: A Literature Review

## Ruhsallık ve Etik: Bir Alanyazın Taraması

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to review spirituality and ethics literature and to examine how spirituality relates to ethics and leaders/employees' ethical behaviors at work. Within this scope, the papers in the years of 2008 – 2018 were examined and the relationship between spirituality and ethics were laid out empirically and conceptually. Also, spirituality and ethics were examined in regard to decision making, sustainability, the role they can play in world problems, religion, and secularism. This paper puts forward the effect of spirituality on ethics and ethical behaviors in the organization, providing recommendations and suggestions to incorporate spirituality to help ethics spread at work.

**Key words:** Spirituality, Ethics, Workplace, Decision Making, Sustainability.

### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, ruhsallık ve etik alanyazını gözden geçirmek ve ruhsallığın etik ve liderlerin/çalışanların işyerinde ahlaki davranışlarını nasıl etkilediğini araştırmaktır. Bu kapsamda 2008 - 2018 yıllarını kapsayan makaleler incelenmiş, ruhsallık ile etik arasındaki ilişki ampirik ve kavramsal olarak ortaya konulmuştur. Ayrıca, karar verme, sürdürülebilirlik, dünya sorunlarında oynayabilecekleri rol, din ve laiklik açısından ruhsallık ve etik incelenmiştir. Bu çalışma, işyerinde etik ve ahlaki davranışlar üzerinde ruhsallığın etkisini ortaya koymakta, etiği iş hayatına yaymak için ruhsallığın işe dâhil edilmesi adına öneriler ve tavsiyeler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Ruhsallık, Etik, İşyeri, Karar Verme, Sürdürülebilirlik.

### Introduction

Spirituality has begun to hold an increasing place in organizational studies. The term spirituality was first generally examined with a view to “the self” and then with its effects in the workplace within the studies of “workplace spirituality”. Due to increasing interest, spirituality has been examined in relation to organizational effectiveness, performance, resilience and leadership, and more recently with an emphasis to ethics at work. From this perspective, the studies of workplace spirituality associated with ethics has been on rise (e.g. Corner, 2009; Ayoun, Rowe, Yassine, 2015; Ananthram, Chan, 2016). In line with this increased interest into spirituality and ethics, our study focused on reviewing spirituality and ethics literature and examining how spirituality relates to ethics and behaviors at work.

Today, we face movements bringing spiritual and ethical values into business, as profit alone is not accepted as the only bottom line, giving way to a “triple bottom line,” a commitment to “people, planet, profit.”(McLaughlin, 2005). Thus, the search for workplace spirituality has an intrinsic ethical flavor as it tries to redefine balancing values for oneself, society, humanity and the world (Rozuel and Kakabadse, 2010, p. 423).

Cultured in materialist stand towards production and producers, humanity needs to change its lenses. The ideas attributed to the concept of spirituality at work generally oppose the materialistic stand of humankind and welcomes inner growth. Dhiman (2016) names humanity as “Homo moralis”, not “Homo economicus”. For, McPherson (2015) who describe humanity as “homo religiosus” claim spiritual person has a vague sense of a ‘spiritual force’ or something similar which requires person to reject the materialism. In this regard, spirituality is now increasingly suggested as a potential counter to the problem of materialism or having profit at the expense of “being a good person” (McGhee and Grant, 2017, p. 160). However, seeking spiritual enlightenment and spiritual mindset against materialism requires a profound change in

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how we think about leadership and education (Peltonen, 2017). This change of thought will greatly contribute into ethical functioning of the life from person to the society.

### **Spirituality**

Generally discussed in relation to the term “religion”, spirituality holds an important place for most of the people from believers to non-believers of any specific belief system. Religion, generally referred as an organized belief system within a relationship with the Creator/Power, is the source for many spiritual practices and spiritual approaches while spirituality can be explained under “*an ability to establish a meaningful relationship between the inner-self, others and the divine (God) through faith, hope and love*” (Issa and Pick, 2011, p.47). For Guillory (2001), religion is in fact a form which spirituality takes in practice.

The word “spiritual” refers to an inner life, which is deeply related with religious forms or in some way with humanistic psychology for reaching one’s greatest potential (Roof, 2003, p.138). Nowadays, the definition of spirituality is generally made independently of religion (Melé & Fontrodona, 2017). Issa and Pick (2011), who attracts attention to different interpretations of spirituality in religious and secular terms, point out the need for some people at modern workplace to develop meaning for their work and potential through their spirituality understanding and application, be it religious or secular.

Through some studies, there were seen some different categorizations of spirituality. Kosiewicz (2015) makes distinction by superficial spirituality and deep spirituality. For him, spirituality includes expressions of superficial spirituality, a common one, and deep spirituality, the one which goes beyond ordinary experiences and transcends patterns of mass culture. Issa and Pick (2011) differentiates between religious spirituality and aesthetic spirituality. Religious spirituality includes prayers, belief of miracles and valuing, including divine truth, aiming for truth while Aesthetic spirituality includes honesty, compassion, harmony, integrity, support and balance.

When the literature is analyzed, the attributes to the concept of spirituality are mainly “a connection with the Creator/Power, transcendence of the self/ a deep emotional state, an inner life surfaced in the one’s life, serving a superior goal, seeking the calling/meaning in the life, ”. They all can be told to sum up to one fact: people try to connect their inner life, beliefs with outside world, either secretly or openly, in their acts, thinking and decisions. Similarly, McGhee and Grant (2017, p. 160) mentioned four themes in explaining spirituality : (1) rising above the self and/or one’s context (transcendence), (2) a deeper connection with others (interconnectedness), (3) finding purpose in life (meaning) and (4) a developmental aspect (innerness)

When it comes to workplace setting, there are slightly different viewpoints to define spirituality. According to McLaughlin (2005), for some, spirituality simply means incorporating the personal values of integrity, morality, good quality work. For others, it means treating colleagues in an affectionate and responsible way. For another, it is about taking part in spiritual practices like prayer, meditation etc. And for some, it’s conducting ethically right business in socially responsible way to impact the environment, serve the community for a better world.

### **Ethics**

In the light of major corporate failures and economic scandals all over the world, business ethics have attracted a paramount importance in managerial competence and responsibility (Ragab Rizk, 2008) because ethics prescribe what is considered appropriate behavior and what is not seen right to do in living one's life (Chippendale, 2001). Only in keeping the ethics in the center explicitly can welfare economics be enriched (Sen, 1999). Also

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having spiritual principles and values can provide an understanding of the many ethical problems which can be seen in business (Kumari, 2014).

People are complex entities affected by contrasting forces and may lack a sense of direction; thus, they may apply to a different moral code at work just like leaders who have an existence extending beyond their relationship and environments (Rozuel and Kakabadse, 2010). From this perspective, leadership and ethics have a synergistic relationship in spirituality as ethics is central to leadership which ensures ethics (Meng, 2016, p.411). The acts of leaders determine the ethical nature of the organizations even when their decisions are not agreed by the employees. The spiritual sides of leaders help them in determining their ethical decisions. The spirit surely plays an important role in guiding ethical behaviors of people and leaders, not to mention the future problems all humanity will face.

Sulmasy (2013) believes that every system of ethics depends on stories and narratives, which could be religious or religious like from Adam and Eve to other stories. These stories include the basic questions and motivations such as the nature of the universe, the meaning of life, purpose and freedom; that is to say, spiritual dimension of human life. Blumenfeld (2004) on his essay upon the basic question of what motivates a person to act for ethical good, he mentions theorists like Sharon Welch and Max Horkheimer who advocated the educational development of critical rationality as the answer, added with Freire's concept of love and Welch's "dangerous memory." Examining a range of studies in the last decade, our paper aims at examining the spirituality at work and ethics relationship in broader perspective because these two concepts could support one another, having parallels in goals and inspiration.

### **Methodology**

The papers used in this study were selected through two databases. Web of science, Google scholar were the ones used for the literature review. We used the key terms: "spirituality and ethics" to find targeted papers. The initial search with no limit or refinement produced thousands of results about spirituality and ethics. The researchers refined the search according to several criteria: Only academic papers between 2008-2018, papers in English, titles of papers which include both "spirituality" and "ethics". Book reviews, editorial information, conference, undownloadable papers were not included.

Web of science and Google scholar were searched with the terms (allintitle: "spirituality" "ethics"), which in the end produced forty seven papers that match our criteria and can be downloadable with titles not repetitive of each other in the databases. The studies examined in different study fields from economics, sociology to education were searched for some themes determined by the writers in line with the goal of the study:

- 1- Relationship between Spirituality and Ethics
- 2- Spirituality in Ethical Decision Making and Behaviors
- 3- Spirituality and Ethics for Sustainability and World Problems
- 4- Spirituality, Religiosity, Secularity, Ethics.

These themes were taken as the base and clarified with the conclusions by the researchers. All selected papers were examined in relation to these themes and only those in line with the themes were given a focus among forty seven papers.

### **Relationship between Spirituality and Ethics**

The discussion over empirical and conceptual relationship between ethics and spirituality has been differently approached in different studies. Corner (2009) attracted attention to the researchers who suggest possible relationship between business ethics and

workplace spirituality and look forward to reveal the way this linkage can unfold. Lowery et al (2014), who speak of spirituality as a promising variable to study in relation to ethics, found results which show employees' perceptions about ethics at work are positively associated with their individual construct of personal spirituality. Their study showed spirituality as having an explanatory power in predicting the employees' ethics at work. Some studies accordingly found statistically significant relationship between spirituality and ethics along with some other constructs (Mohajeran and Shohoudi, 2014; Motlagh, Jamali, Ghoorchian, 2016; Ebrahimi, Kanani, Tabari, Seydanlou, 2017). Issa and Pick (2011) in their mixed method study concluded that presence of aesthetic and religious spirituality and other factors like contentment, optimism, making a difference and interconnectedness are significantly associated with the ethical practice at work. Conceptually, Mukherjee, Bhattacharjee, and Singha (2016) offer spirituality as the explicit way to upgrade loyalty and develop moral ethics at work. Montazeri et al. (2017) reviewed 11 textbooks and studies in Iranian and Global perspective which emphasized the role of spirituality in treatment and medical ethics and concluded spirituality has a significant role in treatment and medical ethics. Ebrahimi et al. (2017) suggest that staff with ethics would better understand spirituality and are more interested in spiritual meetings in the organization. Similarly, people with high spirituality, in comparison to those who have no such spirituality, welcome ethics as an important part of their life more (Rodriguez-Rad and Ramos Hidalgo, 2017).

Although there are increasing studies which empirically confirm the relationship between two concepts, Phillips, MacKusick and Whichello (2018) claim researchers failed to show if there exists a causal relationship between ethics and spirituality and decreased negative behaviors. Similarly, Ayoun et al. (2015) found empirically no significant relationship between spirituality and ethical perception, judgment and intention, but counted studies which claimed spirituality's effect on ethics and morality in conceptual manner. Actually, the relationship between spirituality and ethics may not be always in straightforward way, but at least surely they are not at odds as both domains are keys and interrelated in development of the personality (Abram, 2009).

### **Spirituality in Ethical Decision Making and Behaviors**

Defining ethics in regard to one's right or wrong behavior, Creighton-Smith et al. (2017) claim the forces in the domain of spirituality or religiosity could be one of the most powerful determinants in one's ethical behavior. They also add spirituality or religious beliefs of a person provide an ethical framework for his life and choices for leisure as well. Similarly, Edginton and Kangas (2014) assert that spirituality is one of the most important forces in human life and influences most societies' beliefs, culture, traditions and decisions. It provides opportunities for people to understand their world and give them a meaning for life and existence while also shaping one's ethical, moral beliefs, attitudes, and values (Creighton-Smith et al., 2017). Accordingly, there are several priorities that shape our lives and give light to us in our ethical decisions. Edwards (2016) lists several factors in degree of value :1) God and unique conscious souls, 2) doing the works of love, mercy, and justice and 3) systemic realities or truths, beliefs, laws, and formalities. God and conscious souls are directly related to spirituality, which also signifies a relationship between soul and God.

Researches show that spirituality has an effect on ethical issues and low spirituality affects unethical behavior (Rodriguez-Rad and Ramos Hidalgo, 2017). So, spirituality can be accepted as a determinant of ethical decision-making (Lowery et al. 2014). If there is a quest for more ethical decisions and action, a more inclusive, holistic and peaceful state of consciousness leading to a spiritual self is to be developed (Zsolnai, 2010, p.1). Actually, for Rozuel and Kakabadse (2010), the self whose spiritual side is generally overlooked plays a more prominent role in our morality and ethical acts than what we usually think. Zsolnai (2010),

who assert “ethics needs spirituality” as a major motivational force, believes knowledge does not create ethics and ethical behaviors, but motivation does. According to Lowery et al (2014) people with a more spiritual self or this motivation may be less likely to be part of a manipulative work act and unethical behaviors along with unethical activities.

### **Spirituality and Ethics for Sustainability and World Problems**

Spirituality and ethics could be one of the answers for the wellbeing of a person and humanity/world at larger perspective. Dhiman (2016) mentions ethics as a balancing force and name people pleasure-seeking automatons when the spiritual dimension is not present, which makes people self-centered and greedy for material needs, causing harm in natural order. Zsolnai (2010) supports it with evidence which suggests that spiritual experiences transcend people’s narrow self-conception and bring in real empathy for all-compassing perspective. For Zsolnai (2010) the main ethical message is always love and compassion, which is against greed and disintegration in the society and flawed systems in the world. In this regard, the wellbeing of all communities and world ecosystems are based on care, empathy and respect, which are some main ethical principles and direct results of spirituality.

Greene (2013) sees science, economics and self-interest lacking in a sufficient ground for sustainable development or continuation of world order while ethics, spirituality and value must be brought together to help sustainability among the nations. For Greene (2013), next decades will host great problems and changes and we need people to decide with spirit and ethics to direct the next phase of humanity. Otherwise, the unexpected fast advances in technology, science, democracy and long-range economic, political and social costs of war coupled with a troubled economy all over the world may cause a social anarchy which threatens the very foundations of our existence and social purpose (Fluker, 2008). For Dhiman (2016), only an individual life which is based on moral and spiritual awareness in harmony with nature can preserve the planet. Erosion of ethical values, seen as the cause for environmental and sustainability challenges, still continues (Pillai, 2016). In this regard, spirituality and ethics has been subject to studies on “sustainability” (e.g. Dhiman, 2016; Greene, 2013; Rodriguez-Rad and Ramos Hidalgo, 2017) Sustainability is not limited to economic foundation, studies on the relationship between workplace spirituality and business ethics along with the role of spiritual practice can guide businesses in the 21st century to achieve social sustainability (Corner, 2009).

The ethical decision making will bear much importance for wellbeing of all humanity in the coming decades which will host great advances and possible destructions as well. The erosion of ethics experienced today will cause problems accelerated by the invasion of web in all households, leaving no room for daily human contact and social bonds. In order to exist, leaders of today and tomorrow must decide in line with the knowledge of spirituality, ethics (Fluker, 2008, Greene, 2013). While science and technologies have been good assets for the social development, they have also created problems to the humanity, which could also be linked to the declining spiritual values in ethical and holistic decision making by the people (Pillai, 2016).

The ethical decision making in regard to spirituality also indicates itself in buying behaviors which could directly and indirectly harm the world. The results show that the more spiritual awareness an individual consumer has, the more likely that person to have an ethical predisposition (Vitell et al. 2016, p.147). Another study asserted that spirituality could be a predictor of green-purchase intention and behavior (Chairy, 2012). Vitell et al. (2016) also found that an individual’s spirituality and their moral identity strength play important roles in determining how they evaluate ethical consumer situations.

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## **Spirituality, Religiosity, Secularity, Ethics**

Secularization has been dominant for a long time, now leaving the place for spirituality (Burkhardt, 2010). There have been many studies over the years which have tried to figure out the effect of religion on ethical behaviors and the relationship between spirituality and ethics (Ayoun et al, 2015). Examining spirituality and ethics in the framework of Islam, Suib & Said (2017) assert both terms under Islam have link to each other through seven values (care, generous, honesty, justice, loyalty, respect, and responsible). They also claim ethics enhance service quality, empower workers, and increase customer loyalty and level of profit, spirituality facilitates positive energy, enhances performance, motivates towards good deeds, improves self-realization and increases commitment to social responsibility (p.290). Similarly, Escobar (2011, p.59), looking with the lens of Christianity in his study on postmodernity, spirituality and ethics, claims ethics and spirituality are interdependent as they shape and are central to each other. Issa and Pick (2011) offers evidence of significant association and relationship between ethics, spirituality and aesthetics after analyzing secular and religious perspectives. Burkhardt (2010) going deep into religiosity of the spirit tells that if there is no submission or obedience to God's will, then the spiritual dimension of ethics is lost.

Differentiating between religion and spirituality has been generally accepted in literature (Ayoun et al., 2015; Creighton-Smith et al., 2017) Although the term spirituality is generally viewed distinct from the term religion in that latter is formal, institutionalized and organized, McPherson (2015) assert spirituality leads to organized and agreed practices in the fullest sense generally shared by other followers. The examples can be seen in the birth of new religion-like grouping and cults which are based on spiritual search of different people coming together and forming new forms, though these groups are not necessarily based on any religion or may have followers from different religions. While spirituality is generally on personal level, there are religion understandings on personal level as well. Whether both terms can be assumed as one or two distinct concepts, one needs to very careful while coming to conclusion in the domain of spirituality.

### **Conclusion**

There are found different results on the relationship between spirituality and ethics. While conceptual relationship between spirituality and ethics is agreed by most of the writers, there is a relatively little consensus among the writers on empirical studies which propose a sound relationship between both terms. However, the empirical studies which state a significant relationship between the terms are more than those which disagree with the presence of a significant difference. Thus, it can be concluded that there is an increasing positive consensus on empirically tested relationship between spirituality and ethics in the studies. Spirituality or spiritual life shared by the members of an organization could be a strong predictor of ethical issues and decisions at work. Spirituality is seen to effect decision making, not only in business or organizational context but also in matters that may affect larger scale conditions like environmental problems. Spirituality is seen to be one of the strong factors in consumer habits and decisions as well. Surely, spirituality can play efficient roles in sustainability and solution of new world problems, considering new changes and fast developments in the world order. So this is no wonder spirituality and ethics can play important roles in wellbeing of a person and humanity/world at larger perspective in the coming decades.

Although distinct from each other as accepted in most of the literature, spirituality and religiosity share very similar grounds. Spirituality, which is a very personal concept, can also lead people to form groups or structures similar to religious structures. There have been also some classifications of spirituality, one of which is more linked to secular perspectives while the other is more oriented towards religious perspectives. One hard thing this case sometimes

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presents is to understand whether writers in the various fields take a religious spirituality perspective or a spiritual perspective inclusive all because it could be hard to understand what an author means by “spirituality has direct effect on ethics”. It could refer to spirituality of a religious man adhering to all orders from God and / or spirituality of a man seeking his calling with very different beliefs of conduct on personal level in ethical issues.

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