

# Chapter 54

## The Relationship between Islamic Religion and Ethical Leadership: The Case of Kuwaiti Private Sector

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### ABSTRACT

*Empirical research on how Islam influences leaders' behaviours and business practices is not easily available. The separation of church and state has never been an Islamic precept; therefore, this paper investigates how Islamic religion affects ethical leadership amongst Kuwait's private sector leaders. Using a constructionist approach within which 40 leaders from Kuwaiti private sector organisations were interviewed, in the banking, investment, real estate and services sectors. The study provides important insights into the concepts related to good and ethical leadership in a non-Western environment and enriches our knowledge in this sector of the management field.*

### INTRODUCTION

Kuwait is an Islamic country where religion dictates the way of living and working and should ideally guide the way leaders behave in the workplace, and we need to examine the influence of religion on the leadership styles. Many researches and studies have been done about the Arab culture, its values, and how different it is from the Western cultures. The main fundamental difference seems to be the tribal/group identity versus the Western individualistic focus. Abbas (1996) identified commitments to honour, honesty, respect for par-

ents and older persons, loyalty to one's primary group, hospitality and generosity as major Islamic values. Those values guide people's behaviours and attitudes and influence all decisions for Arabs, and these values permeate into organisations and influence business decisions. Hofstede (2003) also highlights this fact by showing how the Muslim faith plays a significant role in the people's daily and work lives.

However, although Muslims make up one of the largest population in the world as Muslim population constitutes an international market of 2.1 billion possible customers (Muslim population

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6433-3.ch054

worldwide, 2013), the world's Muslim population is projected to grow by about 35% between 2010 and 2030 (Eid, 2013), and leadership scholars have long studied "ethical leadership" and proposed various conceptualizations of the term (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005; Detert, Trevino, Burris, & Andiappan, 2007; Piccolo, Greenbaum, Den Hartog, & Folger, 2010; Trevino, Brown, & Hartman, 2003; Trevino, Hartman, & Brown, 2000; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), this homogeneous sample selection reflects only views of Western cultures, organisations, and industries, presenting a unidimensional access to the concept. Eastern cultures may consider other values and principles essential for ethical leadership (e.g., Islamic religion). Therefore, Resick et al. (2006) called for research that takes a more global view of ethical leadership.

Undoubtedly, although academics have built considerable theoretical knowledge on the conceptualization of ethical leadership, research about its true meaning that applies to different contexts is still few. Very little is known about what makes up ethical leadership for different groups that come from various cultural backgrounds (e.g., Muslims). Understanding ethical leadership must be seen in local contexts as type of "Glocalization" (Robertson, 1994; Salazar 2005) and call for a dramatic change that moves the concept of leadership-in-use to a more descriptive "leadership-in-context" concept (Vargo, 2009).

Therefore, further explorations are needed to broaden the concept as they should fit to the needs and expectations of Muslim leaders. Relationships between religion and ethical leadership also is still in its infancy stage and yet not well established for many researchers as there is a great need for having more well-established studies that can be considered as a step toward a theory building in the field of ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2009; Toor and Ofori, 2009; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007).

To bridge this gap various conceptual and empirical studies investigating the concepts of leadership, religious leadership and ethical leadership were studied. Their findings highlight the fact that there are more factors that have a direct impact on ethical leadership is affected by the Islamic religion. Model, definitions, techniques and discussion of these factors and how could they affect ethical leadership are described in the following sections.

## **Objectives of the Article**

This article pursues the following objectives:

1. To contribute to knowledge on leadership, particularly within the context of a developing country such as Kuwait, and
2. To investigate the Islamic values that influence contribute to the ethical leadership.

## **Literature Review**

In the Islamic religion, the subject of leadership is given considerable attention. This is because, in Islam, leadership is perceived to be the most significant instrument for the realisation of an ideal society (Abbas, 2009). Islam is the predominant religion in Kuwait and it influences people's lives (Milton- Edwards, 2004). Islam is an Arabic word that connotes submission, surrender, and obedience. As a religion, Islam stands for complete submission and obedience to Allah. Sincere submission induces the ability to decipher right from wrong and good from evil, thus enabling our ability to counsel.

The literal translation of 'Islam' is 'submission', and this has implications to this study in that employees might be submissive to their leaders and not question their actions. An authoritarian style of leadership style of leadership where the subordinates have no voice but to accept the managers' decision is against Islamic ethics; Islam does not

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