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Workplace Spirituality As Lived Experience: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study Of Meaning, Well-Being, And Employee Performance

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Abstract

This study examines workplace spirituality as a lived experience among employees in a faith-based higher education institution in Indonesia. The article addresses a methodological imbalance in workplace spirituality research, in which quantitative studies have repeatedly linked spirituality to engagement, well-being, commitment, and performance, while fewer studies explain how employees experience these links in morally demanding work situations. The study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Twelve participants, consisting of five lecturers, four administrative staff members, and three academic leaders, participated in semi-structured video-recorded interviews. The interviews used a mix of local dialects and conversational Indonesian. The research team transcribed the recordings, semantically translated the accounts into standard Indonesian, and translated selected quotations into English while preserving experiential meaning. Five superordinate themes emerged: spirituality as moral orientation beyond ritual formalism; meaningful presence in the lives of others; transcendent reframing under pressure; relational care as a condition of spiritual well-being; and responsible performance under a spirituality-practice gap. Participants experienced spirituality not as a generic positive attitude but as moral accountability that shaped teaching, service, data accuracy, financial honesty, leadership

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fairness, and resistance to unethical organizational demands. The study develops the concept of a spirituality-practice gap to explain why spiritual language strengthens performance only when institutions embody it through fair, credible, and humane work systems. The article contributes an idiographic account from Indonesian faith-based higher education and extends workplace spirituality theory beyond variable-based models.

Keywords: workplace spirituality; interpretative phenomenological analysis; lived experience; meaningful work; employee well-being; employee performance; faith-based higher education; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Workplace spirituality has developed from a marginal topic in organizational studies into a serious conversation about meaning, human dignity, ethical conduct, and sustainable performance. The concept does not simply describe religious expression inside formal workplaces. It captures how employees connect daily tasks with personal values, a sense of calling, community, moral accountability, and an orientation to something larger than instrumental exchange (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Karakas, 2010). Recent reviews confirm that the field continues to expand across management, psychology, religion, and higher education, especially through studies linking spirituality with well-being, engagement, commitment, retention, and performance (Barik & Nayak, 2024; Munjal, 2024; Syahir et al., 2025; Vasconcelos, 2023).

This expansion has produced useful empirical evidence, but it has also created a methodological imbalance. Many studies ask whether workplace spirituality predicts desirable employee outcomes. Fewer studies ask how workers actually experience spirituality when they encounter pressure, ethical ambiguity, weak leadership, unfair work systems, or conflicting organizational values. That difference matters. If researchers treat spirituality as a stable predictor, they risk portraying it as a managerial resource that organizations can mobilize for performance without confronting the moral and relational conditions that make spirituality credible in the first place.

The problem becomes sharper in higher education. Universities increasingly operate under performance regimes that emphasize publication output, accreditation evidence, rankings, employability, audit compliance, and financial discipline. In faith-based institutions, those pressures coexist with explicit spiritual claims about service,

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vocation, integrity, care, sacrifice, and moral formation. Employees, therefore, negotiate two logics at once. They respond to managerial demands while also evaluating whether the institution embodies its professed spiritual values in workload, remuneration, leadership behavior, student service, gender care, data integrity, and decision-making.

Faith-based higher education in Indonesia offers a demanding context for studying this tension. Spiritual language often appears in institutional identity, rituals, codes of ethics, and service narratives. At the same time, Indonesian higher education faces strong accountability pressures from accreditation, publication targets, digital reporting systems, and resource constraints. Recent Indonesian research has shown that workplace spirituality relates to lecturer engagement, professional commitment, person-organization fit, and retention (Margaretha et al., 2021, 2026). Yet those studies leave open a deeper question: how do employees make sense of spirituality when spiritual values meet daily constraints, ethical dilemmas, and performance demands?

This article addresses that question through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Rather than treating workplace spirituality as an independent variable, the study examines spirituality as lived experience. It asks how employees interpret spirituality in relation to meaning, well-being, and performance. The study pays close attention to concrete episodes: a lecturer who resists plagiarism under social pressure, an administrative officer who safeguards financial accuracy, an IT staff member who protects academic data, and a leader who mediates conflict through fairness rather than authority alone.

The guiding research question is: How do employees experience and interpret workplace spirituality in relation to meaning, well-being, and employee performance? Three supporting questions sharpen the inquiry: how do employees distinguish spiritual values from ritual formalism, how do they use spirituality to interpret pressure and sustain well-being, and how do they connect spirituality with responsible performance amid gaps between institutional rhetoric and practice?

The article contributes to workplace spirituality research in three ways. First, it reframes spirituality as lived moral accountability rather than a stable psychological resource. Second, it explains how spirituality supports well-being through meaning reconstruction, relational care, and inner calm, while also showing that spirituality cannot compensate for structural unfairness. Third, it develops the concept of a spirituality-practice gap to describe the break between proclaimed spiritual values and experienced organizational practices. This concept gives the study a critical edge by preventing spirituality from becoming a soft vocabulary for organizational exploitation.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace spirituality scholarship began by challenging the narrow view that employees enter organizations only as economic actors. Mitroff and Denton (1999) argued that many employees seek meaning, authenticity, and value alignment at work even when formal management language avoids spiritual vocabulary. Ashmos and Duchon (2000) then conceptualized workplace spirituality through inner life, meaningful work, and community. Milliman et al. (2003) operationalized the construct through meaningful work, sense of community, and alignment with organizational values. These early contributions established the core vocabulary that still shapes the field.

Subsequent studies connected spirituality to desirable work outcomes. Karakas (2010) reviewed the links between spirituality and performance in terms of well-being, meaning, and interconnectedness. Saks (2011) connected spirituality with employee engagement, while Petchsawang and McLean (2017) linked workplace spirituality, mindfulness, and work engagement. More recent studies have extended this logic to mental well-being, constructive deviance, innovative work behavior, citizenship behavior, and employee performance (Garg, 2017; Garg et al., 2022; Garg & Saini, 2023; Jena, 2022; Jnaneswar & Sulphey, 2023).

The well-being literature has become especially important. Syahir et al. (2025) reviewed global evidence and showed that religious and spiritual workplace environments can shape employee psychological and professional experiences. This synthesis strengthens the case for workplace spirituality, yet it also confirms a gap: studies often document associations between spirituality and well-being without explaining the experiential texture of those associations. Employees do not simply receive spirituality as a contextual input. They interpret it, test it against organizational practice, and decide whether it still carries moral credibility.

Higher education research adds another layer. Lecturers and university staff work in mission-driven institutions, but they also face publish-or-perish pressures, accreditation routines, administrative reporting, student service demands, and employment precarity. Margaretha et al. (2021) found that workplace spirituality related strongly to Indonesian lecturers' engagement, with professional commitment serving as a mediator. Margaretha et al. (2026) later linked workplace spirituality and person-organization fit to faculty engagement and retention. These studies matter because they locate the construct inside Indonesian universities. Nevertheless, they remain primarily variable-based. They cannot explain what employees mean when they describe spirituality as calling, service, conscience, or moral courage.

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A critical strand of the literature warns against romanticizing spirituality. Ashforth and Pratt (2003) argued that institutionalized spirituality can become paradoxical when organizations formalize inner life and convert spiritual language into a form of managerial control. Sheep (2006) also raised ethical concerns about workplace spirituality when organizations fail to protect the whole person. These warnings remain highly relevant. Spirituality can deepen meaning, but it can also mask unequal power, normalize sacrifice, or ask employees to endure unfair systems in the name of vocation.

Person-organization fit theory helps clarify why the gap between values and practice matters. When employees perceive congruence between personal and organizational values, they often experience stronger attachment and engagement (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). Yet value congruence depends on credible action. Employees do not evaluate spiritual values by reading mission statements alone. They evaluate whether leaders enact those values in promotion, pay, workload, gender-sensitive support, data integrity, and everyday respect. Workplace spirituality, therefore, needs a theory of practice, not only a theory of attitude.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis offers a suitable route for developing that theory. IPA examines how people make sense of significant experiences in their personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). It begins with idiographic attention to each participant before moving toward cross-case patterns. Nizza et al. (2021) argue that high-quality IPA shows close analytic engagement with participants' experiential claims, transparent interpretation, attention to convergence and divergence, and a coherent narrative. This study uses IPA because spirituality at work involves interpretation, moral tension, emotion, memory, language, and embodied workplace experience.

METHOD

Research design and setting

The study used a qualitative design guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA aligned with the research aim because the study sought to understand how employees experience and interpret workplace spirituality in relation to meaning, well-being, and performance. The design did not aim to generalize statistically. It sought idiographic depth and analytical transferability through rich accounts of a focused phenomenon.

The study took place in a faith-based higher education institution in Indonesia. The institutional context matters because spiritual values explicitly shape organizational

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language, rituals, expectations, and identity. At the same time, participants worked under ordinary higher education pressures: publication targets, accreditation requirements, student service demands, administrative reporting, digital systems, and limited resources. This combination made the setting analytically useful for examining how spiritual values operate under managerial pressure.

Participants and sampling

Twelve participants were selected purposively. The final corpus included five lecturers, four administrative staff members, and three academic leaders. The number of participants reflected the idiographic commitment of IPA and the information power of a focused sample (Malterud et al., 2016). All participants had at least two years of experience in the institution and direct involvement in academic, administrative, or leadership work. The sample included different roles so that the study could compare how spirituality appeared in teaching, student service, data handling, financial administration, and leadership decisions, while retaining a single institutional context.

Table 1. Participant profile

Code	Role category	Age	Tenure	Role description
DSN-01	Lecturer	48	14 years	Senior lecturer, social sciences
DSN-02	Lecturer	34	5 years	Early-career lecturer, exact sciences
DSN-03	Lecturer	41	9 years	Mid-career lecturer, humanities
DSN-04	Lecturer	53	21 years	Senior lecturer, economics and business
DSN-05	Lecturer	39	7 years	Lecturer, law and religious law
TND-01	Administrative staff	45	12 years	Academic and student affairs staff
TND-02	Administrative staff	36	6 years	Faculty finance staff
TND-03	Administrative staff	41	10 years	IT and university database staff
TND-04	Administrative staff	32	4 years	Student service and front-office staff
PIM-01	Academic leader	50	18 years	Program or faculty-level leader

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Code	Role category	Age	Tenure	Role description
PIM-02	Academic leader	44	11 years	Academic administration leader
PIM-03	Academic leader	55	23 years	Senior institutional leader

Data collection, transcription, and semantic translation

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview guide encouraged participants to narrate concrete episodes rather than provide abstract definitions. Questions explored the meaning of spirituality at work, meaningful work experiences, pressure and coping, workplace relationships, value alignment, well-being, responsible performance, and tensions between institutional values and daily practice.

The interviews were conducted in mixed languages, predominantly local dialects and conversational Indonesian. Participants used local idioms, religious expressions, and everyday workplace vocabulary to describe moral pressure, fatigue, service, calling, inner calm, and institutional contradiction. All interviews were video-recorded with consent. The recordings were transcribed using video-to-text, then semantically translated and adapted into standard Indonesian. This adaptation clarified dialectal expressions without changing the substantive meaning of participants' accounts. Selected quotations were translated into English for publication. The research team checked the cleaned transcripts against the recordings and retained an audit trail consisting of video files, video-to-text outputs, cleaned Indonesian transcripts, analytic memos, and translated quotations.

This translation procedure matters for IPA because meaning does not sit only in lexical equivalence. Participants often expressed spirituality through culturally loaded terms such as calling, sincerity, service, sufficientness, inner burden, and accountability before God. The analysis, therefore, treated translation as an interpretive act. It preserved experiential meaning, emotional tone, and social context rather than mechanically converting every utterance word for word.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

The analysis followed the main stages of IPA. First, each transcript received an idiographic reading to identify experiential, linguistic, and conceptual notes. Second, the researcher developed emergent themes for each participant while preserving the participant's role and context. Third, related themes were clustered within each case. Fourth, the researcher compared cases to identify convergence, divergence, and role-specific meanings. Fifth, the analysis developed superordinate themes that captured the

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shared experiential structure of workplace spirituality without erasing differences between lecturers, administrative staff, and leaders.

Trustworthiness rested on five practices. First, the study retained an audit trail from video recording to translated quotation. Second, the analysis preserved idiographic detail before moving to cross-case interpretation. Third, the researcher actively sought tensions, contradictions, and negative cases, particularly accounts in which spiritual language became organizational rhetoric rather than lived practice. Fourth, the manuscript uses participant codes and role descriptions to support transferability without exposing personal identities. Fifth, the discussion links claims to participant accounts and the existing literature, enabling readers to assess the interpretive movement from data to argument.

Table 2. IPA analytic procedure and audit trail

IPA stage	Analytic action	Output
Idiographic immersion	Read each cleaned transcript repeatedly while retaining role context and narrative sequence.	Case-level experiential notes
Exploratory noting	Marked descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual meanings, including moral language, affective expressions, and references to institutional practice.	Initial analytic memos
Emergent themes	Converted notes into concise theme labels that stayed close to the participant's meaning.	Participant-level theme lists
Within-case clustering	Grouped related emergent themes into coherent structures for each participant.	Case summaries
Cross-case analysis	Compared themes across lecturers, administrative staff, and leaders while noting convergence and divergence.	Superordinate themes
Interpretive synthesis	Integrated themes into a model of spirituality as lived moral accountability under institutional pressure.	Figure 1 and discussion claims

Findings

The findings show that participants did not experience workplace spirituality as a generic positive feeling. They treated it as a demanding moral orientation that shaped

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how they interpreted students, documents, data, money, leadership decisions, and institutional contradictions. Five superordinate themes captured this structure: spirituality as moral orientation beyond ritual formalism; meaningful presence in the lives of others; transcendent reframing under pressure; relational care as a condition of spiritual well-being; and responsible performance under a spirituality-practice gap.

Figure 1 summarizes the interpretive model. The model does not present a linear causal chain. It shows how employees moved from a moral orientation to a meaningful presence, reframed pressure through a transcendent purpose, relied on relational care for well-being, and translated spirituality into responsible performance. The model also shows that a spirituality-practice gap can interrupt this process when institutional practice contradicts spiritual language.

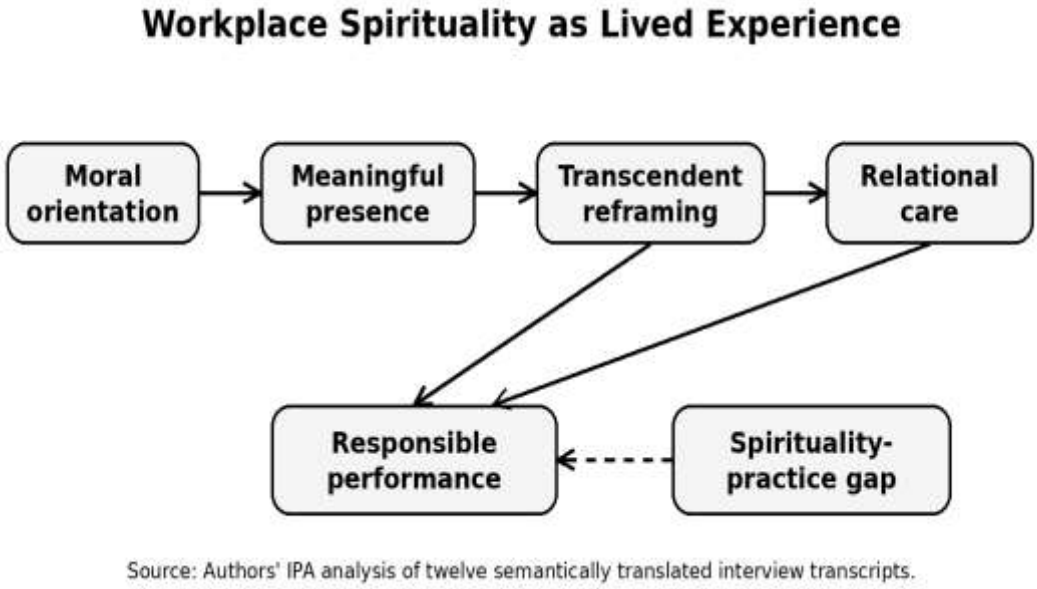


Figure 1. Interpretive model of workplace spirituality as lived experience

Theme 1. Spirituality as moral orientation beyond ritual formalism

Participants consistently separated workplace spirituality from scheduled rituals, symbols, and institutional slogans. They did not reject religion. They rejected reducing spirituality to a ceremony without moral consequence. Lecturers described spirituality as an inner orientation that disciplines teaching, mentoring, assessment, and research

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integrity. Administrative staff described it as honesty in documents, finance, data, and student service. Leaders described it as accountability in decisions that affect people.

This theme moves spirituality inside work practice. Participants did not ask whether the organization held prayer activities or displayed religious statements. They asked whether spiritual values shaped action when no one watched. DSN-01 described spirituality as something that moved through academic activity and demanded intellectual honesty beyond bureaucratic credit points. TND-02 connected spirituality to a clean conscience in financial reporting. DSN-05 linked spirituality to objective grading under pressure from a structural official.

The idiographic accounts show that spirituality became credible when participants faced ethical pressure. DSN-01 rejected plagiarism in a politically sensitive thesis. DSN-03 refused to approve an article suspected of fabricated data. TND-03 refused an illegal request to alter alumni graduation status in a university database. These accounts show spirituality as ethical courage rather than emotional comfort alone.

> *"For me, spirituality at work is not just the Monday ritual. It flows into every academic activity and demands intellectual honesty beyond bureaucratic credit points. (DSN-01)"*
>
> *"Spirituality requires me to keep my conscience clean from every form of budget manipulation. (TND-02)"*
>
> *"Spiritual values forced me to reject the request to manipulate the grade, even though the consequence hurt my own internal research approval. (DSN-05)"*

Theme 2. Meaningful presence in the lives of others

Participants found meaning in episodes in which their work altered another person's trajectory. Lecturers spoke about students who nearly dropped out, experienced financial crisis, struggled with cultural adjustment, or faced psychological distress. Administrative staff described students who nearly lost access to examinations or academic registration due to document and system failures. Leaders described conflict mediation and policies for vulnerable students as moments where work became morally significant.

This presence had a distinct moral texture. Participants did not define meaningful work as personal enjoyment alone. They described it as being available to someone whose vulnerability made the task ethically charged. DSN-02 sacrificed weekend time to train low-income students in quantitative software. TND-01 traced manual academic

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records to protect a student's registration. PIM-01 described leadership spirituality as the willingness to face conflict with fairness and heart.

This finding adds depth to the conventional meaningful work dimension in workplace spirituality theory. Participants did not experience meaning merely because their job fit their values. They found meaning when spiritual values took shape through costly attention to students, colleagues, and institutional members in need. Meaning, therefore, emerged through relational responsibility rather than self-fulfillment alone.

"When I listened to the student and helped him finish the thesis without expecting anything, teaching changed from a profession into a calling. (DSN-01)"

"That night, I saw piles of receipts differently. My work became a bridge of help for another human being. (TND-02)"

"Spirituality in leadership means facing conflict with heart, not only with rules. (PIM-01)"

Theme 3. Transcendent reframing under pressure

Participants faced intense pressure: publication targets, accreditation reports, teaching loads, service complaints, system failures, audits, and budget deadlines. They did not deny fatigue. Many used terms equivalent to burnout, chronic stress, and mental exhaustion. Yet they interpreted spirituality as an inner resource that enabled them to reframe pressure in terms of purpose, accountability, and service.

For lecturers, publication and accreditation pressure became more tolerable when they interpreted scholarly work as a public contribution. For administrative staff, repetitive service demands became bearable when they framed them as service to students' futures. For leaders, managerial pressure became ethically meaningful when they saw decisions as moral responsibilities rather than technical compliance. This reframing did not erase pressure, but it gave participants a way to recover emotional balance.

The theme sharpens the well-being argument. Spirituality supported well-being by giving participants interpretive control over pressure. It helped them transform stress into purpose. On the other hand, when organizations allowed unjust structures to persist, spirituality alone could not repair the injury. Participants distinguished resilient meaning from forced endurance. That distinction matters for any ethical use of workplace spirituality in HRM.

"I interpreted publication pressure not as torture by regulation, but as a way to spread knowledge that can benefit others. (DSN-01)"

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"I saw the audit not as a frightening career threat, but as a way to prove the transparency of public trust. (TND-02)"

"The awareness that God judges every managerial decision gave me deep psychological peace. (PIM-03)"

Theme 4. Relational care as a condition of spiritual well-being

Relationships formed the immediate environment in which spirituality either grew or weakened. Participants described supportive senior colleagues, peer solidarity, transparent leadership, and appreciative supervisors as sources of spiritual warmth. Conversely, authoritarian leadership, campus politics, opaque grant distribution, a feudal academic culture, and a lack of appreciation weakened spiritual well-being.

Administrative staff made this point sharply. TND-01 described solidarity among lower-level staff as a spiritual support that protected them from service exhaustion. TND-03 described fellow IT operators who shared server shifts as a source of psychological survival. Lecturers similarly valued colleagues who shared teaching loads, guided younger academics, or supported them during family crises. Leaders also connected spirituality with dialogic leadership and the ability to accept criticism.

This finding complicates individualistic readings of workplace spirituality. Participants' inner calm depended on relational care. The organization could not delegate spirituality to personal faith and then ignore the relational conditions of work. Spirituality became a collective condition when employees experienced respect, solidarity, and justice. It weakened when employees experienced instrumental treatment.

"When senior colleagues supported and guided younger lecturers, the program created a warm and productive spiritual atmosphere. (DSN-02)"

"Solidarity among administrative staff became the support that saved our mental endurance from exhaustion. (TND-01)"

"When the rectorate practiced transparent management and accepted criticism, spirituality grew across the work unit. (DSN-04)"

Theme 5. Responsible performance under a spirituality-practice gap

Participants linked spirituality to performance, but they understood performance as responsible work rather than mere output volume. Lecturers connected spirituality with punctual teaching, updated materials, careful grading, academic honesty, and detailed student feedback. Administrative staff connected spirituality with accurate records, careful financial reconciliation, secure data systems, and reliable student service. Leaders

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connected spirituality with fair mediation, transparent decisions, and humane performance expectations.

At the same time, the accounts exposed a repeated spirituality-practice gap. Participants criticized institutions that praised service but neglected staff welfare, promoted honesty but encouraged attendance manipulation, preached sacrifice but ignored gender-sensitive facilities, or proclaimed simplicity while leaders displayed excessive privileges. This gap injured trust. It made employees question whether institutional spirituality carried moral substance or functioned as decorative rhetoric.

The spirituality-practice gap gives the study its strongest critical contribution. It explains why workplace spirituality cannot sustain performance through symbols alone. Employees accepted spiritual values when leaders translated them into fairness, remuneration, transparency, workload balance, gender care, and credible data practices. They became skeptical when spiritual language asked them to produce more while the organization avoided moral accountability.

"I refuse to give grades carelessly because laziness in assessment violates my academic oath before the Creator. (DSN-01)"

"Spirituality pushed me to check every financial digit carefully so the institution would not suffer loss. (TND-02)"

"Spiritual values affect performance only when leaders translate moral preaching into fair salary policy for all employees. (DSN-02)"

Table 3. Thematic structure and contribution of the findings

Superordinate theme	Core experiential meaning	Performance link	Critical condition
Moral orientation beyond ritual	Spirituality appears as conscience, integrity, and accountability.	Employees protect academic honesty, data accuracy, and financial integrity.	Rituals need ethical enactment.
Meaningful presence	Work becomes spiritual when it supports vulnerable others.	Employees invest extra attention in teaching, service, and leadership.	Work systems must allow humane care.

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Superordinate theme	Core experiential meaning	Performance link	Critical condition
Transcendent reframing	Employees reinterpret pressure through the lens of calling and purpose.	Employees sustain effort under publication, service, audit, and accreditation demands.	Reframing must not justify exploitation.
Relational care	Well-being grows through solidarity and fair leadership.	Employees perform better when they experience respect and psychological safety.	Leaders must create credible relational climates.
Spirituality-practice gap	Contradiction between values and practice injures trust.	Performance weakens when spiritual rhetoric masks unfair systems.	Organizations must embody values in policy and resource allocation.

DISCUSSION

The findings affirm the central dimensions of workplace spirituality while also reworking them. Meaningful work, community, and value alignment appeared throughout the accounts, but participants did not experience them as stable psychological states. They experienced them as lived struggles over integrity, care, pressure, fairness, and credibility. This matters because the dominant empirical vocabulary often treats workplace spirituality as a variable that produces engagement, commitment, well-being, or performance. The present study shows the experiential work through which those outcomes become possible.

The first contribution concerns meaning. Prior studies often treat meaningful work as a dimension of spirituality that motivates positive attitudes (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Milliman et al., 2003). The present study shows a more demanding form of meaning. Participants found meaning when their work mattered to vulnerable students, colleagues, or institutional members. Meaning came through presence, not only personal fulfillment. This finding expands the literature by linking meaningful work with moral availability: the willingness to remain attentive when another person's dignity or future depends on one's work.

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The second contribution concerns well-being. Studies have linked workplace spirituality with psychological well-being, mental well-being, and resilience (Garg, 2017; Jnaneswar & Sulphey, 2023; Syahir et al., 2025). This study explains how that link works in lived experience. Participants described calm, recovery, sufficientness, and courage because spirituality helped them reinterpret pressure through purpose. Nevertheless, they also showed that reframing has ethical limits. Spirituality did not make unfair remuneration, exploitative contracts, manipulative data practices, or gender-insensitive policies acceptable. Well-being increased when spiritual meaning and organizational justice aligned.

The third contribution concerns performance. Quantitative studies often test whether spirituality improves performance through engagement, citizenship behavior, emotional intelligence, or person-organization fit (Jena, 2022; Saks, 2011; Sharma & Singh, 2021). The present findings show that participants understood performance as responsible performance. They did not reduce performance to output. They associated it with punctuality, careful grading, updated teaching materials, accurate records, transparent finance, secure databases, and fair leadership decisions. Spirituality strengthened performance by making work answerable to conscience, community, and God, not merely to performance indicators.

The fourth contribution lies in the spirituality-practice gap. This concept names the break between proclaimed spiritual values and experienced organizational practices. The gap appeared when participants encountered unfair remuneration, manipulative accreditation practices, neglected gender care, feudal leadership, excessive executive privilege, or instrumental treatment of contract workers. This finding develops the critical tradition in workplace spirituality (Ashforth & Pratt, 2003; Sheep, 2006). It shows that spiritual language can foster cynicism when organizations ask employees to embody values that leaders do not structurally enact.

This argument does not reject workplace spirituality. It protects it from managerial misuse. The participants valued spirituality deeply. They connected it with teaching as a calling, service as care, data work as moral trust, finance as honesty, and leadership as fairness. Their criticism targeted the mismatch between spiritual vocabulary and institutional action. A faith-based institution, therefore, carries a heavier ethical burden than a value-neutral bureaucracy. Once an institution invokes service, integrity, faith, or sacrifice, employees use those values as standards for judging its policies.

The Indonesian higher education context strengthens this contribution. Prior Indonesian studies have shown strong quantitative links between workplace spirituality,

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engagement, professional commitment, person-organization fit, and retention (Margaretha et al., 2021, 2026). This study explains what employees live through beneath those associations. Engagement appears as continued moral investment despite pressure. Commitment appears as loyalty tested by contradiction. Well-being appears as inner calm supported by relational care. Performance appears as ethically careful work under public and spiritual accountability.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

For theory, the study encourages scholars to treat workplace spirituality as an interpretive and relational phenomenon. Future research should not only test whether spirituality predicts engagement or performance. It should also examine the conditions under which spiritual values remain credible. The concept of a spirituality-practice gap offers one route for that work. It invites researchers to study how employees evaluate consistency between spiritual language and concrete organizational practices.

For management practice, leaders in faith-based higher education need to translate spiritual values into work systems. Reflection rituals matter, but they cannot substitute for fair remuneration, transparent promotion, gender-sensitive facilities, credible data practices, workload review, ethical research governance, and dialogic leadership. Employees in this study did not ask leaders to remove spiritual language. They asked leaders to make it real.

For HRM, workplace spirituality should not become a motivational device that asks employees to endure structural unfairness. HR policies must protect the relationship between meaning and dignity. The organization can do this through workload audits, transparent contract policies, accessible counseling, fair treatment of administrative staff, recognition of invisible service labor, and protections against unethical demands. Without those systems, spirituality risks becoming a vocabulary of endurance rather than a source of humane work.

For higher education quality assurance, the findings suggest that spiritual identity and institutional performance need careful alignment. Accreditation evidence, publication targets, and digital reporting should not pressure employees to manipulate data or engage in symbolic compliance. Spirituality contributes to performance when quality systems reward accuracy, honesty, student care, and reflective improvement. It weakens when quality systems demand the appearance of excellence without protecting moral practice.

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Limitations and Future Research

This study examined one faith-based higher education context in Indonesia, so it cannot claim broad generalizability. IPA does not seek that kind of claim. Its strength lies in analytical transferability: readers can judge whether the experiential structure speaks to comparable settings. The sample also included lecturers, administrative staff, and leaders within one institutional ecology. This design strengthened within-context comparisons, but future studies could examine a single occupational group more deeply or compare faith-based and non-faith-based institutions.

Another limitation concerns organizational documentation. This study used institutional context to interpret participants' accounts, but it did not conduct a full organizational ethnography. Future ethnographic research could observe meetings, rituals, administrative service points, and policy implementation to examine how spiritual values circulate beyond interview narratives. A mixed-methods design could also test the spirituality-practice gap as a construct and examine whether it moderates the relationship between workplace spirituality, well-being, and performance.

The translation process also requires careful reading. The study used semantically translated accounts from local dialects and conversational Indonesian. This approach preserved meaning, but some idiomatic nuance inevitably changes when spoken experience enters standard Indonesian and English. Future studies could present selected bilingual excerpts and, where feasible, invite participants to review the translated quotations.

CONCLUSION

Workplace spirituality in this study appeared as lived moral accountability. Participants did not reduce spirituality to formal rituals, religious symbols, or motivational slogans. They experienced it when they protected academic honesty, accompanied vulnerable students, handled data carefully, managed financial records transparently, mediated conflict fairly, and sustained quality work under pressure. Spirituality gave work meaning by connecting ordinary tasks to conscience, service, and accountability to others and to God.

Nevertheless, the same spirituality sharpened employees' awareness of contradiction. Participants felt injured when organizations proclaimed service, integrity, and faith while tolerating unfairness, manipulation, or neglect. The study, therefore, argues that workplace spirituality strengthens meaning, well-being, and performance only when organizations embody their values through credible structures and humane

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relationships. Spirituality becomes a source of performance when it protects dignity. It becomes rhetoric when it asks employees to carry moral burdens that the organization refuses to share.

Ethics, Consent, and Data Handling Statement

The study adhered to ethical principles for minimal-risk qualitative research involving adult professional participants. Participants gave informed consent to video-recorded interviews and to the anonymized use of their accounts. The manuscript uses participant codes rather than personal names, and it removes identifiable institutional details. The research team stored recordings and transcripts securely and used them only for research purposes. The recordings were transcribed, semantically translated from local dialect and conversational Indonesian into standard Indonesian, and then translated into English for publication while preserving experiential meaning.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The interview data are not publicly available because they contain potentially identifiable contextual information. Anonymized excerpts appear in the article. Further access can only be considered under confidentiality conditions and with appropriate ethical safeguards.

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