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# A SWOT Analysis on the Concept of Spirituality among Muslim Support Staff in a Faith-Based Higher Learning Institution in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

*Spirituality and religion are two different concepts that are closely related to one another. For its strategic planning, the organisation under study (a faith-based higher learning institution) needs to conduct a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis related to the concept of spirituality. Therefore, a hermeneutic research design was used to identify the institution's Muslim support staff's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Purposive sampling was used to recruit eight participants who were Muslim full-time support staff currently working at the institution. Data were collected via a focus group discussion through the Google Meet platform. The findings revealed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats at both theoretical and practical levels. Although all participants agreed that spirituality is an innate human nature expressed via good deeds, it is still difficult for them to differentiate between spirituality and religion. In terms of opportunities, spirituality becomes the institution's branding as a faith-based organisation, and this organisation conducted many spiritual-based programmes and community service activities. However, the financial constraints, generational gap, and organisational change might threaten the practice of spirituality in the organisation. The findings serve as an essential basis and guideline for the organisation to develop interventions related to spirituality. Some limitations and recommendations for future research were also discussed.*

Keywords: *spirituality, Islam, support staff, SWOT analysis, organisational psychology.*

## INTRODUCTION

Work defines individuals and provides them meaning as it is closely related to their self-concept. Similarly, spirituality is associated with individuals' quality and meaning of life (Victor & Treschuk, 2020). As an abstract concept, spirituality has been used interchangeably with religion in the literature (Yeşilçınar et al., 2018). Cook (2004) defines spirituality as relatedness, recognition of a transcendent dimension to life, the distinctiveness of humanity, the inner 'core', 'force' or 'soul' of a person, meaning and purpose in life, authenticity and truth, values, importance and worth, non-materiality non-religiousness, holistic wellness, wholeness or health, self-knowledge and self-actualisation, creativity, and consciousness.

In Islam, spirituality is always discussed with the concepts of *ruh*, *nafs*, heart, and soul. Traditional Muslim scholars such as *Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah* used all those concepts interchangeably in his works, namely *Kitab al-Ruh* (Rahim & Yakub, 2007) and Medicine of the Prophet (Khatib, 2021). Spirituality in Islam also indicates the connectedness and attachment of human beings to their Creator, as this is the core of the *tawhidic* paradigm. It entails worshipping Allah, serving Allah, and recognising the greatness of Allah. Spirituality

should also be seen as the aspect of human life that links him to the metaphysical realities, creating a sense of purpose in life and responsibilities towards the divine nature and fellow humans and creatures. In addition, Islam views spirituality as having meaningful and harmonious relationships at individual, group, and organisational levels.

In an organisational context, spirituality is one of the desired outcomes, especially in a faith-based institution. Therefore, informed interventions to nurture employees who are psychologically and spiritually healthy and well equipped with knowledge, skills, ethics, and morality to contribute to society, better known as *Insan Sejahtera*, are necessary. To achieve this goal, the organisation under study prepares the Sejahtera Academic Framework (SAF) as a guideline for its employees. SAF refers to spirituality as gaining perspective and recognising that life has a more excellent value through purification of the heart as guided by faith (Borhan et al., 2021). Spirituality separates a person from dependence on material things and establishes a greater purpose. Actions are motivated purely to seek Allah's pleasure, based on the firm belief in Allah and obedience to Him.

Hence, it is essential to study how the concept of spirituality is practised and serves as the foundation for accomplishing tasks, duties, and responsibilities among employees in a faith-based higher learning institution. In line with this, the present study aims to explore the understanding and practices of spirituality among Muslim support staff currently working in the institution.

### *Spirituality at workplace*

The concept of spirituality refers to the dimension of individuals and their lives that concerns the refinement of the *ruh*, *nafs*, heart, and soul, as well as growth through all forms of education, learning, training, purification, and upbringing. In other words, spirituality is the state of having meaningful and harmonious relationships with oneself, others and the environment. Furthermore, for individuals who believe in a transcendent power, such as the Muslims, spirituality is the state of having meaningful and harmonious relationships with the Creator, the Supreme Being, who is the highest object of veneration.

Workplace spirituality is relatively new in a world where management and organisational principles have been considered outside spiritualism (Fry, 2003). Spirituality is not only confined to individuals' personal life but is also practised at the group and organisational levels in the work setting. Many organisations recognise the importance of spirituality in the workplace, such as promoting peace and harmony; practising ethics and human rights; and encouraging multiculturalism and dialogue (Karakas, 2008). In transforming an organisation into a spiritual one, Banyhamdan et al. (2012) examined the core pillars or pathways that can contribute to building spirituality in an organisation. The pillars identified include organisational culture, mission/vision, leadership, human resource development and organisational structure. In addition, workplace spirituality has been conceptualised to encompass awareness of interconnectedness, respect and recognition of the environment, people and the experience of the performance of duty (Marques, 2006).

Apart from academic staff in an educational institution, support staff also play a crucial role in students' integration and internalisation (Brandenburg, 2016) through daily interaction and student activities. Furthermore, t support staff are an essential component of the organisation as they facilitate the spiritual development and growth of the institution's community. In the attempt to increase the visibility and global brand of Islamic educational

excellence worldwide, the organisation under study adhere to the practice of Islamisation, internalisation, integration, and comprehensive excellence, which are closely related to spirituality.

## *SWOT Analysis*

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis can identify specific organisational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The SWOT analysis contains essential information for organisations to fulfil their mission and vision, develop interventions, and propose strategic planning that benefits the organisations in return. While strengths refer to organisations' internal elements that facilitate achieving organisational goals, weaknesses are the internal elements that interfere with organisational success. On the other hand, opportunities are the positive environmental aspects and possibilities to address gaps and initiate new organisational activities. Lastly, threats are potential external or environmental barriers hindering organisations from reaching their goals. The present study aims to identify spirituality's core strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities among Muslim support staff in a faith-based higher learning institution at both the theoretical and practical levels.

## METHOD

A hermeneutic study which focuses on spirituality with some leanings on Islam from the working experience and perspective of administrative staff in a faith-based higher learning institution was conducted. Although spirituality can be detached from religion, the peculiarities of the participants show different understandings of spirituality. Smythe and Spence (2012) suggest that the hermeneutic study can be applied to understand spirituality or religious interpretation in any given circle, including academic environments, through academic staff traits.

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants for this study. The inclusion criteria of the participants were i) full-time Muslim support staff and ii) currently working in the organisation under study. Those who were academic staff, academic administrators, and retirees were excluded from the study. A focus group discussion was conducted with eight participants who were full-time Muslim support staff, including technicians, security guards, clerks, and desk secretaries. The present study focuses on support staff because of their role as essential stakeholders who assist in the smooth functioning of academic activities (Sultan & Wong, 2013). In return, they affect the overall perceived service quality of the higher learning institution (Abbas, 2020). Additionally, support staff convey the organisation's internal value and are more likely to show commitment and support to the institution's brand (Yu et al., 2016). The organisation under study is a faith-based higher learning institution, emphasising the integration of religious moral-spiritual values in humanities, education, and character building, which fits the phenomena of this study- to analyse the concept of spirituality.

As most support staff were not fluent in English, participants were allowed to deliver the discussion in Malay because that was the most comfortable language. Following the point highlighted in Yin (1989), data analysis consists of several stages, i.e., examining, categorising, and tabulating or otherwise recombining the evidence, to address the initial goal of a study.

For analysis, the raw data was translated from Malay to English. A focus group

discussion was held virtually via the Google Meets platform in compliance with the Malaysian government's COVID-19 standard operating procedures (SOP) and the institution's policy. The information gathered from the participants was transcribed verbatim based on a video recording of the focus group. Then, the information was processed by thematising the data based on the research objectives. Next, researchers cleaned, translated and prepared the transcript as a primary textual document. Primary text was imported into a Google Sheet, and codes were assigned to meaningful quotations. Thematic analysis was used to organise information according to codes.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Using the Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis, data have been thematised and subsequently clustered based on their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, including theoretical and practical aspects.

### Strengths

The present study identified participants' six strengths related to spirituality at the theoretical and practical levels.

### *The theoretical aspects of spirituality*

Theoretically, the participants understood and believed spirituality as *fitrah*, inner self, and emotion regulation.

#### *Fitrah*

The discussion with the participants found that they understood spirituality applied to everyone across all faiths and viewed spirituality as a part of an individual's *fitrah* (nature). Regardless of religion, all individuals were considered as born with spirituality. According to one participant:

> *P1: Spirituality is our fitrah, and Islam is a religion that shapes us. We all search for spirituality regardless of our religion because it is our fitrah."*

Another participant agreed with the view and opined that all religions encourage good deeds among their followers, and performing good deeds relates to spirituality, a part of human *fitrah*. The participant stressed that:

> *P2: "All religions, be it Islam or Buddhism, urge the followers to perform good deeds. Why do we need to be good? Because being good is within us, it is our fitrah."*

The skewed discussion towards Islam among participants is understandable due to the nature of participants in this study, who were all Muslims. Spirituality reflects the understanding of goodness in each religion and the direction of its adherents to do good.

#### *Inner-self*

There was a recurring understanding of spirituality among respondents concerning the inner self, consisting of *ruh*, heart, soul, and inner strength. Consistent with the view of traditional Muslim scholars such as Ibn-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, who defined spirituality as self, a participant related spirituality with self,

> *P5: When it comes to spirituality, I think it is related to yourself. It is connected to your ruh".*

Another participant viewed spirituality as connected to an individual's heart and could be exhibited through behaviours such as piety, patience, and trustworthiness:

> *P4: "... spirituality is related to our hearts. This means that our hearts must have the strength of faith, piety, tawakal, patience, and trustworthiness. We must be strong, our inner strengths, or our hearts".*

It appeared unanimous among participants that spirituality was not a physical or outward perception. Instead, spirituality consists of intangible components that shape individuals' external behaviours.

## *Emotion regulation*

Spirituality was also related to emotion regulation that enabled individuals to manage their anger, as viewed by the following participant:

> *P4: "For example, if someone is angry due to others' provocation, he will keep quiet until he calms down. If he lets his emotion take over, he will also become angry and fight with the one who provokes him. In my opinion, this person is practising spirituality."*

Another participant further elaborated on emotion regulation in the context of sportsmanship, which also relates to psychological strength and spirituality:

> *P3: "I remember that even during sports, an athlete needs physical and psychological strength, which relates to his spirituality. If he is physically solid, but without psychological strengths, he will be an easy target of his opponents".*

Participants also discussed ways to regulate our emotions, and one of the ways is through a specific *zikir* as a mechanism to regulate emotion under challenging situations. According to one of them:

> *P1: "By reciting Allahumma Solli A'la Muhammad, we can balance and regulate our emotions".*

The above excerpt indicates that spirituality was viewed as closely connected to the religion as the *zikir* consists of either Quranic verses or beautiful prayers related to the Creator and His Messenger, among the pillars of faith in Islam.

### The practical aspects of spirituality

In practice, spirituality was viewed as a motivation for individuals to perform good deeds, a factor of success, and a robust platform for Islamisation.

<u>Good deeds</u>

Spirituality is also understood from the purview of spreading good to others through the principle of relationships with other human beings. The findings indicate that participants practised spirituality in their day-to-day activities and with colleagues when completing their responsibilities at work. Some participants highlighted this concept in the following excerpts:

*P5: "I think spirituality is when we do good to others".*

P7: Spirituality relates to how we perform our tasks at work. If our spirituality is not OK, we will not bother others; we will concentrate on our job alone. We are too focused on our tasks and do not care about others. But if our spirituality is OK, we will be good to our colleagues and care about them."

Another participant further supported this opinion:

*P4: "I think spirituality is more on what we practice daily. Our heart, our behaviour".*

Another participant further elaborated on spirituality and good deeds by stressing the relationship between the two:

*P3: "Spirituality needs to be fed and has its demands. If one is spiritual, the demand is to observe himself to be a good person. Therefore, a spiritual person will perform good behaviours and deeds".*

One participant believed that everyone, including criminals, would have at least a good part within themselves. This good part is related to spirituality, which made them inclined to perform good deeds, at least to the person they love, such as their close family members.

*P2: "As spirituality is in all of us, we are inclined to perform good deeds. Even criminals perform good deeds, like being good to their parents and children although they are criminals".*

The above excerpts were in line with Cook's (2004) suggestion on the definitions of spirituality which include relatedness, that is, relationship with other individuals. Additionally, spirituality as an inner component of individuals is related closely to their outward behaviours.

<u>Success</u>

Participants also viewed spirituality as a source of individuals' success because spirituality would ensure individuals fulfil their responsibility as vicegerents on earth.

*P3: "Spirituality is the source of our success in fulfilling our responsibility as the vicegerent of Allah on earth".*

Spirituality is connected to our hearts, so individuals must persevere and guard their hearts because the heart determines individuals' behaviours. According to the participant:

*P3: "We have to take good care of our heart. If we fail to guard and persevere it, then we would not be guided by Allah's hidayah, and we would not be successful".*

One of the participants extended spirituality beyond sitting in a mosque. The participant opined that spirituality complemented physical skills and success in the workplace, as in the following excerpts:

*P7: "Spirituality is not just about sitting in a mosque, remembering, talking, tazkirah. But helping others at work also is a part of spirituality".*

Spirituality was also further elaborated in the context of successful government, as spiritual leaders would observe their professionalism and integrity, as elaborated by a participant in the following excerpt:

*P3: Professionalism is related to one's spirituality. For example, let's look at Kelantan's state government. We know those who lead the state are religious and viewed as spiritual. In more than 30-year of governing the state, the state government has no allegation of corruption. We can see the good values in their professionalism and administration".*

### *Islamisation practices*

On the other hand, spirituality is not limited to Muslims but influences Islamisation practices. A participant opined that the Islamisation element or religion would bind our spirituality:

*P3: Spirituality is a part of Ihsan; we do good not because we want to be praised and looked up to by others. We do good because of Allah and believe Allah will reward us based on our good deeds. Because of this, we keep performing good acts regardless of whether other individuals recognise our behaviours".*

The participant further elaborated:

*P3: "Sometimes, when we do good deeds as required by our religion and perform our role as workers, we might not be recognised by others. For example, when I represent the staff union at the university. The employer might perceive me as the one who retaliates. It is also not a popular decision, but I continue fighting for the workers and representing the union because of my responsibility".*

Another participant agreed with this opinion and explained that ease of others' tasks at work was also a part of spirituality:

*P5: "For example, I try to make the payment and financial process easy for all staff, which is a part of my spirituality, to ease others when performing my tasks".*

From the excerpts, it was evident that participants unanimously agreed that spirituality and religion are related to one another, as spirituality is reflected in the Islamisation process, especially in a faith-based institution. The findings were supported by Victor and Treschuk (2020), who argued that the followers expressed spirituality via religious practices, religious rituals, and religious values.

**Weaknesses**

The present study identified participants' three weaknesses related to spirituality at the theoretical and practical levels.

***The theoretical aspects of spirituality***

Theoretically, participants opined that it was challenging to measure spirituality, and there was a lack of clarity between religion and spirituality.

*Lack of clarity between religion and spirituality*

The threat observed by the participants was the lack of clarity between religion (Islam) and spirituality. It is evident through the following excerpts:

*P1: "This is spiritual; this is Islam. How do you want to differentiate between the two?"*

The finding was consistent with previous studies that found both spirituality and religion were used interchangeably in the literature, although both concepts were reported to be different by researchers (Taliaferro, 2008). Researchers also suggested that it is misleading to use spirituality and religion unanimously (Lepherd, 2014).

*Measurement*

Another weakness of spirituality in terms of its theoretical aspect is the measurement of spirituality. Participants were unsure of the spirituality indicators and how to measure those indicators, as in the following excerpt.

*P7: "How to measure spirituality? It's hard to do it ".*

***The practical aspect of spirituality***

Practically, a low level of spirituality was suggested to hinder individuals' growth and success.

*Hinder growth and success*

One of the participants opined that low spirituality would negatively impact day-to-day activities. Specifically, individuals with low levels of spirituality would be cognitively and

emotionally affected. Therefore, they would be vulnerable to any attack from their opponents because they were following their passion, thus hindering their growth and success, as in the following excerpt:

> P3: *"If we have a weak mental condition and follow our desire solely, we will be the target of our enemies, and this will be a hindrance for us to succeed."*

Another participant highlighted that prioritising worldly matters would also affect individuals' growth in the following excerpt:

> P1: *"After all sorts of things that happened in life, the soul is more inclined toward worldly matter. So, these things make us a little stunted in certain ways".*

## Opportunities

According to the participants, the spirituality activities present some opportunities to be built upon in the university. The three potential opportunities identified by the participants can be categorised as theoretical and practical.

### *The theoretical aspect of spirituality*

Theoretically, spirituality provides a platform for institutional branding, especially in a faith-based institution.

#### Institutional branding

As an Islamic institution, the institution under study has an opportunity to be the ambassador of spirituality because its mission and vision were developed based on the Tawhidic principles, closely related to the concept of spirituality itself. This opportunity enabled this institution to form an institutional branding of spirituality, both locally and globally. A participant stressed this aspect in the following excerpt:

> P3: *"I find that many of us from this institution were appointed as imams in prayers or leaders in religious ceremonies. It is enough to show morality whenever people know we are a part of this institution. It is something to do with the institution's branding."*

### *The practical aspects of spirituality*

Practically, there is an opportunity to teach and learn spirituality through community services.

#### Community service

As spirituality can be taught and learnt through curricular and non-curricular activities, participants observed the need to improve and preserve Islamisation as part of spirituality. Apart from classroom learning, the way to enhance spirituality is through community service to both inside and outside the organisational communities through Islamisation activities, as suggested in the following excerpt:

> *P1:" I am more open to any activity that involves good things and spreading good to others ... that can enhance our spiritual and Islamic values".*

In short, the opportunity highlights that spirituality can be embedded in community service, particularly in nurturing leadership and engaging in good deeds.

*Islamisation programmes*

Participants were unanimous in the opportunity of supplementing spirituality through Islamisation programmes, as in the following excerpt:

> *P3:" Sometimes we need, we need a platform for us to measure and reflect on ourselves. Every day may be difficult. But we can have all sorts of daily mechanisms. For example, how many times do I go to the mosque today? Or today, how many pages have I read in the Quran? Sometimes we have to have other platforms of Islamisation programmes like usrah ... usually, usrah is that we are thoughtful, rebuke ourselves, and reveal our shortcomings."*

As a faith-based institution, numerous Islamisation programmes and activities were conducted for staff. However, other issues, such as readiness to change and the internalisation of Islam, should be considered to ensure the programmes' success. One participant opined that:

> *P1: "Sometimes we view the programmes as unimportant. We attended the programme just for CTD points, not to internalise the content. Therefore, we would not be able to go through the Islamisation process offered by the programme. That is why it is not successful for some employees. We employees must internalise the programme and value them because they are valuable".*

## Threats

Most participants were unanimous on the threats to spirituality. The high level of consensus was similar to the other findings in the focus group discussion (Fardy & Jeffs, 1994). Therefore, the following subsections discuss four threats to spirituality at theoretical and practical levels.

### *The theoretical aspect of spirituality*

*Nature of the spiritual enhancement programmes*

The nature and commitments to activities and programmes capable of enhancing spirituality are staggered and inconsistent among the university community members. Some Kulliyyah/Centre/Division/Institute/Office (K/C/D/I/O) provided a platform for *usrah*, and some did not. According to the participants, some K/C/D/I/O cancelled specific spiritual-based programmes and activities, such as *usrah*, which was no longer available, as in the following excerpt.

> *P3: Before this, we used to have usrah. But now, there is no more usrah. Usrah is a platform of self-assessment and self-improvement".*

Sometimes, many Islamisation activities were crammed into one day, resulting in shorter times to deliver talks and presentations. The arrangement of such programmes could be tiring and overwhelming for the participants compared to staggered activities.

> *P3: "My concern is, there is too much within a 1-day programme. There are too many talks to be digested."*

The nature of the programmes could be a possible reason for low participation in spirituality enhancement programmes. Participants observed that there were lesser staff joining the programmes and training.

> *P1: "In my early days, MSD conducted "Tazkirah Perdana" once a month. Many staff attended the session. However, subsequently, the attendees reduced from time to time."*

Participants also voiced out the structure of the programme in which they were looking forward to hands-on programmes, not only the theoretical parts where they have to listen to the talks. According to the participants:

> *P7: "But I think we can still improve the programmes in terms of their modules. Maybe we can add other related activities, more hands-on activities which relate to the concept of Ibadah Camp".*

> *P3: "Previously, the Ibadah Camp was like an Ibadah Camp. There was once when we camped at Ulu Yam. In the context of an organisation, Islamisation programmes are essential".*

### The practical aspects of spirituality

The participants highlighted the three institutional threats that may hinder the sustainability of spirituality of the organisation as follows:

#### *Financial constraints*

Participants were unanimous on the inherent threats from the university, specifically in terms of financial constraints. The lack of funding affects the spirituality enhancement programmes conducted in the institution.

> *P1: "As the university has been around for almost 40 years, the budget provided by the ministry is slowly cut and reduced. Everyone is worried about how to organise spiritual and Islamisation programmes. There's not enough money."*

#### *Generational gap*

Participants generally perceived that the university was getting more lenient in enforcing rules and regulations. This leniency was observed across all facets. The dichotomy between values between the elderly and younger generation of employees in the university became a significant threat observed by the participants. While the elderly staff struggled to

catch up, the younger generation lacked the requisite values to uphold the institution's mission and vision. As a result, the outsiders criticised the university for poorly upholding its values. One participant mentioned it in the following excerpt:

> *P1: "But how do we maintain the good image of this institution? The generational gap is real. Look at the new generation concerning the institutional values (issue on covering the aurah and leniency in enforcing rules and regulations). The university's top management should tackle this issue".*

### *Organisational change*

Other threats include the introduction of new initiatives and programmes perceived as not spiritual and sustainable due to organisational change. They expressed concerns about whether the flagship will sustain when the upper management changes. Their views on this issue are as follows:

> *P1: "My only personal concern is when I listen to this program, is it just a program? For example, will this programme sustain when Tan Sri is no longer the rector? Sustainable … I want to see that, don't do it later tomorrow when there is no such position. Then we will tapau and close the edges. At least there is a sign. At least there is a sign."*

> *P1: "If it is only the garden (Kebun), I'm sorry to say this garden, I think one day it will die, because as he (referring to another FGD participant) said, the older we get, the weaker we are, the more people will enter, when other people join, his appraisal of what people did at that time, will be different. What is this thing? Is this thing worth it?*

## CONCLUSION

The present study thematically analysed strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities of spirituality among a faith-based higher learning institution's Muslim support staff at the theoretical and practical levels. These crucial findings could serve as bases for developing interventions to nurture the development of spirituality among support staff in such institutions.

Like most research, the present study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the present study focuses only on support staff. Hence, the findings should not be generalised to other staff groups, such as academic staff or academic administrators. Secondly, all participants were Muslims. Therefore, the SWOT analysis of spirituality might be specific to Islam and should not be generalised to other religious groups which might view spirituality differently. Based on the limitations, future research was suggested to focus on other staff groups in higher learning institutions.

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