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## Religious Approaches on Work Ethics: An Alternative Islamic Model

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### ABSTRACT

A longstanding debate has been whether religion plays a role in workplace values. Most religions have an ethical component. In recent years an increasing presence of religious approaches, in both empirical and conceptual research, can be noted, in spite of some objections to the presence of religions in the work ethics field. Empirical research, generally based on psychological and sociological studies, shows the influence of religious faith on several work issues. Conceptual research includes a variety of work ethics issues studied from the perspectives of different religions and wisdom traditions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Ethics, which is a major branch of philosophy, encompasses right conduct and good life. It is significantly broader than the common conception of analyzing right and wrong. Islamic work ethic is a modern multidimensional construct, linking organizational prosperity and social welfare, therefore, the current research seeks to strengthen the role of IWE, expand the understanding of its dimensions.

**Keywords:** Work ethics, Islamic work ethic, hard work, values, moral behavior

### Introduction

Most research on work ethic was carried out by Western scholars, was associated with the phenomenon of religious ethics at work. Max Weber<sup>1</sup> in his thesis titled "the Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", which was the first study published with religion as the main source of work ethic. Weber's study has attracted many social and psychological studies to research the same topic<sup>2</sup>. Increasingly, studies emphasized that work ethic is anchored in all religions<sup>3</sup>. In contrast to Weber's statement that British and Anglo-Saxon countries are the best model of Protestant work ethic, other studies show that there are non-western societies who

<sup>1</sup> Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism [1904–5]*. na, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> Kalemci, R. Arzu, and Ipek Kalemci Tuzun. "Understanding Protestant and Islamic Work Ethic Studies: A Content Analysis of Articles." *Journal of Business Ethics* (2017): 1-10.

<sup>3</sup> Geren, Brenda. "The work ethic: Is it universal." *Journal of International Business and Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (2011): 1-8.

also have greater levels of Protestant work ethic<sup>4</sup>. Geren pointed out that the influence of religion becomes lower on PWE when the value system is stable, even without a religious base or foundation.<sup>5</sup>

### Overview of Work Ethic

In the past few decades, several studies from different parts of the world examined the Protestant work ethic.<sup>6</sup> Muslim scholars have also investigated the same construct of PWE within their societies<sup>7</sup>. Then, they were alerted about the role of Islamic faith in work ethic after a paper presented by Naser, titled "Islamic work ethic in comparative work ethics" at the occasional papers of the Council of Scholars in Library of Congress. Followed by Ali's study of "scaling an Islamic work ethic" which considered work ethic as holding business motives in great honor, in order to satisfy Muslim's needs and establish a balance in their social life.<sup>8</sup> IWE has been researched extensively in the last three decades.<sup>9</sup> Especially, after the empirical study results of.<sup>10</sup> The question of work ethic has continued to generate debates and discussions among scholars at every stage.

**Table 1: Work Ethic Similarities in Religions**

Religion	Discussion Points	
	1.The Way of self-development and societal welfare	2. Work is considered a religious duty
IWE	Islam highly values work as it helps individuals to meet their basic needs and help them to create balance in their life.	In Islam, work is given high respect since it is considered being similar to worship.
PWE	PWE follows the concept of God's calling and thus it is believed that being successful at work is the symptom of being God's chosen one.	It is believed to be the peoples' duty to serve God's instrument in his earth.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Geren, Brenda. "The work ethic: Is it universal." *Journal of International Business and Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (2011): 1-8.

<sup>6</sup> Ali, Abbas J. "The Islamic work ethic in Arabia." *The Journal of psychology* 126, no. 5 (1992): 507-519.

<sup>7</sup> Arslan, Mahmut. "A cross-cultural comparison of British and Turkish managers in terms of Protestant work ethic characteristics." *Business Ethics: A European Review* 9, no. 1 (2000): 13-19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Usman, Muhammad, Khurram Shahzad, and Khurram Khan. "Islamic Work Ethics (IWE): A review of literature and directions for future research." *Journal of Islamic Business and Management* 219, no. 3327 (2015): 1-28.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 13-19.

BWE	Buddhism considers work as the right way to provide one with his basic needs, and it supposed to contribute significantly to the welfare of society.	Learning and gaining skill in one's craft is a great blessing.
HWE	In the Hindu religious text Bhagavad Gita, it is suggested that work is the source of prosperity and strength.	Work is integrated into religion through the castes system. Hindus born in different castes (varna ) are bound to follow their respective work related duties
<b>3. Hard work, perseverance, dedication</b>		<b>4. Honesty, loyalty, fairness, patience at the workplace</b>
IWE	Islam has emphasized working hard and avoidance of laziness and wasting of time.	IWE suggests that, to be an ethical person, it is required to be humble, committed, pardoning, patient and cooperative at the workplace.
PWE	The Protestant faith discourages waste of time and laziness and encourages hard work.	PWE emphasizes honesty, punctuality, loyalty (to the job as well as to the organization) and internal locus of control.
BWE	BWE also perceives laziness as a vice and encourages its followers to put forward their best efforts in their work.	BWE suggests that to achieve the ultimate goal Nirvana (enlightenment), the first step is to perform good deeds, and maintaining ethics.
HWE	As such, Hindus typically emphasize their work as the means to get better living in this life and after rebirth.	In HWE, being non-harmful is given high priority. Furthermore, it emphasizes good ethical conduct such as truthfulness, patience and kindness.

**Source:** Adapted from Mohammad and Quoquab (2016)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Mohammad, Jihad, and Farzana Quoquab. "Furthering the thought on Islamic work ethic: how does it differ?." *Journal of Islamic Marketing* 7, no. 3 (2016): 355-375.

The table above shows that the beliefs about work ethic have similarities across cultures and religions. These orientations (IWE, PWE, HWE, and BWE) on work ethic showed in the previous table, indicate that there is an agreement that the work is significant to improve the individual and the whole society, work is a religious duty<sup>12</sup>, working hard is an obligation<sup>13</sup>, and work should be taken seriously, honestly, and faithfully to enhance the human soul with verified knowledge and adequate skills that will benefit the individual source of work and society.<sup>14</sup>

### **Ethics in Work from a Religious Perspective**

Ethics should be embedded in any organization's DNA.<sup>15</sup> Ethical employees will contribute positively to the organizational culture and performance level.<sup>16</sup> Their personal rules of conduct, values, and ethics will appear in every detail at work. If the organization ignores its role in ethics will appear on every detail at work. A deterioration in its social system may occur allowing a drop of job performance, and real ethical dilemmas (e.g., fraud, embezzlement, deceit and conspiracy).<sup>17</sup>

To understand the term 'ethics', its origins come from the Greek word "ethos" which means custom or habit. Academic studies recognize the concept of ethics as a branch of philosophy to examine and report ideal human behavior and perfect ways of being. Ethics also describe an individual's character, attitude and beliefs or a society's stance.<sup>18</sup> It is found in all disciplines of human endeavor (e.g., legal ethics, medical ethics, religious ethics, media ethics), and investigated as a rational inquiry to its subject matter. Accordingly, ethics consists of norms that govern human's behavior standards. Normative ethics is the activity of applying moral percept to concrete problems.

Although there exists a common recognition to ethics in work in the monotheistic religions; e.g. Islam, Christianity, and Judaism,<sup>19</sup> work ethic practices in Islam and Judaism as a monotheistic religion was not the same as the Christian setting several centuries ago, because of its nature as an inter- cognitive concept. For example, earlier Jewish beliefs viewed work as a sinful activity, "if man does not find his food like animals and birds but must earn it, that is due to sin".<sup>20</sup> Ali and Al-Owaihan demonstrated how there was a distinguished and clear definition

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<sup>12</sup> Rahman, Mohd Rosmizi Abd. *Introduction to Islamic and Buddhist personal ethics*. Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 13-19.

<sup>14</sup> Mittal, R., S. Pareek, H. Abbasi, and M. Kharir. "Business ethics and religion: a review of different religious texts." *European Journal of Economics, Finance and Administrative Sciences* 31 (2011): 176-181.

<sup>15</sup> Kaptein, Muel. *The living code: Embedding ethics into the corporate DNA*. Routledge, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Hayati, Keumala, and Indra Caniago. "Islamic work ethic: The role of intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and job performance." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 65 (2012): 1102-1106.

<sup>17</sup> Javed, Basharat, Sajid Bashir, Mohammed YA Rawwas, and Surendra Arjoon. "Islamic Work Ethic, innovative work behaviour, and adaptive performance: the mediating mechanism and an interacting effect." *Current Issues in Tourism* 20, no. 6 (2017): 647-663.

<sup>18</sup> Meriac, John P., and C. Allen Gorman. "Work ethic and work outcomes in an expanded criterion domain." *Journal of Business and Psychology* 32, no. 3 (2017): 273-282.

<sup>19</sup> Ali, Abbas J., and Manton Gibbs. "Foundation of business ethics in contemporary religious thought: The Ten Commandment perspective." *International Journal of Social Economics* 25, no. 10 (1998): 1552-1564.

<sup>20</sup> Lipset, Seymour Martin. "The work ethic, then and now." *Journal of Labor Research* 13, no. 1 (1992): 45

of ethics and characteristics, in work, in the early days of Islam.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, an individual's perception of ethics is shaped by some factors such as religious values, ethnic beliefs, personal values, and life experiences.<sup>22</sup> The below table shows the differences in work ethics perceived by various believes.

**Table 2: Religious Differences in Work Ethics**

Religion		Discussion Points	
		1. Work-related values	2. Rules related to rate of interest
IWE & PWE	IWE and PWE both emphasize on intrinsic as well as extrinsic values.		Islam and Christianity explicitly impose restriction on dealing with interest. However, during the rise of the Protestant movement, taking interest became acceptable in the view of Protestant Churches.
BWE	The focus is predominantly intrinsic values		In relation to rates of interest, implicit restrictions are found in Buddhism and Hinduism. In recent years BWE as well
HWE	The focus is predominantly extrinsic values.		as HWE all consider interest acceptable, which is not in the case of IWE.
		3. Restriction in terms of intoxicant	4. Classification of work
IWE	Regarding restriction of intoxicant use, it is strictly prohibited in IWE and considered as a sinful activity.		IWE values all work with respect. IWE highly values halal (permitted) work rather than its classification.
PWE	PWE accepts moderate level of alcohol consumption in personal life as well at the workplace.		In medieval Christianity, work was perceived as a sin, and physical work was meant for the slaves only and was seen as vulgar. However, PWE suggests that the person who possesses qualities such as hard work and punctuality are God's chosen one.

<sup>21</sup> Ali, Abbas J., and Abdullah Al-Owaihian. "Islamic work ethic: a critical review." *Cross cultural management: An international Journal* 15, no. 1 (2008): 5-19.

<sup>22</sup> Barrett, Sarah Elizabeth. "The Impact of Religious Beliefs on Professional Ethics: A Case Study of a New Teacher." *Canadian Journal of Education* 38, no. 3 (2015): n3.

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BWE	It is strictly prohibited in BWE. However, taking intoxicants for medical purpose does not violate the fifth precept (Horner, 2004).	In BWE, work is highly valued since it helps one to be independent and self-respectful. BWE highly regards jobs that are not harmful for others, do not required to get involved in unnecessary material consumption, and driven by good motives.
HWE	As such, Hindus typically emphasize their work as the means to get better living in this life and after rebirth.	In HWE, high classification system exists based on their caste system. Usually, the brahmans carry out religious duties, whereas, the Kshatriyas perform administrative duties and also take part in battle (warrior) when needed.

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Source: Adapted from Mohammad and Quoquab (2016)<sup>23</sup>

There were some differences between these orientations toward work ethics, for instance, Islam and Christianity both have a common denominator that explicitly imposes restrictions on interest. Whereas, other religions focused on one side of work related values (Predominantly intrinsic values or predominantly extrinsic values) and implicit restrictions on interest rates. In addition, intoxicants were considered sinful and strictly prohibited in Islam and Buddhism. Moderate level of it was accepted by Christianity, and there were no religious restrictions related to intoxicant use in Hinduism. In work classifications, Islam permitted and respected all halal business or work activities. Buddhism also valued work which does not harm others; Hinduism categorizes work activities based on their caste system. In medieval Christianity, physical work was only for slaves.

### **Work from an Islamic Perspective**

Working is a devotion striving to advance self-interest psychologically, economically and socially to maintain social prestige and welfare.<sup>24</sup> Ali described work as "...an obligatory activity and virtue in light of the needs of man and the necessity to establish equilibrium in one's individual and social life.<sup>25</sup> Work enables man to be independent and is a source of self-respect, satisfaction, and fulfillment" (p.577). Engaging in economic and work activities was also identified by Ikhwan Al-Safa as a motive for people to be creative in a productive way, feeding the soul of human beings with adequate knowledge and skills to be more confident and satisfied, to have good manners, to reduce poverty, and to achieve salvation.<sup>26</sup> From an Islamic perspective, work is a means to safeguard the five essential human needs, namely their din (faith), their nafs (human self), `aql (intellect), their nasl (posterity) and their mal (wealth).<sup>27</sup> The necessity to apply a religious meaning to work is the interrelated relationship between work and faith.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Manan, S. K., N. Kamaluddin, and A. S. A. Puteh Salin. "Islamic Work Ethics and Organizational Commitment: Evidence from Employees of Banking Institutions in Malaysia." *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 21, no. 4 (2013).

<sup>25</sup> Ali, Abbas J. "The Islamic work ethic in Arabia." *The Journal of psychology* 126, no. 5 (1992): 507-519.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 5-19.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 1471-1489.

Abeng highlighted the role of faith in working activities. He declared that working without faith will bring troubles and negative implications.<sup>28</sup> In other words, it is not acceptable to use the wrong means to achieve good goals. The word "work" in all forms was repeatedly written 385 times in the Qur'an, which is more than the days of a year. Allah (SWT) has stressed on work in the holy book of Qur'an (9:105) by saying "And say work: soon will Allah observe your work, His Messenger, the Believers...). By work, man contributes positively to the earth. Therefore, the centrality of work in Islamic perception was a key motive of previous generations to be involved in broad and extensive economic activities, working hard and trading across mountains and seas with all nations.<sup>29</sup> Allah (SWT) says "Human beings can have nothing but what they strive for" (Qur'an 53: 39).

In addition, work in Islam is perceived by three fundamental features; creed (Aqidah), worship (Ibadah), and ethics (akhlaq)<sup>30</sup>. This represents an Islamic ethical system to Muslims in their work activities, values, and perceptions. Thus, Islamic faith directs Muslims to be accountable to God, through their words, actions and decisions; because the results of their behavior during their worldly life will show their fate in the hereafter. Muslims' behavior, attitudes, and manners should follow the Qur'an and Sunnah. Which, in the end, will be referred to and evaluated by Allah (SWT) (Qur'an, 49:13).

### **Work Ethics in Islam**

In the Golden Age of Islamic history, work and ethics were honored in all forms. Islam consists of comprehensive guidelines which governs all aspects of human lives.<sup>31</sup> It was this deep sense of moral values and true justice that Islamic belief contributed in the development of Muslim society. Thus, ethics in work from an Islamic perspective refers to divine and moral values. Countless outstanding evidence from Islamic history up to the middle ages on justice and equity played a significant role in the development of human societies. However, this knowledge that Islam delivered to its followers was absent in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> industrial and cognitive renaissance eras, and neglected in managerial organizational studies.<sup>32</sup> It was also translated in other ways and misunderstood through studies that followed those ages.<sup>33</sup>

In Arabic, 'Akhlaq' is plural of 'Khuluq', the corresponding word of 'ethic' (al-Ba'labakki: 194).<sup>34</sup> The knowledge of morality is the literal translation of 'ilm al-Akhlaq', which also means the moral philosophy in Arabic literature, but it is translated as ethics (al-Ba'labakki: 325). The basic code of Islamic values and principles are primarily derived from the scriptures of the Muslims (the Holy Qur'an) and the recorded words and actions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which is named as 'Sunnah'.<sup>35</sup> According to Sahih Bukhari, Prophet Muhammad PBUH said: "I (Muhammad) have only been sent to complete good manners (Makarim Al-Akhlaq)". The Islamic ethics (Al-Akhlaqul Karimah) was the first message of Allah (SWT) given to his Messenger (Prophet Muhammad PBUH). Muslim authors in past eras quoted the Qur'an and Sunnah in

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<sup>28</sup> Abeng, Tanri. "Business ethics in Islamic context: Perspectives of a Muslim business leader." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1997): 47-54.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 5-19.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 355-375.

<sup>34</sup> al-Ba'labakki, Munir. *al-Mawrid: a modern English-Arabic dictionary*. Dar el-Ilm lil-Malayan, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 507-519.

support of their moral and religious ideas (Rahman et al., 2006). Religion is expected to provide individuals with strong spiritual motivation, principles and a clear vision to achieve their objectives.<sup>36</sup>

The Muslim ethical behavior consists of two important factors: the external factor represents the interactions with environment and society around him, which is recognized as ethics (Akhlaq), the second is an internal factor, his relationship with his creator (Allah S.W.T) which is a spiritual aspect or translated to the term 'ruhani' in Arabic language,<sup>37</sup> a Muslim's good behavior is based on these two factors: The Islamic values he has and the quality of his relationship with Allah (the creator). Good Muslim, the believer (Al-Mo'men) would not harm or create mischief to the environment or the society around him, because his vision 'tassawur' is not limited to the what is morally right or wrong or even to the conditional norms in the belief of the society he interacts with, but to the basic code of Islamic values and principles that governs his character and behavior.<sup>38</sup>

Accordingly, IWE is also rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, which are backed by the Islamic values.<sup>39</sup> Arslan has confirmed on the fact that Islamic communities and other religious groups such as Japanese and Indians were successful in their special way of conducting ethical business environment.<sup>40</sup> Unsurprisingly, some of these non-western societies were sharing work ethics similar to the Protestant Work ethics. Work ethic from Islamic approach was almost the same as it is in Christianity (i.e., PWE).

Rizk has defined IWE as "an orientation towards work and approaches; with work being considered as a virtue in humans' lives" (p. 207).<sup>41</sup> Ibrahim also defined IWE as "performing positive actions with good intentions as a way of getting blessings from Allah SWT and to benefit society and oneself" (p. 97).<sup>42</sup> IWE was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, linking organizational prosperity and social welfare. A study of Ali on IWE has opened the door for studies to conduct further measurements from different contexts. It has also given enough room for more contributions to enrich the conceptual and practical framework of the growing body of IWE.

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<sup>36</sup> Abdullah, Nur Atiqah, Fatimah Omar, Rahman, and Khairul Akmaliah Adham. "Conceptualizing work and organizational values from the Islamic Perspective." *Jurnal Pengurusan*, 39 (2013).

<sup>37</sup> Attahiru, Mustapha Sidi, Al-Hasan Al-Aidaros, and Syarifah Binti Md Yusof. "Moderating role of hisbah Institution on the relationship of Religiosity and Islamic culture to Islamic work ethics in Nigeria." *International Review of Management and Marketing* 6, no. 8S (2016): 125-132.

<sup>38</sup> Kamaluddin, Norlela, and Siti Khadijah Ab Manan. "The Conceptual Framework of Islamic work Ethic." *Management & Accounting Review (MAR)* 9, no. 2 (2010): 57-70.

<sup>39</sup> Arslan, Mahmut. "The work ethic values of protestant British, Catholic Irish and Muslim Turkish managers." *Journal of Business Ethics* 31, no. 4 (2001): 321-339.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ragab Rizk, Riham. "Back to basics: an Islamic perspective on business and work ethics." *Social Responsibility Journal* 4, no. 1/2 (2008): 246-254.

<sup>42</sup> Ibrahim, Azharsyah. "The commitment to Islamic work ethics among Islamic banking employees in Aceh." *Jurnal Syariah* 24, no. 1 (2017).



## Conclusion

Work ethic seemed like a well-established concept in various belief systems. Every society has attempted to develop a work ethic from its unique values and set of norms. Similarly, all religions have emphasized the significance of work and working hard to the individual and the whole society welfare.<sup>43</sup> The centrality of work in Islamic perception was a key motive for Muslim scholars to present the construct of Islamic work ethic (IWE) backed by Islamic values as a spiritual motivation and important principle. In a social cognitive model, a continuous reciprocal interaction occurs between the personal, environmental, and behavioral factors.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Muslim employees' personal factors (i.e., work ethic) are shaped by the Islamic banking environment and displayed in their behavior (i.e., commitment). The notion of Islamic work ethic (IWE) has sparked widespread interest over the last decade. Recent research indicated that the Islamic work ethic (IWE) has great potential to enhance employees' work outcomes such as: job satisfaction,<sup>45</sup> innovation and creativity.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 1552-1564.

<sup>44</sup> Bandura, Albert. "Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency." *Journal of moral education* 31, no. 2 (2002): 101-119.

<sup>45</sup> Mohamed, Norshidah, Nor Shahriza Abdul Karim, and Ramlah Hussein. "Linking Islamic work ethic to computer use ethics, job satisfaction and organisational commitment in Malaysia." *Journal of Business Systems, Governance and Ethics* 5, no. 1 (2010): 13-23.

<sup>46</sup> Javed, Basharat, Sajid Bashir, Mohammed YA Rawwas, and Surendra Arjoon. "Islamic Work Ethic, innovative work behaviour, and adaptive performance: the mediating mechanism and an interacting effect." *Current Issues in Tourism* 20, no. 6 (2017): 647-663.

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