The Sacred and the Profane in Islamic Consumption

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This paper examines the concept of material consumption culture in the Moslem world. It differentiates between institutionalized religion and religion as culture, contests the portrayal of Islam as a dogmatic ideological system, and concludes that in their profane consumption practices, Moslems interpret the sacred (Islamic guidelines) in multiple ways.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009204/volumes/v39/NA-39

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The majority of existing literature on consumption in Islamic societies is based on the premises of reductionist conventional theories that make general assumptions about Islamic ideation with little attention and relevance to Moslems’ daily life practices. Such conventional theories – that come from two camps outside and inside of the Moslem world – make superficial analogies between the West and Islam. The former is epitomized in Weber’s (1958, 1965) trivial analysis of Islam, economy and society in which whilst protestant ethic is driven by value-based rationality, Moslems’ value systems are based on militant (jihād) instrumental-rationality (short term self-interest and pillaging) and emotional (martyrdom) motivations. Therefore, neither capital accumulation is possible nor worldly pleasures are pursued. As a result, Moslems essentially wash their hands off the worldly blessings. Generated from within the Moslem world, the latter stream of theories also adopts a reductionist approach. Consumption in this perspective is largely analyzed within the rigid framework of halāl (lawful) and haram (unlawful), the mustahabb (favored) and makruh (disliked). Such dichotomous categorizations – which legitimize some deeds and demonize others (Soroush, 2000) – prevail in the Islamic discourse as Moslem scholars rarely transgress these rigid boundaries to study consumption from other possible angles (e.g., social, cultural, aesthetic). Typically, entrenched in an ‘ideologized Islam’ (Soroush, 2000), consumption culture is viewed (see, for example, Khan 1984; Kaff’re 1996; Kalantari 2008; Ormanlar 1999; Razzaghi 1996) as the essence of Western capitalism (and, of course, its subsequent Modernity) which seeks to impose its value systems (socio-cultural and economic) on Islamic societies.

Both of these perspectives have encouraged narrow binary oppositions of Islam versus the West, ‘the Occident versus the Orient’, and ‘Modernity versus religion’. Whilst the first stream has adopted an ‘Orientalist’ (Said 1978) approach to define Western Modernity in relation to an anti-Moslem Islam, the second perspective has, in a self-Orientalist manner, responded to the superficial assumptions of the first camp in a superficial way. The above-mentioned Moslem scholars have failed to analyze the ever-changing conditions of contemporary life in Moslem societies and overlooked the context-dependency of consumption (Hasan 2005) and the historical trajectories that have traditionally shaped foundations of the private and public lives of Moslems (Jafari 2009). Therefore, there is a need to transgress these cliché assumptions that are not capable of explaining Moslems’ complicated and often paradoxical everyday life consumption practices in contemporary society.

On the other hand, due to the cultural turn’s emphasis on identity issues, the culture of consumption in contemporary Moslem societies has been predominantly analyzed from the lens of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). The existing studies of consumption culture in Islamic societies have examined this subject mainly with reference to the global expansion of consumer culture and multiple discourses associated with globalization (Pink 2009; Sandikci and Ger 2002), issues of resistance or ideological/political identity formation and negotiation (Kiliçbay and Binark 2002; Jafari and Goulding 2008; Fischer 2008), and formation of modern identities in new national and international geographies (Wong 2007; Üstünler and Holt 2007; Sandikci and Ger 2010). These studies have all extended our knowledge of consumption practices within the Moslem world. For instance, they have proposed ‘multiple roots to modernity’ (Sandikci and Ger 2002); hence, contesting the clichéd perceptions of a hegemonic Western Modernity. They have also opposed the puritan views which portray consumption culture in Islamic societies “as a threat, harmful to religion as it privileges hedonism, pleasure, individualism and an excessive lifestyle” (Wong 2007, 451).

Whilst we acknowledge that the expansion of consumption culture in Moslem societies is associated with pervasive globalization (Kiliçbay and Binark 2002; Sandikci and Ger 2010) and that Moslems practice multiple modernities and Islams (Wong 2007), we argue, as the core of our theoretical contribution, that the popularization of material consumption in the Moslem world is largely stimulated by the embeddedness of this culture within the everyday practices of Islam. We draw on Soroush (2000) and contend that Islam is both secular and plural and it is these characteristics that pave the way for Moslems’ multiple interpretations of Islam as a source of constituting their lives.

In our argument, we are not apologetic. We do not seek to defend Islam as a Modern religion juxtaposed with the West. On the contrary, we emphasize that such binary oppositions are political/ideological concepts that are often augmented by biased media in populist ways. Therefore, we contest the portrayal of Islam as a rigid ideological system and demonstrate that in their everyday life consumption activities (the profane), Moslems constantly (re)interpret religious guidelines of Islam (the sacred) as cultural codes rather than rigid doxas. With reference to Haddorff’s (2000) typology of the market-religion interactions, we discuss that in Islam’s view, there is a close symbiotic relationship between the sacred and the profane to the extent that abandoning either one to the benefit of the other is reproached (Naraghi 2009/1771-1829). Transgressing the boundaries between the two, peoples’ cultural understanding of Islam (Soroush 2000) plays a crucial role in constituting localized cultural forms of Islam. For instance, popular religious activities such as rituals and feasts are all socio-cultural sites where the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are transgressed as cultural sense making activities. In such situations, not only are the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ symbiotically present (Belk et al., 1989; Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Muñiz and Schau, 2005), but also the Halal (lawful) and Haram (unlawful), the Mustahabb (favored) and Makruh (disliked), and the Islamic and un-Islamic may all be juxtaposed to shape Moslems’ mundane consumption practices.

Therefore, we propose the term ‘authorized selection’ to denote the fact that with reference to religion, individuals authorize themselves to selectively interpret Islam and justify their own choices (lifestyles and consumption practices). Based on the premises of this paper, we humbly invite our fellow scholars to forsake the clichéd binary oppositions (e.g., the West vs. Islam) and apologetic approaches and embark on fresh investigation of very exciting and paradoxical consumption practices that prevail not only in the Moslem world but also in the population of other creeds.

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