

# DILEMMAS OF UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRITUALITY CONCEPT FROM ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the confusion attributed to conceptualization of spirituality, at both historical and ideological stance, and it therefore proposes an Islamic perspective to understanding with a definition of the phenomenon within a sociocultural context. A qualitative design of discourse analytical approach was applied to illuminate the perceived epistemology controversy over the phenomenal nature of spirituality. The analysis of available literature on spirituality indicates that the concept is usually defined by scholars/authors based on their historical socio-cultural ideologies or beliefs; and these all show that definition of spirituality either takes a religious or non-religious context. However, Islamic perspective to this debate is that spirituality could only be rightly defined if its conceptualization is grounded in religious norms, traditions and beliefs. Thus, this paper finds that any definition of spirituality from Islamic perspective should depict factual knowledge of the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. Though the authors of this paper would be the first to apply a general discourse analysis to review and provide a simple and concise arguments on the controversy surrounding conceptualization of spirituality, yet a critical analysis of extant literature could give a comprehensive insight to the identified issues in the study.*

**Keywords:** *Conceptualization, Context, Dilemma, Islamic Spirituality, Understanding.*

## Introduction

Since time immemorial, researchers have expressed opinions about the dilemma surrounding the understanding and definition of spirituality (Dhiman, 2017; Greenstreet, 1999; Speck, 2005). Yet, discussions on the concept 'spirituality' has not been much debated until in recent times; where it has attracted focus from various quarters (Watts, 2017). The available literature indicates that focus on the concept cuts across divergent ideological, philosophical, theoretical, and cultural stance (Grant & McGhee, 2012). In this manner, the position on spirituality could be categorized in terms of belief, and this suggests that discussions on spirituality would broadly fit into either of two main perspectives: religious or non-religious background (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002). Just like other disciplines, many scholars/authors of management sciences, both academics and professionals alike have stressed the importance of understanding and application of spirituality based on their religious or non-religious conviction (Bagheshahi, Kargar, Manshadi, & Kypadkhoo, 2014). In addition, spirituality is strongly believed to have potentials for management as well as organizational growth and stability as well as other components of organizations (King & Koenig, 2009). To that end, Marques (2008) explains that spirituality is a progressive catalyst to drive managers and subordinates towards achievement of managerial and organizational corporate goals and objectives. Logically, it is important that in every organization stakeholders should have better understanding of spirituality, especially managers of organizations who are saddled with the responsibilities of running the day-to-day operations of organizations; because this has potent to guide stakeholders to display behavioural standards for better results (Ishola & Nwogwugwu, 2012; Kazmi, 2004).

Following the growing trend of the concept, there is a need to consolidate the tide of spirituality for better performance in organizations, as different scholars/authors have undertaken studies to contribute to theory and practice of spirituality (Gamble & Beer, 2015). Some of such scholars/authors have come up with measurement scales (e.g., Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging, 1999; Ghorbani *et al.*, 2014; Underwood & Teresi, 2002), while others have propounded theories to explain the concept 'spirituality' and its usefulness in organizational science and management, and in other disciplines (e.g., Fry, 2003; MacDonald *et al.*, 2015; Oxhandler, 2017; Piedmont, 2007). Hence, various concepts of interest in relation to spirituality now avail researchers in their studies. Among notable ones are: Grant and McGhee (2012) who adopted concepts of 'soul and spirit at work'; Usman and Danish (2010) preferred 'spiritual consciousness'; and, Wibawa *et al.* (2014) used 'spiritual leadership and management', among several others.

Moreover, it is on record that scholars/authors and professionals have made efforts towards evolving theoretical models to explain efficacy of spirituality over performance at formal and informal sectors; especially with efforts to improve the public sector (Law, 1993). Once more, available literature on spirituality indicate that scholars/authors have attempted to come up with conceptual contributions to the understanding of spirituality (Beringer, 2000; Carroll, 2010). Many more of such scholars/authors went further to establish empirical justifications for spirituality to address various challenges in human endeavours (Adawiyah &

Pramuka, 2017). And this could be seen in the usage of spirituality as a construct for various research purposes in that direction.

In spite of the foregoing, hosts of literature on ‘spirituality’ still shows that the phenomenon is still confronted with conceptual questions (Ku *et al.*, 2017; Vachon *et al.*, 2009). Anyway, Da Silva and Pereira (2017) observe that variety of definitions about the concept makes it difficult to really get to understand its actual meaning. In this regard, one reason for the definitional issues could be that because different scholars/authors define ‘spirituality’ to suit their own understanding or/and conviction (Adams, 2017). Anyway, potent of spirituality may likely dwindle due to nebulous characterizations scholars/authors provide for its definition (MacDonald *et al.*, 2015). Among other reasons could be that because cultural background or cultural ideology of every author plays prominent roles in his/her intellectual efforts to conceptualise spirituality, and this may determine the perspective from which he/she defines the concept (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2000).

### **Dilemmas in Understanding of Spirituality**

Etymology of spirituality dates back to around the fourteenth (14<sup>th</sup>) century, when the word was first used between 1375 and 1425 to mean “incorporeal or immaterial” (Stein, 1984). Afterwards, spirituality has been used to depict traditional belief about connection of man “to a soul or a nonmaterial aspect of man” among the people of native America (Leon-Portilla, 1980, p.4). More so, Crisp (2017) indicates that spirituality has attracted several meanings and definitions from other parts of the globe. At the same time, Melville-Wiseman (2017) observes that definition and application of spirituality vary between Associations of Social Workers in America and the UK. Furthermore, the context and consideration for spirituality vary between Korea and Australia. In the former, people slightly conceptualize or/and apply spirituality from religious context, while people in the latter greatly give consideration to religion in their conceptualization or/and application of spirituality (Crisp, 2017). Following these dichotomies, misunderstanding of spirituality as a phenomenon or concept has become more tensed in the contemporary scientific literature written in English language (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005), where its application devoid a consensus due to over hundred definitions among authors (Worthington & Sandage, 2016). Notwithstanding, Mahadevan (2013) maintains that spirituality has not seize to “shape human life from time immemorial” in spite that some people keep missing its inherent ethical values (p.91).

Another dilemma regarding the understanding of spirituality could be observed from revolution towards embracing non-faith spirituality, especially in the Western world where a lot of people now give priority to what they termed ‘*spiritual tradition*’ over religion or faith practices (Hodge, 2009). This trend, Mario Beauregard notes, has continued to grow different sects of followership, though few in number, whom are usually replete with “speculations, fears, and some pretty wild guesses – but most of all, a compelling curiosity, a desire to investigate” without treading the path of religious faiths (Beauregard & O’Leary, 2007, p.xiv). To whatever extent, many people from the West and East believe that spirituality is more of a liberal phenomenon than religion, and that religion is more rigid towards application of divine rules;

which to them are inflexible (Crisp, 2008). This becomes more confusing when same set of people still substitute spirituality and religion for each other when they write or talk about transcendental experience (Ammerman, 2013; Hodge, 2015).

From different points of view, confusion could arise in the understanding of spirituality as Gisela H. Kreglinger portrays spirituality in her book. Her recent publication '*The Spirituality of Wine*' would readily confuse anyone who does not have belief in the prophet-hood of Jesus Christ (who is known as *Isah – Ruhu Allah* by Muslims; as noble Prophet of Allah). In what seems like an accounts of an ethnographic study about Christian spirituality "with various kinds of dualisms ... the spiritual and the material are profoundly intertwined" (Kreglinger, 2016, p.2). The foregoing notions are not different from facts established by various scholars/authors before now; but the confusion is that "Gisela Kreglinger's new book on wine is a statistical outlier: [as] the author pairs wine with spirituality" (Elzinger, 2017, p.109). Kreglinger (2016) expresses that Christian spirituality cannot be devoid of historical narratives of wine, as "Christian understanding of the spirituality of wine does not lift [Christians] out of the natural world. Rather, it calls [Christians] to trust that God wants to heal [their] relationship with creation and the profound gifts that [they] receive from it, including wine" (pp.3-4).

Such narratives of Kreglinger (2016) about relating spirituality to wine is somehow close to "a myriad of curious and subjective reflections on the appreciation of wine, and ... to somehow tie this appreciation to the ideas and values of a vaguely Christian (but in parts also quasi-pagan) spirituality" (Todd, 2017, p.254). Nevertheless, this paper respects the academic prowess of Gisela H. Kreglinger; but with caution, because the author's narratives piece in her "book presents an understanding of Christian spirituality that sees all spiritual dimensions of our loves and our world as deeply and thoroughly embedded and engaged in material things" (Kreglinger, 2016, p.2). Thus, "narratives can be harmful as well as helpful" (Culliford, 2017, p.79).

In a similar vein, confusion about the meaning and understanding of spirituality could be noticed across various disciplines, where various efforts by different scholars to provide a comprehensive or/and universal definition as "solution creates more problems than it solves" (Schneiders, 1989, p.678). Right from time immemorial, scholars have continued to write or/and teach subjects on spirituality from their own academic or professional background, and this has continued to dilate ambiguity of meaning regarding the concept (Whittington, 2017). To this end, Anderson-Nathe, Gringer, and Wahab (2013) explain that the different views of scholars/authors are complex to the extent that the contradictions in the spirituality meanings and definitions provide by them somewhat impact and determine how adherents of different religions see themselves. Consequently, efforts are made recently "to explore how spirituality is conceived in and across cultures, and how more connections between different disciplines can be made to advance understanding in academia and professional practice" (Adams, 2017, p.1).

### **Contradictions in Spirituality Definitions**

Generally, spirituality as a concept has undergone different forms in terms of conceptualizations, interpretations, measurements, and applications. The concept is widely applied across several disciplines, and sometimes within interests ranging from ordinary use, to academic disciplines,

and to professional callings (Adams, 2017; Gamble & Beer, 2015). It may not be an over statement to say that data overload could arise, if a total and comprehensive review is to be undertaken to determine the meaning of spirituality from available literature on the concept at present time. In whatever way, it would be necessary to at least mention some notable literature on the concept – with focus on ideological or theoretical perspectives they follow. Scholars/authors define spirituality either in the context of religion, or on the other way round (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002; Zinnbauer *et al.*, 1997). This may be the reason why abundant literature on the spirituality could be categorically grouped into two.

At various times some scholars/authors suggest that any definition of spirituality should be made within the context of religion (Ammerman 2013; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014; Kimball, Cook, Boyatzis and Leonard, 2016; Negru, Subțirică & Oprea, 2011). Actually, some scholars/authors occasionally substitute spirituality for religiosity (e.g., Ammerman, 2013; Hodge, 2017). Against that backdrop, others believe that spirituality should be entirely separated from religiosity, religiousness or religion. Hence, they argue that a delineated effort should be made to provide a definition of spirituality far away from religiosity, religiousness or religion. Amongst scholars/authors that critique defining spirituality in the context of religiosity, religiousness or religion, includes: Bhatia and Arora (2017), Doyle (1992), Mitroff and Denton (1999), and Zinnbauer and Pargament (2000).

Part of the contradictions observed in the process of defining spirituality is the ‘belief aspect’; as several scholars/authors who provide definitions for spirituality tend to have belief in one religion or the other, while some others do not have belief in any religion at all (Crisp, 2017; Shaw, 2017). Some scholars/authors believe that spirituality is a concept that can only be understood if it is defined within the context of ‘faith in God – Allah’, while some others disagree with this notion; and subsequently argue that spirituality could be understood without typifying its definition in the context of ‘faith in God’ (Watts, 2017). One of those Scholars/authors that believe spirituality would be well conceptualized in the context of ‘faith in God’ is Hodge (2017). On the contrary, humanists/naturalists believe that if at all that spirituality exists, its definition should be made outside a ‘faith context’ (MacDonald *et al.*, 2015). It may be true that this category of people (i.e., humanists/naturalists) strongly object to traditional beliefs in spirituality. Consequentially, this paper posits that ‘the humanists/naturalists sometimes get confused whenever they go about defining ‘*what*’ (spirituality) they claim does not exist’.

Just as confusion could be observed on the part of humanist’s/naturalists’ efforts to define or to debunk the concept of spirituality, it is also evident that confusion features in various definitions provided by adherents or apologists of different religions when it comes to defining the concept (Anderson-Nathe *et al.*, 2013; Crisp, 2017). The confusion generated among the latter group stems from different religious creeds, traditions, or practices they uphold (Nasr, 2013). Different adherents or apologists of religion usually speak and write based on their understanding and loyalty to their denominational beliefs, faiths, and convictions, which equally determine their definitions for spirituality (Crisp, 2017; Gardner, 2011, 2017). To that effect, some adherents or apologists of religion define spirituality to only reflect basic human-to-human relationships, while others define spirituality to incorporate human-to-human relationships and human-to-God relationships (transcendental) (Zinnbauer *et al.*, 1999).

Spirituality in the light of religion is defined by Pargament *et al.* (2013) as “the search for sacred” (p.14) where people strive to connect to God as a result of their belief and faith that a connection with God would put them at an advantage to seek the Almighty Allah’s favours. Likewise, opinion of Fetzer Institute (1999) about definition of spirituality is in “a general connection with some transcendent force or being, and the importance of that connection in daily life” (p.75). In their own view, Pradhan *et al.* (2017) define spirituality “as the valuing of the non-material or transcendental aspects of life” (p.44) that are usually preached by all monotheistic religions. Also, Mitroff and Denton (1999) define spirituality to mean a fundamental sensation of having compassion for oneself and others; with or without a recourse to religion to achieve this (Koenig *et al.*, 2001). Guillory (2000) too suggests that spirituality is naturally a humanistic value that awaits religion to consolidate. Hence, Panzini *et al.* (2017) argue that “spirituality involves questions about the meaning of life and meaning to live, not limited to types of beliefs or practices” (p.264); and all these make a universal definition of spirituality more difficult (Holmberg *et al.*, 2017).

### **Islamic Spirituality**

Recent library and internet search shows that few attempts have been made to specifically define spirituality from Islamic perspective. In that connection, Ewert Cousins notes that “no attempt was made to arrive at a common definition of spirituality that would be accepted by all in precisely the same way” (Nasr, 2013, p.xiv). This may be because evolving “a universally acceptable definition of spirituality is not an easy task” (Leon-Portilla, 1980, p.4). However, Nasr (2013) is apt to indicate that Islamic spirituality simply means qualities of piety that true Muslims possess, which indicate an obedience to the ‘Commandments of the Almighty Allah’ – in their intentions, words, and actions. He explains that Islamic spirituality is synonymous with *Al-Tawhid* – “The principle of Unity [that] lies at the heart of the Islamic message” (Nasr, 2013, p.xv). Besides, it is a general knowledge among Muslims that sources of Islamic message are the divine revelation of Allah (i.e., the Holy Qur’an), as well as the teachings and deeds (*Sunnah*) of the noble Prophet Muhammad [Peace be upon Him (PBUH)].

Collections from classical texts has identified Islamic spirituality with mystical power attained through consistent and devoted *dhikr* (Friedlander, 1992). *Dhikr* is Arabic word that simply means “The remembrance of God” (Muhaiyaddeen, 1999, p.1). To Ibn Khaldun, Islamic spirituality would mean pious nature of a person with considerate attitudes to accord other people preference over oneself; in expectation that the preferential gestures would meet Allah’s reward in the world and hereafter (Katsifacas, 2007). In another perspective, Ibn al-Arabi portrays Islamic spirituality as a situation whereby people “have passed beyond the veils that stand between them and their Lord and stand in His Presence” (Chittick, 2016, p.3).

Similarly, Mohsen (2007) defines Islamic spirituality to mean an awareness and the belief that the Almighty Allah exists, despite that someone cannot see Him physically. Again, Mohsen (2007) expresses that Islamic spirituality could in like manner mean a transcendental relationship between the Creator – Allah, and His steadfast and obedient creatures. In their study to develop a multidimensional measure of Islamic spirituality (MMS), Dasti and Sitwat (2014) consider Islamic spirituality to mean “an implicit construct which can be measured crudely through its manifestations and expressions which ... include self-discipline, God consciousness (feeling of

connectedness with Allah), knowledge (quest and search for divinity), beliefs, morality, responsibilities and obligations enjoined on every Muslim, and Islamic practices” (p.51).

Recently, some Muslim scholars/authors observe from Islamic perspective that “[s]pirituality encompasses all aspects of being human, and [it] is a means of experiencing life” (Elias *et al.*, 2017, p.44). Under this circumstances, caution should be put into understanding the definition provide by Elias *et al.* (2017), because if its contents are taken loosely without placing in the proper context, this could result in excessive religious ritual practices, or an extremism towards mundane activities; as observed among some “certain sects such as *hurūfīs* [that] have in fact gone extreme in their emphasis upon the esoteric significance of letters, and thereby left the pale of Islamic orthodoxy” (Nasr, 1987a., p.36). In essence, AlTareb (1996) suggests that taking a “middle path” would go a long way to guide against confusion in the definition of spirituality that may lead to excessive religious practices or extremism (p.29).

Despite the nebulous nature of the definitions of spirituality, understanding the phenomenon from Islamic perspective would better position its definition, because “[w]hen this term is employed [within Islamic context], there is always evoked sense of the presence of the *barakah*, or that grace which flows in the vein of the universe and within the life of man to the extent that he dedicates himself to God” (Nasr, 1987b, p.xvii). For this reason, this paper opines that any definition of Islamic spirituality should be within the purview of Holy Qur’an and *Sunnah* of the noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Brohi, 2013). “In a profound sense, Islamic spirituality is nothing other than the realization of *tawhid* upon the life, actions, art, and thought of Muslims” (Nasr, 1987b, xvi).

## Conclusion

It is a general knowledge that confusions emanating from complexity in the definitions of social phenomenon like spirituality would deepen controversies over its application/usage, dimensions, and measurement. Consequently, universal definition of the concepts/phenomena becomes plausible, if not impossible. This is the more reason why various scholars/authors usually give considerations to ideological stance of their academic or professional background towards conceptual definition of social phenomena. In the context of Islamic management, however, scholars/authors should not defer in this direction. Any good attempt to define spirituality from Islamic perspective, or better still – Islamic spirituality, should put into consideration Nasr’s (1987, 2013) arguments for a *Tawhidic* context, which would be shaped with Islamic culture and Islamic epistemology.

It is in consideration of the foregoing that this paper proposes a conceptual paradigm shift to the definition of Islamic spirituality, or spirituality from Islamic perspective that would integrate core norms, values, and traditions of Islam. Hence, a phenomenon like ‘Islamic spiritual culture’ is recommended for exploration through a qualitative study of phenomenology grounded theory; for scholars/authors to inductively inquire for an emergent theory that is embedded in qualitative data. Thus, any new definition, and subsequent definitions of Islamic spiritual or spirituality from Islamic perspective afterwards should have basis in the Holy Qur’an and *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him).

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