

Brand Islam: The Marketing and Commodification of Piety

Faegheh Shirazi

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Brand Islam: The Marketing and Commodification of Piety examines the growing business of Muslim merchandise, ranging from food products considered *ḥalāl* (permissible) to children's dolls that represent devout Muslim behavior through sartorial choices such as modest clothing and the wearing of the veil. Faegheh Shirazi illustrates how a growing Muslim market often intersects, in both problematic and intriguing ways, with capitalism. Using an extensive survey of case studies, illustrations, and diverse Muslim communities (Iran and Indonesia are often cited), the book provides a useful exploration of the question of Muslim consumption and contributes to larger discussions surrounding material religion.

In chapter 1, Shirazi begins her investigation into these topics by discussing the problem of Islamophobia and how it may influence Muslims to seek out markers of religious identity, thus influencing the market. Her definitions of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and Islamoparanoia are useful, although I felt myself wanting a richer discussion of how these trends intersect with white supremacy, colonial politics, and misogyny. Symbols—especially the veil and the mosque—can be used, as other scholars have shown, to generate anxiety in non-Muslim populations. Although Shirazi is less interested in how these symbols are used to shore up white, male, Christian, or secular authority, she employs them to show the ways in which Islamophobia and radical, literalist Islamic rhetoric feed off each other. The manipulation of this rhetoric is even used when non-Muslims make concessions in an effort to improve relations with Muslims, such as Queen Elizabeth's 2010 visit to the UAE, when she covered her hair. As Shirazi points out, "Sheikh Yasser Burhani, one of Egypt's leading Islamic scholars, jumped on the queen's gesture as justification for furthering an oppressive, fundamentalist Salafi Islamic position" (p. 32). The ways in which the body—in this case a white, regal body—is used in debates surrounding Islam and modernity is at the crux of this book.

Halal food and the economy surrounding its production, monitoring, and distribution is the focus of chapter 2. As Shirazi points out, modernity has had an effect on religious modes of eating and drinking, "While it is

not unusual for religions to establish dietary restrictions, what is unusual is the unprecedented demand for and global marketing of religiously sanctioned foods in the twenty-first century” (p. 39). The chapter begins with a detailed discussion of religious rules surrounding the consumption of food, which includes the designations of *ḥarām* (forbidden), *ḥalāl* (lawful), and the often less-discussed *mashbūh* (essentially, an intermediary category). *Mashbūh*, or “doubtful food,” includes food and drink that would be *ḥarām* under normal circumstances, but changes categories under special circumstances, such as in the case of a patient who must take a life-saving medicine that contains alcohol (p. 40).

The chapter provides a rich discussion of halal foods and the economy surrounding these products, including issues of manufacturing and transport. While interesting, the real value in this chapter lies in Shirazi’s examination of certification standards and, in particular, the questions of who determines what is halal and what happens when there is a disagreement on these determinations. Because Islam is not a monolithic tradition, but one that contains numerous legal schools and countless ulema (religious figures who make judgments on social matters, including the designation of halal), there is predictably much disagreement on the halal question. As Shirazi writes, “Islamic clerics often put forward contradictory interpretations of what is and what is not halal. Indeed, an item deemed halal by one set of fatwas might be considered haram according to another” (p. 49). Compounding this issue are others, including the time limits placed on halal certification and, more importantly, the influence of the market on the determination of halal. This last issue is perhaps of most interest to scholars thinking about the commodification of religion, for the production of counterfeit halal and part-halal foods (such as the 50% halal products pointed to in this chapter) is a growing problem. More importantly, what happens when competing Muslim markets challenge each other?

The most interesting case explored by Shirazi is Indonesia, which has national halal standards and a self-monitoring system that passes by the over forty foreign halal certification ruling organizations (p. 52). The only shortcoming that I voice here is that Shirazi could be more attentive to the economic realities of Indonesia. It has the largest Muslim population in the world and an isolated geographical location, factors that likely influence the move to have a self-regulating body (the MUI) alongside any religious considerations. Shirazi argues that, “by rejecting all halal certifications except those issued by the MUI, Indonesia’s government has created a religious monopoly through which economic gains are tightly controlled and ma-

nipulated” (p. 66). When she describes this as a “disturbing precedent,” I am not sure that the larger economic and political realities of this Southeast Asian nation are being fully considered.

Chapter 3 also examines the halal food industry and in particular focuses on the slaughtering practices that include worship (*ibāda*), the blessing of the animal (*bismillāh*), and numerous rules surrounding halal meats. The question of contamination, either through non-halal meats such as pork or through non-halal permissible meats (such as beef that is not halal) is also taken up in this chapter. Here we see the challenges Muslims who follow halal guidelines face in the marketplace. How they determine what is truly halal is a more difficult question than one might assume. Many of these challenges lie in areas less often discussed in the academic literature, and it is to these details that we owe a great debt to Shirazi, whose intricate discussion of halal issues is so needed. One concern is the prohibitions against consuming blood and plasma. As the author explains, these rules are dictated by the Qur’an, but difficult to follow, for reasons she points out: “To date, no specific testing has been developed to detect blood plasma in food products. Islam prohibits consuming the blood of any animal, even if that animal has been slaughtered by halal standards. Therefore, the presence of plasma in meat products makes them unsuitable for Muslim consumers” (p. 87).

Chapter Four focuses on the halal toy industry, which includes items such as dolls, board games, and educational toys. Dolls provide a particularly interesting case, representing issues such as the legislation of proper dress for girls, anxieties over sexuality, and political ideologies that have characterized Barbie as, for instance, according to Saudi religious authorities, a “Jewish toy,” representing decadence, revealing clothing, and the perversion associated with the West (p. 91). It is perhaps the theological questions these dolls pose that are the most interesting; as Shirazi asks, what is halal about a toy serving as a religious teaching tool? In the case of the Muslim Barbie and its various copycats, Shirazi remarks, “The toy that is purely the creation of man cannot be Muslim because a toy does not follow a religion. In other words, a Muslim is a person who is obedient to Allah and also follows the religion of Islam. A doll is not in the same category as humans; thus the man-made doll cannot be Muslim” (p. 94). The larger theological issues this points to—most explicitly the threat of *shirk*, or the association with other things than Allah—is not fully addressed, but surely would be provocative for a group of students using this book in a university-level course. The great variety of these toys, which include Afghan, Iranian, Emi-

rati, and Bosnian versions, among others, points to Muslims' desires to have religious commodities in their lives. Putting the theological questions aside, the halal toy market demonstrates the power of material Islam in the lives of many Muslims, including children.

In Chapter Five, Shirazi turns her attention to halal skin care and cosmetics. Brand Islam products must fulfill a number of requirements for observant Muslims. Among these, the contamination of beauty items with pork products or other non-halal materials is paramount. One of the points made in this chapter that is particularly important for scholars interested in Islam and modernity is the expansion of the halal category to these non-food items. As Shirazi points out, "Fewer than fifty years ago, no one voiced particular concerns or much consideration of halal products. In Muslim majority nations, the average Muslim looked upon the concepts of halal and haram as primarily pertaining to food, such as pork and its derivatives, and alcoholic beverages" (p. 116). The expansion of the halal category is in part due to the realities of the emerging global market and the exponential growth of such products, which are often mass produced and imported into local communities. As this chapter points out, with items containing the foreskins of circumcised infants (p. 119), the placental material of sheep (p. 120), and skin-cell proteins from aborted fetuses (p. 122), these are well-founded concerns, and not just for the Muslim consumer. Another topic of interest in this chapter is the Islamic legality of certain cosmetic products. As Shirazi explains, a hadith of Prophet Muhammad that prohibits tattoos would also prohibit the practice of permanent eyeliner and eyebrows, which function as tattoos (p. 133). In another example, Iran has launched anti-lipstick campaigns that discourage females from "face painting" (p. 143) and liken lipsticks to weapons that originate in the West to corrupt Islam (p. 143).

Chapters 6 and 7 examine Islamic clothing—halal fashion, sportswear, and lingerie. The topic of Islamic fashion is a growing field of interest for scholars, with studies by Emma Tarlo, Annelies Moors, and Reina Lewis that look at issues involving the fashion industry, styles of veiling, and Muslim anti-fashion campaigns. Shirazi's analysis of Islamic fashion is enriched by her inclusion of visual material, including numerous advertising images, that show how women's bodies are commodified, displayed, and at times disguised in the name of halal fashion. Her brief but cogent discussion of naming, slogans, and Islamic key words in the promotion of Brand Islam is of particular interest to scholars studying the ways in which Arabic and other languages are deployed politically. Shirazi quotes one advertising

campaign that includes the phrase, “Faith, Modesty, Style & Inspiration. Promote your *faith*, uphold your *modesty*, define your *style* and be an *inspiration* to others” (p. 172). Such coding promotes the idea that sartorial choices involve female agency and promote the idea that what an individual Muslim female wears may even reflect the level of her piety.

In the subsequent chapter, which focuses on sportswear and lingerie, Shirazi continues this discussion. As she points out, the market has recently opened up to Islamic sportswear and has been especially rich with sports hijabs, which can be worn at the gym, on the running trail, or in professional sports. In soccer (for non-Americans, football) female Muslim athletes have made noticeable strides; FIFA even changed its rules, allowing for the wearing of the hijab on the field (reversing an earlier policy that argued the hijab would endanger the player). Soccer is not alone in the expansion of sports to include more Muslim athletes. As Shirazi points out, in 2008 the manufacturer of the soccer hijab known as ResportOne “designed a head veil suitable for use in taekwondo,” which was followed by more versions for Formula 1 racing and go-carting (p. 183). Brand Islam is growing in step with the growing number of Muslim athletes, including female sports enthusiasts.

Other items that Shirazi discusses in this chapter include lingerie, which is only a halal issue when it comes to advertising. However, the fact that lingerie is popular with Muslims should be no surprise given that sexual relations between a husband and wife are promoted within Islam. The chapter concludes with an interesting discussion of amulets, which may include items with Arabic script from the Qur’an. This is one of the many places where the marketplace wins over Islamic sensitivities about cultural superstitions. As Shirazi points out, the jewelry industry and use of talismans and amulets reflect the desire among many Muslims to have public displays of their religious commitments, whether they are halal or not.

This last point is one of the many strengths of this volume. Brand Islam is not just reflective of the growing power of the capitalist system, Muslim commodities, and a globalized religious marketplace; it also tells us something about the ways in which Islam is very much a material religion, engaged in bodily practices that are both symbolic of piety and of the choices afforded by modernity.

If I have one critique of Shirazi’s book, it is that she did not include more discussion of the issues raised by Talal Asad and others concerning the secular and the modern in the lives of Muslims and the world of Brand Islam. Asad’s critique of approaches to religion that over-emphasize belief

over human activity—including material practices such as consumerism—is apropos here. How does commercial activity function as a corrupting influence on religious traditions—seen in the production of counterfeit halal foods? Belief does not always trump the desires created by the local and world market, as Shirazi shows in this study. Lastly, Asad’s contention that we are all “conscripts of modernity” is a point made by *Brand Islam*, for it is evidence that Muslims are subject to the same mechanisms or power as other human communities in the contemporary world.

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