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Business Ethics in Islam: Assessing Traders' Understanding of Islamic Work Ethics; Perspectives of Muslim Market Women in Kumasi Central Market, Ghana

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Abstract. The study aimed at assessing Muslim traders' understanding of Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) using perspectives from Muslim Market Women in the Kumasi Central Market in Ghana. Being an exploratory study, the purposive sampling technique was adopted to select nineteen (19) respondents to be interviewed using the one-on-one in-depth interview instrument. The participants involved twelve (12) Islam Women Traders, five (5) regular customers of the traders and two (2) Muslim Religious Leaders. The study found out that the main Islam ethical teachings for Islam traders include Sincerity, honesty, humility, fairness in pricing, truthfulness, love for customers and fellow traders. The study concludes that Islamic Women traders in the Kumasi Central Market do have fair understanding of Islamic Work Ethics. A major recommendation this study makes is to encourage a methodical training and education of Muslim Women on the accepted trading ethics and standards enshrined in Islam. The focus of these trainings should be on the rationale for the principles and consequences for non-abiders. Again, the study recommends for the formation of women groups which could serve as a springboard for inviting Islam religious leaders to encourage and assist them through seminar and educative programmes. Further studies on the phenomenon should assess the impact of knowledge of these ethical principles on the trading behaviors of Islamic Women Traders in the Kumasi Central Market.

Keywords: Islamic work ethic, ethical trading, loyalty, Islamic trade, religion.

1.0 Introduction

Religious beliefs and practices of a group of people do have great influence on all their social and economic behaviors and approaches to issues. People do have a heritage, a culture and religious beliefs which dictate to them how to carry out their day-to-day activities or transactions. Ethics refers to standards of behavior which indicate how individuals ought to behave in the society or group that they find themselves. This point has been argued by Josephson (1989) who defined the concept of ethics as a "system or code of conduct based on universal moral duties and obligations which indicate how one should behave; it deals with the ability to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong and propriety from impropriety" (p. 2). Each religion has its own moral rules for conduct of individuals and groups and the yardstick for measuring this varies from place to place. These rules determine what is right and wrong. Ethical judgment on the other hand deals with issues involving legal, commercial, social, philosophical, political and psychological aspects. Business is an economic system in which goods and services are exchanged for one another or money, on the basis of their perceived worth. A business (also known as enterprise or firm) is an organization designed to provide goods services or both to consumers.

In business, there are many different people you have to respond to: customers, shareholders and clients, suppliers, government among others. Business ethics refers to the moral rules and regulations governing the business world. In other words, they are the moral values that guide the way corporations or other business makes decisions. Some business ethics are imposed by law.e.g. The Securities and Exchange Commission governs the way investment bankers and stock brokers do business, and court rules dealing with attorney client privilege dictate some ethical decisions for attorneys. However there are also business decisions that do not fall near the guide lines of the law, in which ethical or moral judgments must be made. Businesses regard profit as a very important factor in business. In contemporary business world, it even appears unethical for a business not to make profit.

Businesses must hence go with their obligation to society as well. Business ethics is defined as the application of ethical principles and methods of analysis to business. Ethical questions are divided in two types as; overt and covert issues. Overt issues are open and can be seen such as bribery, theft, sabotage, collusion while covert issues are hidden such as corporate acquisition, marketing policies, capital investments, market espionage. Both issues hurt the business in several forms. Business ethics is a specialized study of moral right and wrong which concentrates on moral standards as they apply to business policies, institution and behavior.

It is important to note that business enterprises are the primary economic institutions through which people in modern societies carry on tasks of producing and distributing goods and services. They provide the fundamental structures and channels by means of which goods and services are produced and distributed. Business ethics, hence, studies the moral standards and how they apply to the system and organizations.

Belt (2002), notes that the term Islam itself is an Arabic word meaning ‘submission to God – Allah,’ with its roots in the Arabic word ‘Salam’ which literally means peace. That may come as a surprise to many non-Muslims, whose perceptions of the belief have been distorted by terrorists, mainly from the Middle East and in recent times in other African countries including Northern Nigeria, Somalia, and Mali among others, whose acts in the name of Islam have been condemned by Muslim leaders everywhere. According to the Muslim faith, submission to God “implies that all actions undertaken by Muslims are acts of worship. Thus eating, drinking, socializing, buying, selling, promoting, manufacturing, education and so on have to comply with God’s rules” (Alhersan, 2011, p.5). The author further argues that Islam provides either general or detailed instructions about what is permissible and what is not. Detailed instructions are provided on the acts of pure worship such as prayer, pilgrimage, fasting and charity, as well as a multitude of other aspects of life. However, general guidelines are provided in what is referred to by Prophet

Muhammad as ‘the affairs of your worldly life’. For example, some rules, like forbidding the use of interest rates as a method of making money, represent a general guideline.

Wilson (1997), argues that with over 1400 of 6226 verses referring to economic issues, the Koran appears more concerned about economic life than the Bible. Concerning trade, the Islamic Religion’s views differ from Christianity. Whereas for Christians, trade is a necessity that does not add value to the commodity traded, in Islam, trading is considered as important as producing (ibid). It is argued that without the exchange of goods, production would be worth much less. This trade favoring position is pronounced explicitly in several passages of the Koran. Sura 4:29 warns to keep exclusive control over personal property and postulates “let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual goodwill”. The Koran condemns any attempt to deceive or to cheat in economic transactions. Furthermore, Muslims should only get involved into trading when they are able to take responsibility for the quality of the traded good. Finally, the possible gains from trade should not result in materialism. As in the Bible, materialism is considered as diverting the attention from more important spiritual concerns, the Koran also condemns coveting of a neighbor’s good. However, it does not denounce the accumulation of wealth. Wealth is seen as a means of serving God and not an end in itself. Wealth also comes with responsibilities, most prominently with the responsibility to give, and since believers are promised much more in the afterlife, material wealth in this world is seen as secondary.

Adam Smith, in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776), indicates that businessmen are “an order of men, whose interest is never the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it” (quoted in Koontz et al., 1980, p. 31). Since the early days of Islam, in particular, Muslims have offered unique perspectives on work and have formulated specific conceptualization of work

ethic. In all probability, their articulation of work ethic and desired behavior has reinforced their faith and accelerated social and economic changes that were seldom experienced in Arabia, the birth place of Islam. Indeed, as documented in the following sections, the positive meaning that was attached to work was at that time a novel development and arguably is in tune with today's contemporary thinking. For example, Ibn Khaldun and Abd al-Rahman (1989, p. 273), the medieval Arab sociologists, argue that engaging in business serves four objectives: facilitating cooperation and mutual understanding among people, satisfying the needs of people, increasing wealth and influence and spurning the growth of cities. Unlike work ethic in Judaism and Christianity, Islamic work ethic (IWE) has been misunderstood or ignored in management and organization studies. Whether right or wrong, regardless of what an individual believes about a particular action, if society judges it to be unethical or wrong, whether correctly or not, that judgment directly affects the organization's ability to achieve its business goals, hence the need for strong emphasis on the study of business ethics.

From all the philosophical ideas behind ethics, it is clear that we cannot divorce ethics from our economic activities since issues of profit motive could have the tendency of driving businesses to indulge in certain misconducts such as insider trading, falsification of financial performances among others which are regarded as unethical. So long as these states of affairs continue to exist, ethics comes into play. Ethics is even more important in the sense that the organization is made up of individuals with different moral backgrounds and values which sometimes conflict with issues on the job. In view of the need for business ethics, several ethical theories have been developed helping us to; first of all identify the moral considerations or reason that constitute dilemmas, secondly, provide a more precise sense of what kind of information are relevant to solving moral dilemmas and thirdly, to offer ways to rank relevant moral consideration in order of importance and thereby provide a guidance in solving moral problems.

To juxtapose the above in the Ghanaian context, one first of all needs to recap the environment in which most Ghanaian businesses operate. Most of these businesses operate within a largely informal environment, coupled with variously unregulated activities of these businesses even within the formal sector. It is therefore, clear that issues that raise ethical questions may arise. These include tax evasion and avoidance; bribery and corruption; environmental destruction, examples by some mining companies; deceitful advertisements; sexual harassments; violations of employee rights; poor attitudes of workers especially in the public sector among others. These issues can variously be addressed if ethical consideration or values are variously promoted within the business environment.

The Kumasi Central Market is a place for business transactions where many traders of different religious backgrounds interact and transact. With the ideal Islamic teachings and practices of fair play, comradeship, empathy and avoidance of cheating as well as eschewing unethical behaviors in one's trading activities, it is quintessential to investigate the level of understanding and knowledge levels of Muslim Market Women regarding these. In an era where there is an increased and renewed emphasis on teaching and learning business ethics, the highly pertinent question being raised is the role of faith and religious beliefs on business practices. Do religious beliefs help produce more ethical organizations and business people? As a major world religion with clearly defined rules, restrictions and behavioural guidelines, what are Islam's teachings regarding ethical practices in commerce? The study answers some of these questions by throwing light on the Islamic teachings on business conduct, or what has been known since the early Islamic periods as the 'rules of sales and commerce'. The main objective of the study was to assess Islamic women traders' understanding of what Islam permits and disallows in their trading profession. In other words, it sought to assess the understanding of Muslim women traders on Islam business ethics using the Kumasi Central Market as a case.

2.0 Literature review

Religion and Trade Ethics

Helbe (2006), argues that beside individual differences between people, culture is the main driving force that separates humans into groups. Out of the many elements that define culture, only two are readily observable: language and religion. The author argues that religion may even be more influential for the human behavior and suggests that one would not be far from right to conjecture that religious beliefs also impact economic exchange among people. This suggests that religious beliefs of individuals in most cases dictate their ethical behavior.

The concept of ethics defies a single definition; it has however, been generally accepted to relate to an individual's conscience by which one is directed to reach fair decision on the basis of organizational values. Philosophically, ethics directs and guides all individuals including traders to make the right decisions by distinguishing between right and wrong. Put differently, ethics is about standards of behavior that tells how human beings ought to act in the many situations in which they find themselves as: friends; Parents; Children; Citizens; Business people; Teachers; Professionals; Politicians; traders and so on. According to Josephson (1989), ethics refers to "system or code of conduct based on universal moral duties and obligations which indicate how one should behave; it deals with the ability to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong and propriety from impropriety". It is a body of principles or standards of human conduct that govern the behavior of individuals and groups.

Though ethics is not about religion, and of course not the same as morality, there appears to be inter-linkages and relationships between these concepts. Religion and religious practices or values of individuals to a greater extent have influence on their ethical standards. Each religion has their codes and teachings which serve as

points of reflection or mental frame that directs the ethical conduct or how people even carry out their trading activities.

Enterprise culture and religion

The notions of enterprise culture and religion appear to have some correlations. The correlation seems to be different among the various religious practices. In a Weberian perspective, changes in the socio-cultural framework of religion might be influential on entrepreneurial activities by facilitating and encouraging them. Weber (2004), argues that the Protestant ethic facilitated a distinct form of capitalism, namely reproductive entrepreneurship with the rational outcome of developed business. Enterprise culture has been used to refer to the market-responsive initiatives of business in the private sector, and by some commentators, it is still understood in this way (Morris, 1991). For instance, in UK during the reign of Thatcher, an enterprise culture was revamped into the system. The aim of Thatcher's endeavour in creating an enterprise culture was to enhance the competitive performance of the British economy, so that Britain could challenge the other well developed countries, such as America, Japan and Germany (Carr, 2000). Carr further outlines some key features that need to be exhibited by enterprising individuals. Enterprising individuals according to Carr (2000), need to possess these attributes: initiative, risk-taking, flexibility, creativity, independence, leadership, strong ethic, daring spirit, responsibility (p. 11).

The literature suggests that individual religious beliefs or practices in most cases do influence their propensity to showcase the attributes outlined by Carr (2000). Religion has effect on how individuals transact or engage in businesses. This point has been observed by Weber (2004) who stresses the crucial role that Calvinist Protestantism played in the formation of rational capitalism. The history of capitalism is older than that of Protestantism. However, Weber argues that the puritan ethic; which encourages a disciplined and frugal life style, and being hard-

working as religious obligations; facilitated a distinct form of capitalism that is called -rational capitalism, namely reproductive entrepreneurship with the rational outcome of developed business. A glance at the occupational statistics of any country of mixed religious composition brings to light with remarkable frequency a situation which has several times provoked discussion in the Catholic press and literature and in Catholic congresses in Germany, namely, the fact that business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labour, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant (Weber 2004, p. 7). Banks (1998), also stresses that PWE is mostly related to hard work, and he mentions the following behaviours in his PWE definition: (1) The belief that work gives meaning to life; (2) a strong sense of duty to one's work; (3) the necessity of hard work, giving work even before family the best of one's time; (4) believing that work contributes to the moral worth of the individual and to the health of the social order (p.5).

Criteria for assessing what is permissible and not permissible

What selection criteria should be used when determining which companies are acceptable from the point of view of Islamic investors? How should the companies be ethically monitored? Can such monitoring be carried out in a cost effective fashion given the large amount of published information available in most company accounts? How much attention should be paid to company mission statements? How seriously should press reports be treated? Does the rejection of companies on ethical grounds imply that an Islamically acceptable portfolio will yield lower dividends and smaller capital gains than one not subject to non-financial constraints? There are a multitude of issues that confront any Islamic investors wanting to place funds in equity markets. Purists could of course argue that all investment in western markets and those of most Muslim countries is unacceptable, as quoted companies inevitably deal with *riba*-based banks. Many deal in products which are not acceptable to Muslims, even if their main business is *halal*. Food retailers, hotel

chains and airlines, for example, often derive a proportion of their revenue from alcohol sales, but does this mean that such businesses are to be classified with breweries and excluded from any Islamic investment portfolio?

For equity investment it can be argued that investing in companies involved with *riba*-based banks can be dealt with in a similar fashion. Furthermore what matters is the company's main business activity, and it is inappropriate to boycott a otherwise acceptable trading company such as a supermarket chain simply because a small proportion of its activities are *haram*. Adopting a 5 or 10 per cent rule for unacceptable activities is possible, although such criteria are, of course, arbitrary. For the ethical investor who wishes to deploy his or her funds according to personal religious values, the ultimate test must be the investor's own conscience. *Shariah* advisers can help, but all human agents inevitably disagree. While respecting the advice given by eminent *shariah* scholars, the devout Muslim can nevertheless read the Koran himself or herself, and seek guidance through prayer. The investor will want to ensure that not merely personal financial interests, but those of his or her family are safeguarded, indeed the interests of all those whose welfare the investor is responsible for. These responsibilities are also a matter of conscience which has to be balanced with the quest for financial purity. Financial management concerns the stewardship of resources which for the devout Muslim are ultimately provided by the almighty. The ordinary investor can only do his or her best to carry out financial responsibilities in an honest fashion (Wilson, 1997).

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted the case study design within qualitative research paradigm in assessing the level of understanding of trade ethics among Muslim traders in the Kumasi Central. The qualitative paradigm was deemed appropriate for the study because the approach enabled the researcher to have an in-depth interaction with participants which led to a detailed understanding of the phenomenon under

discussion. Qualitative research involves the use of soft data in the form of gestures, impressions, symbols of the respondents (Neuman, 2007). The researcher combined the purposive and simple random sampling techniques to select respondents for the study.

A total of nineteen (19) respondents were selected for the study. The distribution of the respondents was as follows: twelve (12) Muslim Women traders (4 wholesalers, 4 retailers, 4 hawkers) in the Kumasi Central Market. Again, five (5) regular customers of the Muslim women traders were selected, and finally two (2) Muslim leaders or Imams were selected for the study. The main instrument of data collection was through the use of in-depth interviews. This instrument was deemed appropriate because it afforded the researcher an opportunity to interact face-to-face with respondents and it also allowed for detailed responses to be obtained through follow-up questions that allowed for clearer and detailed responses from participants. All interview sessions were facilitated by a well designed interview guide and all proceedings of the interviews were audio-recorded; after each interview the proceedings were replayed aloud; the interviews were transcribed and typed into word format. The typed data was subjected to a thorough content analysis. The analysis involved a description and interpretation of data in the form of narratives, including direct quotations from the interviewees.

4.0 Findings and discussions

Demographic profile

The demographic data of the sample selected for the study suggests that the Muslim women traders have a long history of practicing the Islamic Religion and in the Kumasi Central Market. The data suggests that respondents are grown ups, all respondents (100%) are above age thirty and each of them have been in the Kumasi market for at least fifteen years. This suggests that the respondents could provide

the necessary information to achieve the research objectives. The data also indicates that all traders have practiced Islam for a very long time at least between 21 to 30 years. Meanwhile, 91.67% of respondents have practiced Islam between 31-60 years which suggests that they should be well aware of Islamic teachings on work ethics surrounding their business.

Traders' understanding of Muslim work ethics relating to their businesses

The main objective of the study was to assess Muslim women traders' understanding of Islam work ethics relating to trading. In other words, the objective was to assess their level of understanding of how Islam teaches or obliges them to treat their customers.

In the in-depth interviews with twelve (12) women traders, whilst respondents answered unanimously in the affirmative, three of them were very sure that they know Islam trade ethics. However, the remaining nine (9) affirmed they are aware of it but not entirely; which suggests that they are not totally ignorant. Even those who claimed not to know, upon further interviews and follow-up questions, their responses suggested they are aware of Islam trade ethics and how trading activities ought to be carried out. Respondents were asked to mention some of the trade ethics guiding Islamic traders. The principles they mentioned are summed up as; sincerity, honesty, fairness, humility, and love among others.

A thirty-three (33) year old trader explained that:

"I am quite aware of what Islam tells us to do as traders, these include fairness in sharing profit and loss, fair and reasonable pricing system, just or fair with what is right and we should value our business".

A forty-nine (49) year old trader at the Kumasi Central Market answered that, though she is not quite aware of Islam trade ethics, she does it in her own way. She mentioned some of the practices that guide her to include:

“I know I am to avoid being arrogant; i should avoid disrespectful act and show love to customers and lastly polite”.

A fifty-two (52) year old Muslim trader who though claimed not very aware of Islam ethics was able to mention some of the elements she thinks will be required of them to include:

“I do not know Islam ethics very well but i know some...to be hardworking; to be humble; patience; truthfulness; humility towards people; sincerity toward people and patience towards people”.

Respondents were asked to mention what Islam teaches with regards to pricing goods and services. All respondents appeared to be aware of fair pricing, fairness and the avoidance of abnormal profits and cheating clients.

One of the respondents answered that:

“in our dealings with people, we should be fair in our pricing we should be truthful”.

Another respondent reiterated the point above by arguing that:

“...we should be patient with customers, we should avoid illegal profit, and we should avoid cheating”.

The submissions above regarding Islamic trade ethics coincide with what the Hadith as well as Koran teaches. This suggests that the traders have a fair idea of

Islamic teachings on ethics. Islamic Religion has some useful thoughts on trade ethics and the consequences and grievous. For instance, the Prophet Muhammed (S.A.W) admonishes good trading habits and abhors unethical trade decisions and practices. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) encouraged the trust worthy traders by these words, “A trustworthy and truthful merchant shall be with the prophets and the truthful and the martyrs and the righteous.” The Holy Prophet further provides that Allah shows mercy to a person who is kind when he sells, when he buys and when he makes a claim. The Prophet emphasized on the truthfulness and the righteousness of the businessmen a lot when he spoke that “Verily, merchants shall be raised up sinners on the day of resurrection, except he who fears God, and is good, and speaks the truth.”(P.B.U.H.)

The researcher interacted with Muslim opinion leaders in the Kumasi Metropolis to find out what Islam teaches on trading ethics. In an interview with an Imam at the Zabo Zongo, the Imam summarized Islam teachings on trade ethics as:

“they should be welcoming, must have care towards customers, should be friendly and they should respect clients and other traders. He further added that they should be peaceful at the market place; traders should be forgiving towards customers and should treat them with care”.

On the issue of how Muslim traders price their commodities or goods and services, the Imam submitted that:

“they should avoid over pricing, they should desist from being disloyal and traders should be reasonable”.

This suggests that Muslim traders should not indulge in unfair treatment of people and should also guard against being cheated. That is the ‘reasonability’ element. Islamic law invites mankind to value actions not only on faith, but also on rational

ground. This is done by initially looking at the benefits (*manfaah*) and disbenefits (*mudarah*) generated from particular human action self-interest, even when an Islamic system is in place. It also confirms an argument made by Haykal (1976) that “O Men, your lives and your property shall be inviolate until you meet your Lord”.

5.0 Summary, conclusions, recommendations

The study found out that, though most of them were not confident of what they knew; Muslim traders in the Kumasi Central Market have fair idea of Islamic trade ethics. Their views on trade ethics are summarized as:

Sincerity, honesty, humility, fairness in pricing, should be truthful, as well as love for customers and fellow traders. In the view of respondents, Islam obliges adherents to avoid over pricing, desist from being disloyal and above all Islam traders are obliged to be reasonable.

Conclusions

From interactions with respondents and discussions above, the study concludes that Islam has ideal principles that serve as benchmarks for Islam traders. These principles include trustworthiness, honesty, friendliness and love which should be the guiding principles that direct Islam traders. The study concludes that, though not in a systematic and holistic manner, these fundamental principles to a greater extent are known by Muslim women traders at the Kumasi Central Market. In other words, the study concludes that participants to a greater extent do have fair understanding of Islamic work ethic. As to whether the knowledge of these ethical principles translates into their trading behaviors, this could only be ascertained through a further study on the phenomenon.

Recommendations

In order to strengthen Muslim women traders' understanding of Islamic trade ethics in a more systematic and holistic manner, the study makes the following key recommendations.

A major recommendation this study makes is to enhance the training and education of Muslim Women on the accepted trading ethics and standards established by Islam. Traders should be educated on the acceptable Islamic standards and should be taught the consequences of not abiding by these standards. This would further enhance their understanding of what Islam expects from them. Methodically educating traders would enhance their confidence in the teachings and reinforce what they already appear to know and also clear all doubts regarding trade ethics.

Again, the study recommends for the formation of women groups so that they could invite their religious leaders to encourage and assist them through seminar and workshops.

Finally, Muslim leaders should monitor their followers by regularly interacting with them to ensure their people abide by the Islamic ethical principles.

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