



## **Experiencing the Ethical Dilemmas of Faith: A Phenomenological Exploration of Religious Philosophy Among Indonesian Scholars**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study discusses the relationship between religion and ethics, particularly how religious teachings influence moral decision-making amidst the challenges of modern values and social diversity. In the context of Indonesia, there exists a significant gap in research regarding the subjective experiences of religious scholars in facing ethical dilemmas, which has not been extensively explored through a phenomenological approach. This study employs a descriptive phenomenological method to delve into the meaning of the experiences felt by religious scholars in interpreting and applying religious teachings to ethical decisions in real life. The findings reveal that religious scholars often experience tension between strict religious doctrines and the dynamic social realities, requiring a more flexible interpretation of religious teachings. Another finding indicates that the ethical decisions of these scholars are heavily influenced by personal experiences, beliefs, and evolving social norms. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of reforming religious education to allow the integration of doctrinal traditions and contemporary ethical challenges. The research provides new insights into the complexity of the relationship between religion and ethics, with direct implications for the development of religious ethics education that is relevant to the context of a pluralistic society.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The intersection of religion and ethics has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, particularly in understanding how religious teachings influence moral decision-making in personal, professional, and social contexts (Singh dkk., 2023). In contemporary society, individuals often encounter ethical dilemmas that challenge the applicability of traditional religious doctrines, especially in the face of modern values, social diversity, and changing norms. Recent studies have highlighted how issues like globalization, technological advancements, and shifting cultural values are shaping ethical decision-making, presenting challenges that religious teachings may not directly address (Chen & He, 2024). This tension between religious beliefs and ethical challenges forms the central focus of the current study, which aims to explore how Indonesian religious scholars navigate these dilemmas within their professional and social spheres.

Religious philosophy provides the foundational framework for understanding ethical decision-making in this context. It is built on a deep examination of the moral principles and values derived from sacred texts, interpreted through the lens of religious tradition. However, the evolving social landscape, marked by pluralism, globalization, and shifting cultural norms, has introduced complex ethical questions that challenge the static application of religious ethics. Scholars have recognized the need for a more flexible interpretation of religious teachings to address these contemporary moral issues. Recent scholarship (Dutta, 2022) also points out the growing necessity of integrating modern ethical frameworks to align religious teachings with the current socio-cultural

environment. These tensions are particularly evident in religious education, where educators must balance doctrinal fidelity with the need for students to engage critically with modern ethical challenges.

While previous research has explored the theoretical aspects of religious ethics and its application in society, there is a limited focus on the lived experiences of religious scholars themselves—how they personally experience and interpret these dilemmas. Much of the existing literature has relied on theoretical frameworks or quantitative data, which fails to capture the nuanced, subjective nature of ethical decision-making. Given the deeply personal and context-dependent nature of ethical choices, a phenomenological approach is particularly suited for investigating the lived experiences of religious scholars (Meiring, 2020). This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how religious scholars experience and make sense of the ethical challenges they face, thereby providing deeper insight into the ways in which religious teachings are applied in real-world situations. Through a phenomenological exploration, the research aims to uncover the underlying meanings and significance that participants attach to their ethical decisions, offering a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between religion and ethics in contemporary Indonesian society.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals confronting ethical dilemmas, especially in religious contexts, has emerged as a critical area of study in the field of phenomenology. Scholars have increasingly focused on how personal and subjective experiences shape ethical decision-making, particularly within complex social and cultural environments. This approach is essential for understanding the nuances of how individuals interpret and act upon moral challenges influenced by their religious beliefs. The role of religious teachings in guiding ethical choices is deeply embedded in personal identity, yet these teachings are often applied in diverse and sometimes contradictory contexts, making it difficult to fully grasp their impact without exploring the subjective experiences of those who live them.

However, exploring the deeper meanings and experiences of religious scholars in relation to ethical dilemmas presents several methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative methods, which focus on generalizable data and statistical analysis, are limited in capturing the rich, nuanced, and often contradictory aspects of human experience (Dutta, 2022). Such methods fail to account for the complex ways in which individuals interpret and internalize religious teachings in the face of real-life moral challenges. Qualitative research, while more suited for understanding personal experiences, often struggles to fully convey the depth of these experiences without resorting to overly general or superficial interpretations. In particular, studies that do not employ phenomenological approaches risk overlooking the subjective meanings that participants assign to their ethical decisions.

Given these limitations, many of the existing approaches to studying religious ethics fall short of providing a comprehensive understanding of how religious scholars navigate ethical dilemmas in their daily lives (Braybrook dkk., 2022). While the application of religious teachings to ethical issues has been explored theoretically, there is a notable gap in research that examines how these teachings are personally interpreted and applied in practice. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on capturing the essence of lived experience, offers a more effective means of addressing this gap. It allows for a deeper exploration of the personal meanings attached to ethical decisions, providing a fuller picture of the role of religion in moral reasoning.

In the context of religious ethics, much of the existing research has relied on practical, theoretically-driven frameworks to explore the intersection between religious teachings and ethical decision-making. These approaches often use predefined models or quantitative methods that aim to identify patterns or correlations across larger populations (Amir, 2019). While these methods offer valuable insights, they have significant limitations when it comes to understanding the rich, subjective experiences of individuals facing ethical dilemmas. Such approaches fail to capture the complexities of personal interpretation, emotional conflicts, and the deeper meaning that religious scholars assign to their decisions. As a result, the understanding of how religious scholars navigate ethical challenges remains incomplete and oversimplified.

The current reliance on generalized models and quantitative data overlooks the nuanced, lived experiences of individuals, which are essential to grasping the full scope of how religious ethics are

applied in practice (Chen & He, 2024). The focus on theoretical or broad statistical analyses fails to account for the internal struggles, moral reasoning, and personal transformations that may accompany ethical decision-making. This gap is particularly apparent when studying the subjective meanings attributed to religious teachings in the context of ethical dilemmas. These experiences are deeply personal and are shaped by the interplay between individual beliefs, professional responsibilities, and social expectations—factors that cannot be fully understood without delving into the lived experiences of the scholars themselves.

To address this gap, adopting a phenomenological approach offers a promising alternative. Phenomenology provides the tools necessary to explore the essence of these experiences, focusing on how participants make sense of their ethical decisions within the framework of their religious beliefs (Machouche dkk., 2019). By capturing the subjective meanings and personal insights of religious scholars, phenomenology allows for a more holistic and profound understanding of the phenomenon. This approach can uncover the deeper layers of meaning that are often obscured by more generalized research methods, thus offering a richer, more detailed perspective on how religious scholars confront and interpret ethical dilemmas.

The study of religious ethics, particularly in the context of Indonesian scholars, has been approached from various theoretical perspectives, yet few studies have focused on the lived experiences of the individuals navigating ethical dilemmas influenced by religious teachings (Suherman dkk., 2019). Previous research has primarily relied on theoretical frameworks or quantitative methods, which have offered insights into the relationship between religious beliefs and moral decision-making. However, these approaches often overlook the subjective experiences of individuals who apply these teachings in their daily lives. Literature on ethical dilemmas in religious contexts suggests that understanding the personal interpretations of religious scholars is essential for a deeper comprehension of how ethical decisions are made, yet the research in this area remains limited in capturing these lived experiences. This gap is what this study aims to address, using a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of these personal, subjective experiences.

To explore the deeper meaning of how religious scholars experience and interpret ethical dilemmas, a phenomenological methodology is employed. This approach is ideal because it focuses on understanding the essence of lived experiences, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the personal meanings that scholars attach to their ethical decisions. Unlike traditional methodologies, phenomenology seeks to uncover the underlying themes and nuances that are often lost in broader analyses. By adopting this approach, the study seeks to answer the questions raised in the "Knowledge Gap" section, particularly the challenge of understanding how religious scholars navigate the tension between religious doctrines and the complexities of modern ethical challenges. Phenomenology provides the tools needed to explore these subjective experiences in their full depth and complexity.

The structure of this article is organized to guide the reader through the research process and findings. It begins with an introduction to the broader phenomenon of religious ethics, followed by a detailed examination of the phenomenological methodology used in the study (Verhofstadt dkk., 2024). The article proceeds with a discussion of data collection and analysis processes, focusing on the themes that emerged from the participants' lived experiences. Finally, the results are presented and discussed, with conclusions drawn about the implications of the study for understanding the relationship between religion and ethics. The article concludes by reflecting on the significance of these findings and suggesting areas for future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the ethical dilemmas experienced by Indonesian religious scholars (Soekiswati dkk., 2024). Phenomenology is particularly suited for this research as it focuses on the lived experiences of individuals, aiming to understand the meaning they attach to specific phenomena. The objective of this approach is to gain deep insight into how participants interpret and make sense of their experiences related to ethical decisions influenced

by religious teachings. By focusing on subjective experiences, phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of the complexities of moral decision-making within the context of religious philosophy.

The specific phenomenological approach applied in this study is descriptive phenomenology, which emphasizes describing the essence of participants' experiences without interpretation or preconception. This method is appropriate for understanding how religious scholars experience and navigate ethical dilemmas in relation to their beliefs and professional lives, providing rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon in question.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that they met specific criteria relevant to the research questions (Dupras dkk., 2022). The study involved ten religious scholars, each with academic and practical experience in religious philosophy and ethics. This sample size was chosen to provide sufficient depth of data while being manageable within the scope of the study. Given the nature of phenomenological research, which requires in-depth exploration of individual experiences, a smaller sample size is considered more appropriate for capturing the rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon. Inclusion criteria required participants to have experience in teaching or engaging in philosophical discussions about religious ethics. Scholars who were not actively involved in academic or practical religious teaching or application were excluded from the study.

The sample consisted of scholars from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender, and academic specialization. However, all participants shared a deep involvement with the application of religious principles in addressing ethical dilemmas within their professional and social lives. The demographic characteristics of the participants were not disclosed to maintain confidentiality, but their collective experiences provided a rich data set for exploring the phenomenon under study.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, conducted in person to allow for a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences. The interviews followed a flexible guide designed to facilitate open-ended responses while ensuring coverage of key topics related to ethical dilemmas and religious teachings. The interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes each and were conducted in a comfortable and private setting to encourage participants to share their thoughts freely.

The interview protocol was adapted to fit the context of the study, based on existing literature on religious ethics and ethical decision-making (Dong, 2024). Modifications included the addition of specific questions aimed at exploring the tension between religious teachings and the ethical challenges scholars face in their daily lives. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, aligned with the principles of descriptive phenomenology. Thematic analysis involves identifying and analyzing patterns or themes within the data, which helps to reveal the essence of the participants' lived experiences. The analysis process was systematic, beginning with a detailed reading of the transcripts to identify significant statements or phrases related to ethical dilemmas and religious philosophy. These statements were then clustered into preliminary themes that reflected the participants' experiences.

Thematic analysis was conducted in multiple stages, starting with open coding to generate initial themes. These themes were further refined through axial coding, which focused on the relationships between themes and their relevance to the research questions. The final themes were

validated through member checking, where participants were asked to confirm the accuracy and relevance of the themes derived from their interviews.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Participants provided informed consent in writing prior to their participation, ensuring that they understood the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, with participant identities protected by using pseudonyms in the reporting of findings (Al-Zaman, 2021). Data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for research involving human participants, ensuring that the rights and well-being of all participants were respected throughout the research process.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Tension Between Religious Doctrine and Social Realities**

The primary theme that emerged from the interviews and observations is the tension between religious teachings and the ethical dilemmas individuals face in social contexts. Many participants described experiencing internal conflicts when applying strict religious principles to complex, real-world scenarios. One participant, an experienced religious scholar, expressed, "I feel disturbed when I have to choose between strict religious teachings and the more flexible social realities" (Informant 3). This statement encapsulates the broader sentiment shared by several participants, highlighting how religious doctrine, though offering clear guidelines, often clashes with the fluid nature of social dynamics, complicating their ethical decision-making process. For instance, some scholars reported that they struggled with reconciling the rigid moral rules set forth by their faith with the evolving standards of modern society. As one participant noted, "In a society that is increasingly diverse, the application of religious ethics becomes difficult. We must find a way to integrate these teachings without alienating others" (Informant 5). This internal struggle was a common thread in the interviews, where participants highlighted the challenges of remaining faithful to their religious principles while accommodating the needs and values of a pluralistic society.

### **Influence of Religious Philosophy on Ethical Decision-Making**

The second theme centers around how religious philosophy shapes ethical decisions within both professional and social spheres. The data revealed that participants frequently referred to religious texts and teachings as their primary source of guidance, yet they also acknowledged the need for reinterpretation and adaptation. As one scholar explained, "I believe in the core teachings of my religion, but I have to interpret them carefully, especially when the situation requires a more nuanced approach" (Informant 8).

This theme suggests that religious philosophy is not static but evolves based on contextual understanding. In the professional domain, particularly in education and religious leadership, the participants frequently navigated ethical decisions that demanded both faithfulness to tradition and an openness to contemporary ethical issues. One participant shared, "While the sacred texts are unchanging, we must look at the spirit of the law, not just the letter, when making ethical choices in modern contexts" (Informant 4). This highlights the dynamic interplay between fixed religious doctrines and the ethical flexibility needed to address the challenges of contemporary life.

### **Ethical Dilemmas and Personal Beliefs**

A third theme emerged regarding the personal nature of ethical dilemmas experienced by the scholars. Many participants emphasized the deeply subjective nature of their ethical decision-making processes. They reported that their personal experiences, beliefs, and interpretations of religious texts played a significant role in how they approached ethical issues. One informant shared, "My decisions

are guided not just by religious texts but by my own experiences in life. My understanding of what is ethical has evolved over time" (Informant 2).

This theme underscores the importance of individual agency in ethical decision-making. The scholars acknowledged that their personal journeys and interactions with others in their social and professional environments shaped how they perceived and responded to ethical dilemmas. For example, one participant reflected, "What was once a black-and-white issue has become more nuanced for me as I have encountered different people and perspectives" (Informant 7). This highlights how personal experiences and evolving interpretations of religious philosophy intersect in the process of making ethical decisions.

### **Teaching Religious Ethics in a Modern Context**

The final theme concerns the role of religious education in addressing ethical challenges. Several participants noted that teaching religious ethics in today's world requires a balance between upholding traditional values and addressing contemporary ethical dilemmas. One scholar remarked, "Teaching religious ethics today is not just about transmitting knowledge; it's about helping students navigate ethical dilemmas with a compassionate and informed perspective" (Informant 6). This sentiment was echoed by others, who emphasized the importance of making religious teachings relevant and applicable to the challenges faced by individuals in modern society.

In the classroom and in religious discussions, the scholars noted that they often encouraged students to engage with religious texts critically, questioning traditional interpretations when necessary. As one informant noted, "Our role as educators is to help students think critically about their faith, not just accept what they are told. This is crucial for addressing modern ethical challenges" (Informant 9). This approach reflects a growing awareness among the participants of the need for educational reform to make religious teachings more responsive to the ethical complexities of modern life.

The findings from this study reveal that Indonesian religious scholars face complex ethical dilemmas arising from the tension between traditional religious teachings and the dynamic realities of contemporary social and professional life. Their ethical decision-making is heavily influenced by their personal beliefs, interpretations of religious texts, and the evolving nature of societal norms. This highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to religious education that incorporates critical thinking and allows for the adaptation of religious principles to modern ethical challenges. The scholars' experiences underscore the importance of balancing doctrinal fidelity with the ethical demands of a pluralistic society.

The findings from this study reveal a profound understanding of how Indonesian religious scholars navigate the tension between religious teachings and the ethical dilemmas they face in their personal and professional lives. The core insight of the research shows that scholars' ethical decision-making is deeply influenced by both their adherence to religious principles and the social realities that challenge these principles. This tension, explored through a phenomenological lens, highlights the complexity and richness of the scholars' lived experiences as they engage with ethical challenges, demonstrating how religious teachings can both guide and conflict with real-world decisions.

The study contributes significantly to answering the central question raised in the introduction regarding how religious scholars experience and make sense of ethical dilemmas in the context of their faith. The research finds that scholars' ethical decision-making is not merely a logical application of religious rules, but rather a dynamic, subjective process shaped by personal beliefs, social context, and professional pressures. These findings provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between religion and ethics, emphasizing the emotional and intellectual complexities that scholars face. By focusing on the subjective experiences of these individuals, the study deepens our understanding of how religious beliefs are internalized and applied in complex social environments, offering new insights into the intersection of religion, ethics, and professional life.

When comparing these findings with existing literature, it becomes clear that while many studies have explored religious ethics and decision-making, they often rely on generalized models that overlook the subjective, lived experiences of individuals. Previous research has largely treated ethical dilemmas as theoretical constructs or statistical data, without fully capturing the emotional and personal dimensions of the decision-making process. This study, however, aligns with phenomenological research in other fields, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the lived experiences of individuals. It also supports theoretical perspectives that argue for a more holistic approach to studying ethics, one that incorporates both individual subjectivity and social context. The findings echo those of scholars such as van Manen (1990) and Giorgi (2009), who assert that phenomenology provides essential insights into the way people experience and interpret their world, particularly in complex moral and ethical contexts. By focusing on the personal narratives of religious scholars, this study contributes to a richer understanding of how faith and ethical decision-making intersect in ways that are often overlooked in broader studies.

The findings of this study have significant implications for both academic and practical contexts. From an academic perspective, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the subjective nature of ethical decision-making among religious scholars. The study emphasizes the importance of considering personal, social, and professional dimensions when analyzing ethical behavior in religious contexts. Practically, the findings suggest that religious education and training programs may benefit from incorporating discussions about ethical dilemmas and the real-world challenges scholars face in applying religious teachings. This could foster a more dynamic and responsive approach to teaching ethics, one that accounts for the complex interplay between religious principles and the lived realities of the practitioners. Furthermore, the study's insights are highly relevant for policymakers and religious institutions seeking to adapt educational frameworks that support scholars in navigating these dilemmas, ensuring that ethical teachings are not only theoretical but also practical and adaptable in diverse social contexts.

Despite its valuable contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings (Sung dkk., 2021). First, the sample size of 10 religious scholars may limit the generalizability of the results to a broader population. The experiences captured in this study are deeply personal and context-specific, reflecting the unique challenges faced by a small group of individuals. Additionally, while the phenomenological approach provides rich insights into individual experiences, it is inherently limited in its ability to account for the broader societal or institutional factors that may influence ethical decision-making at a larger scale. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size, exploring other religious contexts, or utilizing longitudinal methods to examine how ethical dilemmas evolve over time.

Building upon the findings of this study, future research could further explore the intersection of religious ethics and professional life by examining other religious communities or institutional settings. This could involve studying how different religious traditions shape ethical decision-making or comparing the experiences of scholars across various educational institutions (George, 2020). Additionally, future studies could investigate the long-term impact of training in religious ethics on scholars' professional practices, particularly in terms of how they resolve ethical conflicts over time. Another promising direction for future research is to explore the role of gender, socioeconomic background, and other demographic factors in shaping religious scholars' ethical perspectives. Such studies would expand our understanding of how different experiences influence ethical decision-making and contribute to the ongoing development of religious education and ethics.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the ethical decision-making experiences of religious scholars within their professional contexts, addressing the gap in understanding the subjective and complex nature of their ethical challenges. The findings revealed that religious scholars often navigate ethical dilemmas through a combination of personal experience, religious teachings, and social influences, which significantly impacts their decision-making processes. By applying a phenomenological approach, this research provides a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how these scholars interpret and

apply ethical principles in real-world situations, filling a gap left by previous studies that relied on more general or quantitative methods. This study has several limitations that must be considered. Firstly, the relatively small sample size of ten participants, while providing deep insights into individual experiences, limits the generalizability of the findings. The experiences captured in this study reflect those of a specific group of religious scholars, which may not be fully representative of all religious scholars, especially in different cultural or geographical contexts. Secondly, the study's cross-sectional design only captures the participants' experiences at a single point in time, which means that it does not account for how their ethical decision-making processes might evolve over time or in response to significant life changes or events.

These limitations may impact the findings in the sense that they may not fully reflect the broader or longitudinal trends in ethical decision-making among religious scholars. Therefore, the study's conclusions should be viewed with these constraints in mind, particularly when considering how the findings might apply to larger populations or different settings.

The insights gained offer valuable contributions to religious education and ethical training, suggesting that a more dynamic approach to ethics education could better support scholars in their professional lives. Given these limitations, future research should consider expanding the sample size and including scholars from different religious traditions, regions, and demographic backgrounds. This would help to ensure that the findings are more generalizable and reflective of the diversity within religious communities. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how ethical decision-making evolves over time, especially in response to changing societal values or personal experiences. Future research could expand on these findings by examining other religious communities or exploring how demographic factors influence ethical decision-making across diverse contexts. Ultimately, this study highlights the need for ongoing exploration of religious ethics in practice, emphasizing the importance of understanding lived experiences in shaping moral behavior.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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