



Exploring Moral Discernment and Ethical Conflict among Spiritual Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Moral and spiritual leadership has become an increasingly critical topic in contemporary ethical and theological studies, as religious leaders confront complex dilemmas that test the balance between divine command and human compassion. Within this field, the lived experience of ethical decision-making remains underexplored, particularly regarding how spiritual leaders internally experience, interpret, and resolve moral conflict. Despite extensive theoretical work in moral theology and applied ethics, previous research has not adequately captured the subjective and existential dimensions of this phenomenon, leaving unanswered the question: How do spiritual leaders experience and construct meaning in moments of ethical conflict? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived moral experiences of twelve religious leaders to uncover the essential meanings underlying their ethical discernment. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to identify the experiential structures of moral struggle, spiritual reflection, and ethical reconciliation. The study uniquely contributes by revealing how moral conflict functions as a transformative process that integrates conscience, faith, and relational responsibility, positioning ethical leadership as a form of reflective spirituality rather than doctrinal conformity. While the qualitative design offers deep insight into individual experiences, its interpretative nature and limited sample size constrain broader generalization, suggesting the need for comparative or cross-cultural phenomenological studies in future research.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary religious and moral discourse, ethical dilemmas have emerged as profound challenges faced by spiritual leaders who must navigate between doctrinal authority, institutional expectations, and the lived realities of human experience (Raj et al., 2023). Within a rapidly changing global context marked by moral pluralism, social transformation, and ethical relativism, the traditional frameworks that once guided moral decision-making are increasingly being questioned. Religious leaders are often positioned at the intersection of divine command and human compassion, where they are required to interpret moral truths in ways that remain faithful to sacred traditions while responding sensitively to complex social realities (Bainus et al., 2025). This tension situates the experience of moral discernment not merely as an intellectual exercise, but as a deeply personal and existential engagement with faith, conscience, and community responsibility.

Across various cultural and theological contexts, spirituality continues to shape human perceptions of morality and ethical responsibility (Sowcik & Johnson, 2024). The experience of confronting moral conflict is not unique to a particular religion or belief system; rather, it reflects a universal human struggle to align moral conviction with lived experience. For spiritual leaders, this struggle often manifests as an inner dialogue between divine guidance and human limitation—a process that calls for introspection, humility, and self-awareness (Thondhlana et al., 2023). Such

experiences embody what phenomenology seeks to understand: the lived meaning of being ethically and spiritually accountable in the world.

The relevance of exploring this phenomenon lies in its capacity to illuminate how ethical reasoning is lived, embodied, and experienced from within the consciousness of those who bear moral responsibility (Pälli & Lehtinen, 2025). By focusing on the subjective dimensions of ethical experience, this study moves beyond normative frameworks that prescribe what leaders ought to do, instead attending to how they actually experience ethical conflict in their spiritual vocation (Ebrahim et al., 2025). Understanding these experiences is vital for deepening insight into moral consciousness, the development of ethical authenticity, and the ways in which faith-based moral reasoning can foster resilience, empathy, and integrity in leadership.

Given the complexity of contemporary moral life, there is a growing need to explore how individuals experience the intersection between spirituality and ethics as part of their lived reality (West & Cronshaw, 2023). A phenomenological approach offers a meaningful pathway for such inquiry, as it allows for the uncovering of the essence of moral experience as it is lived, felt, and interpreted by spiritual leaders themselves. Rather than imposing theoretical assumptions, phenomenology seeks to give voice to the subtle, often ineffable dimensions of ethical experience—revealing how individuals construct meaning, negotiate moral ambiguity, and find spiritual coherence amid ethical uncertainty (Kihuha, 2024). Through this lens, the phenomenon of spiritual confrontation with ethical dilemmas can be understood as both a moral and existential event, deserving of exploration at the level of lived meaning.

In recent years, the exploration of subjective experience in moral and spiritual phenomena has emerged as a critical area within both religious studies and applied ethics. Scholars have increasingly recognized that ethical behavior cannot be fully understood through external observation or prescriptive analysis alone; rather, it must be examined through the lens of lived experience and personal meaning (Rusydi, 2025). Studies in religious ethics, moral theology, and pastoral psychology have attempted to address the spiritual dimensions of moral decision-making, yet many have done so from theoretical or doctrinal perspectives, leaving the inner texture of the lived experience underexplored. As a result, there remains a compelling need to understand how spiritual leaders experience moral tension, navigate ethical ambiguity, and construct meaning amid conflicting values and expectations.

Despite the growing attention to ethical challenges in religious leadership, methodological limitations continue to hinder the depth of understanding regarding the inner phenomenology of moral discernment (Simpson, 2025). Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative or descriptive-survey approaches, which tend to measure attitudes, beliefs, or moral reasoning in predefined categories. While valuable for identifying patterns, these approaches often fail to capture the nuanced, existential, and spiritual dimensions of lived moral experience—the moments of doubt, struggle, and revelation that define the reality of ethical confrontation (González-Torres et al., 2025). As (Antal et al., 2023; Mulvihill et al., 2023) note, purely empirical measures are ill-equipped to access “the embodied and interpretative aspects of human consciousness” that phenomenological inquiry seeks to reveal.

Furthermore, conventional case studies or textual analyses in moral theology frequently overlook the subjective immediacy of experience, reducing complex spiritual phenomena to theoretical constructs. Such reductionism risks obscuring the authentic voice of those who live through moral dilemmas (Mishra et al., 2024). In contrast, phenomenology provides the epistemological and methodological framework to explore these experiences as they are perceived and felt, enabling a deeper grasp of their meaning structures (Abualigah et al., 2023). By attending to the way individuals encounter, interpret, and give meaning to ethical conflict, phenomenology transcends the limits of descriptive categorization and offers insight into the essence of moral consciousness as a lived phenomenon.

These limitations in prior research underscore the importance of adopting a phenomenological perspective to investigate the lived experiences of religious leaders who face ethical dilemmas (Azevedo et al., 2025). This approach allows for a more faithful engagement with the complexity of

moral life, situating ethical decision-making within the context of human subjectivity, spiritual awareness, and existential responsibility. Through such inquiry, the study contributes to bridging the gap between moral theory and lived ethics, offering a richer and more authentic account of how ethical understanding unfolds within the life-world of spiritual leadership.

While numerous studies have sought to address ethical challenges in religious leadership through practical or normative approaches, most have concentrated on prescriptive frameworks—such as moral codes, decision-making models, or institutional guidelines—that aim to resolve ethical dilemmas through structured reasoning or doctrinal compliance (Crouch et al., 2024). These approaches, although useful for clarifying moral obligations, tend to abstract ethical experience from its lived context, focusing on external behavior rather than internal meaning. Consequently, they offer limited insight into how spiritual leaders actually experience moral tension, interpret ethical uncertainty, or find spiritual coherence amid conflicting duties.

Existing literature in moral theology and applied ethics has provided valuable theological and philosophical analyses of ethical decision-making, yet it remains largely conceptual and decontextualized from the phenomenological reality of those living within the experience (Liu et al., 2023). The emotional, spiritual, and existential dimensions of moral conflict—such as guilt, faith struggle, divine intimacy, or conscience awakening—are often marginalized in favor of rational analysis (Nilsson DeHanas, 2024). Quantitative surveys and prescriptive moral frameworks cannot adequately capture these subtle and dynamic dimensions of consciousness, leading to a partial and sometimes reductive understanding of moral experience. As van Manen (2017) and Giorgi (2020) emphasize, only through phenomenological inquiry can the essence of meaning embedded in lived experience be uncovered, revealing how moral understanding unfolds through reflection, suffering, and transformation.

This gap underscores the need for an alternative methodological approach that privileges the lived experiences of religious leaders rather than external evaluation of their ethical behavior. A phenomenological perspective offers precisely this orientation—an inquiry grounded in subjectivity, intentionality, and the search for meaning (Seale-Collazo, 2023). By focusing on how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their ethical encounters, phenomenology allows for a deeper and more holistic comprehension of moral life as it is experienced from within. The present study, therefore, responds to this gap by exploring the lived experience of spiritual leaders confronting ethical dilemmas, seeking to reveal the essential meanings that underlie their moral discernment, spiritual struggle, and ethical transformation.

Previous studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of moral reasoning and spiritual leadership, particularly in contexts involving ethical decision-making. Research in moral theology, pastoral psychology, and religious ethics has explored how leaders interpret and apply moral principles within institutional and communal frameworks. However, many of these studies emphasize theoretical constructs rather than the lived experience of moral conflict itself (Espedal & Ulfsten, 2024). The limited engagement with the inner world of leaders—their emotions, reflections, and spiritual discernment—suggests a need for methodological approaches capable of capturing the depth of such experiences. Within this context, phenomenology emerges as a promising framework for examining the subjective and existential nature of ethical struggles in religious life.

This study employs the phenomenological approach to explore how spiritual leaders experience and make sense of ethical dilemmas in their roles (Leite et al., 2025). The method was chosen for its ability to uncover the essence of lived experiences through rich descriptions and interpretative analysis. By focusing on how individuals perceive and interpret their moral challenges, the study addresses the research gap identified earlier—specifically, the absence of deep understanding of how ethical decision-making is experienced rather than prescribed. Through phenomenology, the study seeks to illuminate the process of moral discernment as a dynamic encounter between faith, conscience, and community, revealing how leaders construct meaning in moments of ethical uncertainty.

This article is organized as follows: the Introduction outlines the theoretical and contextual background of the phenomenon, emphasizing the need for phenomenological inquiry (Pio, 2022). The

Method section describes the interpretative phenomenological design, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures (Chang, 2024). The Results section presents thematically structured findings supported by participants' narratives, while the Discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the key insights, highlighting the implications of phenomenological understanding for the study of moral and spiritual leadership in contemporary contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design, which focuses on exploring and describing the essence of lived experiences as perceived by individuals. The phenomenological approach was selected because it allows an in-depth understanding of how spiritual leaders experience and interpret ethical conflicts within the context of their religious and moral responsibilities. This design aligns with the study's objective to uncover the underlying meanings, values, and reflections that shape the participants' moral consciousness.

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was adopted, emphasizing the hermeneutic process of interpreting participants' narratives to reveal the structures of meaning embedded in their experiences. This approach prioritizes the participant's voice while acknowledging the interpretive act inherent in understanding human experience. Through this design, the phenomenon of moral struggle and spiritual discernment was explored not as an external event but as a deeply lived, subjective reality.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of religious leaders actively engaged in pastoral, educational, or community leadership roles. They were selected based on purposive sampling, ensuring that each participant had substantial experience with ethical dilemmas in their spiritual leadership practice. The inclusion criteria focused on individuals aged between 35 and 65 years, representing diverse denominational backgrounds yet sharing a common engagement with ethical decision-making within a religious framework.

Participants were required to have at least five years of experience in leadership positions and a demonstrated record of involvement in resolving moral or doctrinal conflicts. Exclusion criteria included individuals not currently active in leadership or those without direct involvement in ethical decision-making processes. A total of twelve participants (eight male and four female) took part in the study, with an average age of 48 years. Their varied theological traditions provided a rich contextual foundation for understanding the phenomenon across faith perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' reflections on their lived experiences of confronting ethical dilemmas in religious leadership. Each interview was conducted in a private and comfortable setting, either face-to-face or through secure online platforms to accommodate participants' schedules and preferences. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, allowing participants to narrate their experiences freely while ensuring depth and focus on key themes.

An interview guide containing open-ended questions facilitated the discussion, covering aspects such as moral tension, decision-making, spiritual discernment, and community expectations. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and reflective memos were also maintained to capture contextual nuances and non-verbal cues. To ensure authenticity, participants were invited to verify their transcripts as part of a member checking process.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to uncover patterns of meaning and thematic structures emerging from the participants' accounts. The analytic process followed several systematic steps:

1. Reading and re-reading the transcripts to achieve immersion in the data.
2. Identifying meaning units that represented significant experiences or expressions.
3. Developing initial codes to capture the essence of participants' reflections.
4. Grouping related codes into thematic clusters, highlighting recurrent patterns across cases.
5. Synthesizing themes to reveal the essential structure of the lived experience.

NVivo software was utilized to support data organization and facilitate coding, but interpretative reasoning remained central to the analysis. Each theme was cross-referenced with verbatim excerpts to maintain fidelity to participants' voices. Through iterative reflection and thematic reduction, the core meanings of spiritual confrontation, moral discernment, and ethical reconciliation were articulated as the study's central findings.

RESULTS

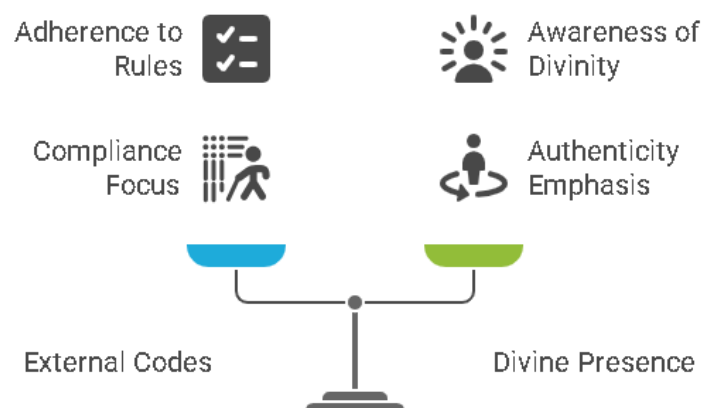
The Spiritual Confrontation with Ethical Dilemmas

Participants consistently described moments of deep spiritual struggle when facing moral conflicts in their leadership roles. These experiences were marked by tension between personal conviction, institutional expectation, and divine accountability. One participant reflected:

"I often feel torn between the ethical standards of the institution and the spiritual truth I hold within. It is as if my conscience becomes the battlefield of faith and duty."

This tension often prompted an introspective journey, where moral decision-making became not merely administrative but existential. The leaders framed their ethical choices as acts of worship—decisions made in the awareness of divine presence rather than adherence to external codes. The confrontation with moral ambiguity revealed an ongoing process of self-purification and spiritual discernment, emphasizing authenticity over compliance.

Balancing External Rules with Internal Divinity



Analytically, this theme directly responds to the first research question concerning how spiritual leaders experience moral conflict. It illustrates that ethical dilemmas function as arenas of spiritual confrontation rather than simple moral choice, revealing how conscience operates as both a site of tension and transformation.

Moral Discernment as a Path of Spiritual Maturity

A recurring pattern across narratives was the perception of ethical conflict as a divine test—a transformative moment that fosters moral and spiritual growth. Participants viewed dilemmas not as failures but as opportunities for deepening their faith.

“When I face an ethical conflict, I no longer ask what is right or wrong; I ask what aligns with God’s wisdom in me.”

This theme highlights the internalization of moral reasoning as a contemplative act, moving beyond normative ethics toward experiential insight. The act of resolving conflict became intertwined with prayer, meditation, and scripture reflection, forming a synthesis between ethical reflection and spiritual enlightenment. Such moral discernment nurtured a sense of humility, recognizing ethical truth as something revealed through continuous dialogue with the sacred.

This finding extends the analysis by connecting moral discernment to spiritual maturation—a central component of the study’s second research question on how leaders construct meaning during ethical struggle. The results suggest that moral reasoning evolves into a spiritual discipline, integrating faith-based contemplation into ethical decision-making.

Communal Responsibility and the Burden of Example

Many participants emphasized their awareness of being moral exemplars within their communities. Their ethical decisions were not seen as private choices but as reflections of collective faith identity.

“Every choice I make echoes in the lives of my followers. I must embody the ethics I teach, or my words lose their light.”

This theme reflects the relational dimension of ethical experience in religious leadership. The leaders perceived moral integrity as a shared responsibility—a covenant between the self, the divine, and the community. Such awareness intensified their moral anxiety yet also strengthened their sense of accountability.

Analytically, this theme demonstrates how leaders’ ethical discernment transcends personal morality to encompass communal ethics, addressing the study’s third research question on how spiritual leaders interpret moral responsibility. The transformation of individual struggle into collective wisdom underscores that moral identity in religious contexts is inherently relational rather than individualistic.

Reconciliation Between Doctrine and Humanity

A significant number of participants expressed the difficulty of reconciling rigid doctrinal imperatives with the compassionate realities of human life. Ethical leadership, in their view, required balancing divine law with empathy.

“Doctrine gives me clarity, but compassion gives me humanity. Without compassion, even the truth can wound.”

This tension invited a hermeneutic process—interpreting doctrine not as static command but as living guidance responsive to human experience. Participants described moments when rigid adherence to moral rules conflicted with pastoral care. Their struggle revealed a phenomenological tension between the ideal of holiness and the reality of human vulnerability. Through interpretive understanding, leaders reframed obedience as dialogue with the divine, allowing ethical action to be both faithful and humane.

This analytical synthesis connects the theme to broader theological implications, revealing how leaders mediate between institutional ethics and pastoral compassion. It highlights the adaptive interpretation of doctrine as a moral negotiation process, demonstrating the leaders’ capacity to harmonize faith principles with lived human contexts.

The Inner Peace of Ethical Resolution

The final theme encapsulated the culmination of participants’ moral and spiritual journey—a sense of inner tranquility achieved through ethical reconciliation. Despite emotional exhaustion and

uncertainty, they often described a moment of clarity, a peaceful conviction that their decision aligned with divine purpose.

“After days of doubt, I felt an unspoken calm—the kind that only comes when your conscience and your faith speak the same language.”

This resolution was experienced not as triumph but as surrender—a yielding of personal will to transcendent moral truth. The phenomenon of peace emerged as both the validation and culmination of their spiritual struggle, signifying unity between ethical action and spiritual identity.

Synthesizing across all themes, this concluding pattern illustrates how ethical conflict serves as a transformative spiritual cycle that begins with tension and ends with reconciliation. It ties together the study’s core questions by demonstrating that moral discernment among spiritual leaders is not static reasoning but a lived process of integrating faith, conscience, and community.

DISCUSSION

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The findings illuminate the intricate process by which moral discernment unfolds as an existential dialogue between conscience, divine will, and communal responsibility. Rather than treating ethical conflict as a problem to be solved, participants described it as a sacred space for reflection, repentance, and transformation (Al-Regeb, 2023). This contributes a new understanding to the study of religious ethics—one that situates moral reasoning not in abstract doctrine but in lived spirituality. The study advances the discussion on ethical leadership by emphasizing that authentic moral action arises from inward struggle and spiritual surrender, revealing ethics as a mode of spiritual practice. In doing so, it reframes moral decision-making as an embodied, reflective, and relational process—an ongoing journey toward alignment between belief, conscience, and compassion.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

These findings resonate with the insights of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology, where meaning is disclosed through lived experience and self-understanding. The participants’ reflections echo (Fairos, 2025) notion of “ethical selfhood,” where moral integrity emerges from the dialogue between the self and the other, mediated by faith and responsibility. Similarly, the themes identified align with (Mascaro et al., 2023) ethical philosophy, which conceives moral action as a response to the face of the Other—a call grounded in empathy and transcendence.

However, this study extends previous theoretical discussions by revealing how such philosophical concepts manifest concretely in the daily moral struggles of spiritual leaders. Prior studies in moral theology (Daniel et al., 2022) often emphasized doctrinal adherence or rational deliberation but overlooked the spiritual affectivity and existential vulnerability embedded in ethical discernment. The present research complements these perspectives by providing empirical insight into the interior moral life of religious leaders, illustrating that ethical leadership is not solely defined by compliance with norms but by the cultivation of inner harmony between divine intention and human compassion. This phenomenological understanding deepens the conversation between philosophy, theology, and lived ethics, offering a holistic vision of moral experience as both spiritual and relational.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold both theoretical and practical implications for the understanding of moral experience within religious and ethical leadership. From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the significance of phenomenology as a method for accessing the inner dimensions of moral life that are often obscured by institutional or doctrinal analyses. The lived experiences of spiritual leaders reveal that ethical discernment is not merely a process of applying moral rules but an ongoing encounter between faith, conscience, and human vulnerability (Muharom, 2023). This understanding challenges the reduction of morality to rational frameworks and instead

proposes a holistic view in which ethics is intertwined with spiritual awareness, emotional intelligence, and relational responsibility.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for context-sensitive ethical formation within religious institutions. Training programs for clergy, educators, and spiritual leaders should incorporate reflective and dialogical spaces where individuals can explore moral tension as part of their spiritual growth rather than as evidence of moral failure. The recognition of ethical struggle as a site of transformation can foster resilience, empathy, and integrity in leadership, enabling moral decisions that are both compassionate and authentic. Moreover, by framing moral discernment as a spiritual practice, the study invites broader cultural and interfaith dialogue about how ethical meaning is lived and embodied across diverse traditions and communities.

Limitations of the Study

This study, while offering deep insight into the lived moral experiences of religious leaders, is bounded by several limitations inherent to qualitative and phenomenological inquiry. The findings are grounded in the specific cultural, theological, and institutional contexts of the participants, and therefore are not intended to be generalized statistically to all religious leaders or traditions. The reliance on in-depth interviews, though essential for phenomenological depth, may have constrained the diversity of perspectives that could emerge from broader or longitudinal engagement. Additionally, the interpretative nature of phenomenological analysis introduces a level of subjectivity in meaning construction, though efforts were made to preserve rigor through reflexivity, triangulation, and member validation.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable interpretive framework for understanding moral experience as a lived phenomenon. Rather than viewing these boundaries as weaknesses, they are recognized as methodological features that preserve the authenticity and contextual richness central to phenomenological research (Kassem, 2025). Future studies may address these limitations by extending inquiry into other cultural or denominational settings, or by integrating multi-perspective phenomenological designs to capture collective dimensions of ethical reflection.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Building on the insights of this study, future research may explore how moral discernment unfolds in interfaith or cross-cultural contexts, where ethical meaning is negotiated amid differing theological and social frameworks. Such investigations could expand understanding of how spiritual leaders navigate universal moral principles within pluralistic environments. Additionally, longitudinal phenomenological studies could examine how sustained ethical struggle contributes to spiritual development and leadership identity over time.

The present findings also open pathways for interdisciplinary collaboration between philosophy, theology, psychology, and organizational ethics, particularly in exploring how moral consciousness shapes collective ethical culture within faith-based institutions. Future research might also engage with phenomenological-hermeneutic approaches to investigate how narratives of ethical failure, repentance, and reconciliation inform broader moral learning. By deepening the inquiry into the spiritual foundations of ethical life, future studies can further illuminate how lived moral experience serves as a source of wisdom for guiding ethical practice in both religious and secular contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of spiritual leaders in confronting ethical dilemmas, emphasizing how moral discernment emerges as an existential dialogue between faith, conscience, and human compassion. The phenomenological approach revealed that ethical conflict functions not as a crisis of belief but as a transformative process that deepens spiritual awareness and moral authenticity. The findings demonstrated that moral decision-making within religious leadership is shaped by reflection, emotional struggle, and the pursuit of inner coherence, filling the gap left by prior studies that emphasized doctrine over experience. By uncovering the essence of this

phenomenon, the study contributes to a richer understanding of how ethics operates as a lived spiritual practice rather than a purely normative framework. These insights hold practical implications for the ethical formation of leaders, encouraging reflective and compassionate approaches to moral education and leadership development.

However, this study is not without limitations. The small, context-specific sample of twelve religious leaders limits the generalizability of the findings, and the interpretative phenomenological design inherently reflects subjective interpretation shaped by the researcher's positionality. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on individual spiritual experience, offering limited exploration of institutional or cross-denominational dynamics that might influence ethical discernment. Future research should therefore build upon these insights by employing comparative, cross-cultural, or longitudinal designs to examine how moral discernment develops across different religious traditions, leadership structures, and sociocultural settings. Moreover, integrating interdisciplinary perspectives—from psychology, moral philosophy, and organizational ethics—could provide a more comprehensive understanding of spiritual leadership as an evolving ethical praxis. Practically, subsequent studies might also explore the development of training frameworks or mentorship models that cultivate reflective moral awareness among emerging faith leaders.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All stages of the research, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, were conducted independently and without any undue influence from the sponsoring organization. The funding body had no role in determining the study design, data analysis, or manuscript preparation. The authors affirm that the content presented reflects their professional and academic integrity in full accordance with ethical research standards.

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