



CHAPTER 9

Profaning the Sacred

A Prophetic Critique of Consumerism in the Heart of the Muslim World

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Introduction



In 2003, Mattel's Barbie doll was banned in Saudi Arabia. Barbie was seen as corrupting Islamic ideals of female modesty. In Islamic culture, showing too much skin by women (or men, for that matter) is considered abominable. Barbie's too-short skirts certainly violate such a notion of modesty. In addition, Barbie is ideologically perceived to represent a "Western lifestyle" that does not conform to Arab-Islamic social norms.

A few months after Barbie was outlawed, a new doll named Fulla (Arabian "jasmine") began to arrive in retail stores. Fulla is marketed to Muslim children as an alternative to Barbie. What makes Fulla special is that when she is outdoors, she wears a *hijab*, the modest Muslim style of clothing, covering her head and most of her body. In Saudi Arabia, Fulla wears a black *abaya*, a full-body covering cloak, and a headscarf. In other less conservative Muslim countries she may wear another color headscarf and a pastel coat, and colorful outfits without the *abaya*. Today Fulla is sold in China, Brazil, Indonesia, and the United States as a model of a modest female Muslim who does not display her femininity outside the home.¹

This chapter demonstrates the contradictions consumerism brings to ideals embedded in Islamic scriptures and traditions. While other examples could have





been chosen, Fulla demonstrates these contradictions clearly, showing how a popular product pulls Muslims into the shopping mall, the ultimate place of consumption. Fulla represents the paradox of how mass media can work to subvert Muslim values—even through products that ostensibly aim to preserve them.

As is the case in most of the Western world, media content in Muslim countries is now hostage to mass media (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, etc.) advertising. What this means is that media content is tailored to fit the negotiated demands of advertisers, who are essentially the main purchasers of broadcast time and publishing space. This capitalist structure determines that media content is shaped to suit the desires of those who fund it. The media thus become a powerful tool in promoting the consumerist paradigm. The unhindered commercialization of life in the Muslim world is progressing untamed, coopting Islam itself and its values in the capitalist mechanics of profitmaking. The unmistakable impact of this trend is to repress the main features of the Muslim religious identity through processes of profaning the sacred and sacredizing the profane—that is, treating the profane as if it were sacred.

In this chapter, we articulate a prophetic view of media and consumerism in oil-rich Muslim countries from an Islamic reformist perspective. After providing an overview of the case study, we define key concepts, including what we mean by the Islamic reformist perspective, and other authentic Muslim values embedded in traditional faith that form the foundation of our prophetic critique in the Islamic context. We then demonstrate through prophetic critique how consumerist values have overshadowed Muslim desires for a sacred life. Throughout, we assert that consumerist values are opposed to the Islamic values of freedom from fear, freedom from materialist desires, self-control, equality, and charity. We explain how Islam distinguishes between needs and wants and argue that the concept of needs has been overtaken by the concept of wants in the heart of the Muslim world.

The Meaning of *Fulla*

Fulla is a product of NewBoy FZCO, a company established in 1999 and based in the United Arab Emirates. Selling at a retail price of SR109.00 (U.S. \$30), Fulla became an instant hit upon her arrival in stores in 2003 and secured herself as the most profitable item produced by the company.² In Saudi Arabia, which includes the region of Hijaz, the birth place of Islam, Fulla sells extremely well, so retailers use her popularity to make extravagant profits.

Fulla is not the first of its kind. She was preceded by others like Razanne and Sara, also dolls with Arab and Muslim looks. These did not meet the same level



of success, probably because Fulla's creators used shrewder psychographic marketing techniques. Like them, Fulla has a range of favorite hobbies and professions. Preferred professional options for Fulla include teaching, being a doctor, and other jobs deemed socially appropriate for women from a traditional Arab-Islamic worldview. Unlike them, Fulla is accentuated with a bit darker complexion, with her black hair mimicking the predominant Arab girl look, especially the Arab Gulf girl. Fulla even has a song of her own, "Fulla, the Dream of Every Arabian Girl," played in commercials and sung by little girls just like any other popular song.

Advertisements using Islamic rhetoric, piety, modesty, prayer, and Arab cultural symbols are what made Fulla so successful commercially. By being appropriated commercially, these symbols themselves become commoditized. These, in addition to the children's song mentioned above, made Fulla an irresistible brand for the well-off in Muslim countries where it is marketed. However, in spite of the claim of advancing Islamic values and instead of leading the Arabian girl to the mosque, Fulla effectively takes the fondness of Arabian and non-Arabian Muslim girls with such values from Mecca to the mall. Advertising that implies such Islamic virtues are attainable, at least partly, though spending money on a toy and its ancillaries is alien to the founding values and principles of the faith. The fact that Fulla scarves, prayer mats, bicycles, schoolbags, chewing gum, breakfast, and other ancillary products are sold with the Fulla brand shows the extent to which Islamic symbols have been appropriated by free-market values.

Muslim parents find Fulla to be a better choice than all her competitors because she wears the *hijab* and because Barbie is frowned upon by the conservative segment of the general Muslim population. It is likely that without the *hijab* and other Islamic symbols, Fulla would not have become such an astounding success. This begs the question: How ethical, or for that matter how Islamic, is it to use Islamic values to sell a product? Is Fulla truly Islamic, when the sale of this doll uses the same commercial, worldly techniques of capitalism to encourage consumption for the sake of profits? Is this not profaning the sacred or making the spiritual too temporal by emphasizing vain attributes over sublime values? What about abusing children's natural play instincts and most parents' natural leaning toward the safety net of conformity to socio-religious customs all for the sake of profit? What happens to the deeper meaning of *Jihad* (curbing the desire for instant gratification), when *Israf* (unhindered self-gratification) takes over a person's value system? What is left of Islam, in a Muslim consumer, other than mere symbols, when advertising and market values become the guiding elements in a Muslim's life? Whose control is stronger on a Muslim: the self-restraint of *Jihad* toward the moral exercise of freedom or the global beast of consumption?



As the example of Fulla shows, even religious traditions, prayers, and scriptures have become fair game in the marketplace. They have become selling tools. Heavy use of Islamic symbols is especially intense during the celebration of religious events, such as the holy month of *Ramadan* and the two major *Eids* (holy festivities) in Muslim countries. Any Muslim today would assert that *Ramadan* (a holy month of daily fasting from dawn to dusk) has become the time during which Muslims exercise consumerism the most. Enormous annual consumer advertising revenues are earned during this month. While people fast during the day, in the evening they eat, drink, and spend money on luxury goods much more so than they do during regular months. The same goes for the two holy *Eids*, mimicking Christmas and other holy day celebrations in the West.

Consumerism—the culture of a persistent desire to acquire and consume a continuously updated list of diverse commodities “far exceeding the consumers’ basic needs both in substance and in variety”³—now seeps through the core of affluent Muslim communities. Consumerism, in this sense, undermines the value system that defines a Muslim community through co-opting that same value system to its ends. Growing tides of consumerism have re-shaped oil-rich Muslim countries in profound ways. The Islamic faith is a major player in the traditional cultures of these countries, but the reality of globalization, along with the general affordability of commodities, is making way for a different value system. This new value system is not entirely Islamic, Arab, or Western, but surely one with a free-market flavor.

While other examples could have been chosen, Fulla is a good case to show how a very popular product pulls Muslims into the shopping mall, the larger setting where consumerism is expressed. The place of the shopping malls, hotels, and other outlets of consumptive behavior in the oil-rich countries is central in this context. It provides support for our argument that consumerism is shaking the moral foundations of being human in the Islamic world as it is doing in the Western world. Advertising, as discussed in the Fulla case, and its impact on consumptive behavior will be presented in the context of an Islamic prophetic critique of media. We now turn to an explanation of this prophetic approach and how it will be used for analyzing various outlets for consumptive behavior.

Prophetic Critique of Media in a Muslim Context

To help the reader understand the connections between the meaning of Fulla and the repression of moral ideals embedded in Islamic scriptures as understood by Islamic reformist thinking, an explanation of this thinking is necessary. Because



Islamic thought is still foreign to many Western readers, we provide a theoretical exposition of the overarching values within which the individual and the community ought to interact according to Islam. Such values provide a foundation for prophetic critique in a Muslim context.

While the use of the word “reform” is often divorced from the use of the word “renaissance” (the first implying improvement and change, while the second implies rebirth of old ways), reform is assumed in religious discourse to be founded upon a level of renaissance, a call to return to the original, uncorrupted source. This call aspires to draw strength and legitimacy from the original source in order to move forward with more confidence. In short, while aspiring to remain genuinely loyal to the founding values and principles of the faith, an Islamic reformist perspective combines that commitment with proposals to reshape aspects of human life that do not jeopardize those founding values and principles, where such re-shaping is believed to be better overall for the community of believers.

The Basis of Islamic Values

Islamic reformist thinker Ustadh (“revered teacher”) Mahmoud Mohamed Taha—who was executed for his ideas in Sudan in 1985—saw absolute individual freedom, including freedom of expression, not as a mechanical autonomy of individuals but as both a result and a nourishing tool of a truly healthy, organic, community. He therefore condemned the Western theoretical models for confusing chaotic autonomy with freedom.⁴ A few years later, renowned Western communication and media scholar Clifford G. Christians said that reliance on Enlightenment views of freedom, which emphasize utilitarian individual autonomy, had run its course.⁵ Like Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, he did not equate individual freedom with individual autonomy—an intriguing junction where East meets West.

In Islam, a dignified, happy, absolutely free individual is always well attuned to society’s healthy trends and to the universe; that state of being is the end of all human endeavors.⁶ Never will he or she be a means to any other end. Even worship and the Qur’an itself are means to happiness in communion with the God and the universe, in this life and the hereafter. Islam, in this sense, provides an epistemology, or way of knowing, in which absolute individual freedom is a product of the exercise of a community full of equality and social justice. Consequently, Islam provides for making the organization of the community a vehicle for a full expression of individual freedom, leading to a dignified, happier



life. This equilibrium, derived from the concept of *Tawhid* (monotheism), renders individual worship of *Allah* (God) meaningless if its fruits are not reaped by the community in acts of stewardship, fairness, truth-telling, kindness, charity, mercy, and other virtues.

Such a community, in turn, prepares the person to be a good worshiper by setting a healthy environment in which an individual can enjoy direct communion with *Allah*—without any (human or otherwise) conduits—and with the universe. Conversely, this reproduces more individuality and, hence, absolute individual freedom, which is freedom from fear of death—where death is only a transition from one state of being to another—and freedom from need. This is because monotheism asserts that the whole universe has one source: It emanates from *Allah*, and to Him it shall return. That it is to say, we all return to our source. But we will return as individuals, not as groups. Happy is the individual who returns as fair, good, free, and charitable because of what the individual sowed in communal good deeds. Hence, while individual goodness is dependent on the existence of community, the individual, in his or her absolute oneness, is more in the image of the Absolute Being (*Allah*) than community. Yet community is a necessity for individuality to manifest and express itself, because exercising individuality is rendered meaningless without community.

Every individual, according to this view in Islam, has the right to a fulfilling life and to freedom regardless of religion, race, or sex. The individual, according to this view, is capable of limitless development. He or she pursues, through a healthy community, absoluteness in communion with *Allah*, in His Absolute Oneness, in a constant quest for perfection. “The goal of the worshiper in Islam is to achieve the perfection of God, and the perfection of God is infinite.”⁷

In the infinitude of seeking the perfection of God, there is no final destination to be reached. The worshiper is therefore one who is free from all bondages other than the bond with God. The worshiper diligently seeks to be free by striving to achieve the qualities of God, the Just, the Beneficent, and the Merciful. To this effect Prophet Muhammad said, “Adopt the qualities of God, my Lord is on the straight path.”⁸

What prevents us from discharging the responsibilities leading to absolute individual freedom is ignorance and selfishness. The ignorantly selfish may seek interest in things that are inconsistent with the interest of the community, whereas the intelligently selfless sees his or her interest in congruity with the interest of others. This meaning is expressed in the statement of the Prophet Muhammad that “one does not become a believer unless he wishes for his brother what he would wish for himself.”⁹ Islam is therefore against ignorant selfishness.



The Prophet Muhammad also said, “The worst of your enemies is yourself, which is within you.”¹⁰

According to this perspective, today’s exercise of freedom in the West—including freedom of expression and of the press—has gone awry. Media industries have become altars upon which universal values, bred through all kinds of human sacrifices, are nowadays slaughtered. This, according to Islamic ethics, endangers the very meaning of being human. It is as if we are lapsing and regressing into times past when only the rich and powerful could be free, not in the moral sense, but by means of exercising a false, and sometimes fatal, autonomy at the expense of genuine freedoms in the service of communal welfare.

Israf

Islam strongly condemns *Israf*, which means extravagance or indulgence in consumption and unhindered self-gratification. *Israf* in Islam is a sign of, and leads to, other ills in society. In many instances, the Prophet Muhammad advised Muslims to eat, drink, and even “give” in moderation, and advised against false pride, pretense, and extravagance. Indeed, the Qur’an warns extravagant individuals against being “companions of the devils.”¹¹ Thus, like Judaism and Christianity, the other two of the three main Abrahamic traditions, Islam abhors over-indulgence in consumptive behavior.

As the major themes of this book show, extravagant consumption is also abundantly condemned by Western communitarian traditions that employ social critique as a tool of explication.¹² Yet all these powerful traditions, religious and non-religious alike, do not seem to be able to counter global consumption. The Muslim world, especially the oil-rich part of it, is no exception. As presented in this chapter, the Muslim world is an integral part of a larger world that keeps consuming more what it wants than what it needs. Happiness in today’s commercialized Muslim public space is mostly equated with one’s ability to consume.

Jihad

Recently, Western audiences have become very familiar with the Islamic term *Jihad*. *Jihad* in Arabic is generally equivalent to the word “struggle” or exertion of one’s energy. However, the West is mostly familiar with only one aspect of what this term means, which is using force to fight active enemies of Islam. Other aspects of the meaning of *Jihad*, which are deeper, more transcendent, and most relevant to our times and to our topic here in this chapter, have not been explained well by Muslims to non-Muslims. Most non-Muslims, on the other hand, are not



doing enough to educate themselves about Muslims and the Islamic faith, relying instead on media stereotypes. In the aftermath of 9/11, the warring aspect of the word *Jihad* tended to dominate the Western mindset. It is, therefore, a certain understanding of *Jihad* that legitimately pushed itself to the Western public perception and was not simply a creation of anti-Muslim agenda. However, this understanding does not convey what the concept, mainly and essentially, means in Islamic discourse.

The other aspects of *Jihad* are reflected in many sayings of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad. In one instance, while returning from a war with enemies of Islam, he said, “We just came from minor *Jihad* to the greater *Jihad*,” and he taught that the greatest *Jihad* is that which is against the self, meaning that self-control and self-discipline are the greatest *Jihad* for the Muslim.¹³ This asserts that the struggle within oneself to fight indulgences of all sorts is the main task of a Muslim in becoming a better human being. He also said, “The best *Jihad* is a word of truth in the face of an unfair ruler.”¹⁴ From these teachings and similar ones, the importance in Islam for an individual to curb extravagance, to engage in causes for justice, and to expose injustice is emphasized. These essential values receive immense moral legitimacy from the Islamic tradition.

Truth-telling and Prophetic Voice

In Islam, a concern for truth-telling in religious social critique is a duty of the pious, whatever their place in the community. Exposing the hypocrisy and fallacies of the “powers-that-be” in society is one of the Muslim’s duties as taught by the prophet of Islam. Although the word “prophetic” is reserved in Islamic discourse only for that which pertains to the Prophet Muhammad—in addition to the major prophets of the Abrahamic lineage acknowledged in Islam—the concept of a “prophetic critique” is still, in essence, consistent with this approach.

This practice of truth-telling is generally known in the Islamic tradition as “commanding what is good and forbidding what is wrong.”¹⁵ A famous *hadith* (saying) by the prophet of Islam states, “If one of you sees something wrong, let him change it with his hand; if he cannot, then with his tongue; if he cannot, then with his heart and this is the weakest of faith.”¹⁶ This general Muslim approach to the role of the faithful in society is shared, in theory, across different doctrines. The idea of “resistance thinking” attributed to prophetic critique in this book resonates in the Islamic tradition. There have been, there are, and there will be Muslim voices in different contexts that take up this duty of the pious and apply it in their social life.



Modernity, especially in its current global commercial manifestations and influenced by Enlightenment ideas, resorts to reducing the meaning of freedom to total autonomy, separate from any morality in the prophetic traditions. Nowhere is this clearer than in the concept of a free market that encourages free spending, free production, and free consumption. This trend separates the individual from communal concerns, environmental awareness, and the ethics or morals that make us humans. This isolating of freedom from morality and social conscience leads to discourse and actions that lead to disorder, which contradicts the essence of being human and being social. For this reason, as previously mentioned, Western communication scholar Christians concludes that the Enlightenment has run its course.¹⁷ Christians's view in this regard is an echo in many ways of Islamic reformist views of individual responsibility toward one's own freedom as it translates into enriching the welfare of community.

In brief, in the Western nations, the most powerful driving force of commercialism and consumerism—a common approach to the “worth” of an individual—seems to be the value of his or her assets. An individual is measured by the value of what the individual has, and not by the values the individual embodies. This objectifying of human worth is one of the stark indicators of the deep moral crisis of the capitalist system. The Muslim world seems to be heading in that same direction. The economic engine of the world seems to have appropriated Islam itself as a tool for creating wealth and for measuring a Muslim's worth and happiness with what he or she has and consumes. Herein is the real crisis of universal citizenship, because overindulgence—consuming more than we produce—produces stark inequities, and no democracy can claim to be a democracy without upholding the ideals of equality and social justice.

Malls in Mecca: Profaning the Sacred and Sacredizing the Profane

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.” (Matt. 21:12)

“...and of the places God despises are the market places.” (Prophet Muhammad)¹⁸

Mecca, as a place, is central to the Islamic faith. The Ka'ba is a holy cubic structure and the direction in which Muslims turn from all over the world to recite their



five daily prayers (at dawn, around midday, after midday and before dusk, at sunset, and before bedtime). No matter where a Muslim is, she has to make sure before praying that her face is in the direction of Ka'ba. In addition to its worship value, the Ka'ba also establishes a link between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in historically significant ways. In the Islamic tradition, the Ka'ba was built by Abraham himself when he left his son Ishmael and his wife Hagar there.

Muslims also perform their holy pilgrimage, *Hajj*, in Mecca, a significant act of worship in itself. In Islamic tradition, the *Hajj* is to be undertaken by each able Muslim, male or female, once in a lifetime, because it is one of the major pillars of the faith, which also include prayer, fasting, and obligatory charity (*Zakah*). Mecca is also the birthplace of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, and the town in which he lived most of his life. It is where he first preached his message and established the first community of believers. It is, therefore, not only filled with sacred sites but is also full of narratives of significant spiritual values. When Muslims visit Mecca, for pilgrimage or to pay tribute, it is expected to be a time of foregoing material concerns and concentrating on spiritual ones. It is in essence an ascetic journey to be filled with religious contemplation and the practice of piety and self-control.

Recently, however, the Ka'ba structure, and Mecca in general, began to be rivaled by new buildings vying for dominating space and carrying symbols of unusual behaviors and lifestyles. With the exception of alcohol and pork, modern shopping malls and five-star hotels are filled with all the consumerist pleasures of the modernist promise—for those who can afford them.¹⁹ An ironic scene is becoming very familiar: pilgrims, in their pilgrim clothes, shopping at malls for consumer goods and enjoying the luxuries the more expensive hotels offer for visitors of the holy land. The shrewdness of the business mentality saw an opportunity to make religious tourism compatible with consumerist pursuits, and it has yielded huge profits. A most sacred place is in a process of being “profaned” by free-market values in the heart of Muslim societies. Hotels and furnished apartments for all income levels dot the landscape of the city of Mecca more densely and close to the Ka'ba.

This process of commodifying Islamic symbols plays a profound role in what we call profaning the sacred—that is, items that symbolize Islamic piety now also symbolize consumer status. *Aswaq*, or marketplaces, are generally considered, in the Islamic tradition, a natural part of social life; the Qur'an itself uses the expression that prophets “eat food and walk in the market places” as evidence of their humble mortality (which goes hand in hand with their divine manifestations).²⁰ However, marketplaces also have the status of a necessary evil in that



same Islamic tradition. By “evil” here we do not mean ultimate evil but what is generally considered impious to indulge in beyond the basic level of material-need satisfaction, as indicated by the saying of the Prophet Muhammad at the beginning of this section.

Fulla demonstrates how specific products within these marketplaces contribute to the process of profaning the sacred. Through advertising, mass media extend the reach of the marketplace from the commercial mall to private homes. Commercials in Saudi Arabia display Fulla saying her prayers at dawn, baking a cake for friends, or reading a book at bedtime to convey her values and display the kind of behavior she promotes. Some of these commercials begin with her singing in a high tone in Arabic (the language of Qur’an, the Islamic scriptures) or displaying silverware, stationery, and accessories, which are part of the product line of NewBoy FZCO. Fulla commercials promote modest outfits even in less conservative Muslim societies. One Fulla commercial advises, “When you take Fulla out of the house, don’t forget her new spring *abaya*.” Unlike Mattel’s Barbie, Fulla does not have a boyfriend and has no bikinis or swimwear. Her personality is marketed as loving and caring; she is respectful of her mother and father and good to her friends. She is honest and does not lie. She likes reading. She loves fashion, especially indoors—where she and her female friends can mingle and have fun. In other words, Fulla is as relaxed indoors as Barbie is. But there is an emphasis on Fulla’s personality as modest and appropriate for a Muslim female, especially when she is outdoors.

Commercials targeting adults likewise demonstrate how the media invoke Islamic values and symbols for commerce. One common television advertisement in many oil-rich Muslim-majority countries shows a brand of shampoo and/or hair conditioner for women. This shampoo is acclaimed to make women’s hair soft and silky. To demonstrate this silky softness, a long-haired woman has to show her hair on television. The dilemma, for Muslim culture, is that it is not acceptable for women to expose their hair this way in public. The advertisement thus shows a woman’s hair from the back (i.e., without showing her face), then shows another woman—assumedly the same person—facing the audience and telling them about her positive experience with the brand shampoo, this time wearing a headscarf. The modification of the advertising content to make consumerism compatible with the local culture makes the media a prominent actor in promoting consumerism—not merely a tool of disseminating information about consumer items.

Not only do we observe a profaning of the sacred, as described above, but we also witness a sacredizing of the profane. The principles of Islamic piety, such



as modesty, asceticism, self-control, and so forth, presented earlier are in clear opposition to the principles of consumerist lifestyle. This effectively means that in order for consumerism to flourish, Islamic piety has to lose ground. This profaning of the sacred becomes a new semi-religious wave that also sacredizes the profane. By sacredizing the profane we mean the shifting trend in which inward piety is now losing ground to the outward expression of religious affiliation. The manifestation of religious identity is now becoming understood—at least in practice—as making choices in consumer items. When Patrick Haenni talks about this process, he calls it a commercialization of religion—or the Islamization of commerce.²¹

As described earlier, Fulla demonstrates this parallel process of sacredizing the profane. Muslim girls (and their parents) buy Fulla and Fulla accessories as a way to demonstrate their commitment to Islamic values. In other words, the purchase of the Fulla products becomes a part of demonstrating personal piety. Prayer mats bearing the Fulla name, Hijab scarves, and other similar products are bought as such.

Similar trends, and explanations, are found in critics of Christian consumerist behavior. Vincent J. Miller, for instance, documents and analyzes how religious symbols—not just Christian ones—have become recognized as market commodities, sometimes with the latter dominating the former.²² Skye Jethani, on the other hand, argues that the Christian Church itself has been co-opted by the consumer culture, rendering the Church a marketing agent for consumerism among the religious believers, to the point that the expression of faith happens largely through the items and brands they consume.²³ Other Christian cultural critics ask questions such as: “Do special Christian ringtones and cell-phone carrying cases suggest that evangelicals are obsessed with material consumption? Or that being an evangelical is just another brand of consumerism?”²⁴

This profaning of the sacred, or “commercialization of religion” is where the mainstream media in oil-rich Muslim-majority countries come into play. Muslim consumers are not entirely passive respondents to the media. Like other consumers around the world, they are active players in the culture of consumerism, and they need to think of themselves as such, in order to act as such, for consumerist culture to sustain itself. Consuming is active, involving intent and motives. Thus the advertising media can only be successful in instigating consumerism if they are successful in relating to the audience in a familiar way. This is one of the reasons why consumer commodities have different shapes and functions in different societies. For example, Islamic symbols become popular consumer items; certain Islamic television and radio shows hosts become religious icons and rich



celebrities. “Islamic” consumer items include worship or souvenir items, such as *sib’has* (small chains of luxurious stones—like rosaries, used to keep count in rituals in which a Muslim repeatedly recites some prayers—also commonly and similarly used among Eastern Christians and Eastern religions), prayer rugs, pictures of Islamic sites, and even Islamic fashion. These Islamic commodities are huge markets for wealthy show-offs and lend to produce lucrative profits.

All the elements of a new competing religion are evident on the shopping mall ground. We do not refer to the standard definition of religion here but to the patterns of behavior by which religions inspire social action.

Implications for Media Scholars

Advertising for consumption, which is an essential lifeline for the survival and success of popular media outlets in the Muslim world, is now as “good” as advertising in the West. Commercials on television shows like *Arabs Got Talent*, *Arab Idol*, and *Star Academy* are professional, effective, and very expensive. The judges in these shows are megastars. And the new stars born out of the shows join them in becoming part of the “free” marketplace machinery and fodder for global consumerism. Freedom thus becomes more linked to the concept of a free market than to giving birth to an individual free from want and fear. In fact, an unregulated free market runs contrary to the Islamic concept of freeing oneself from the enslavement of things and being hostage to temporal pleasures. A free market, where the word “free” means unchecked autonomy in consumption, is inherently destructive to the environment because it encourages people to ultimately consume more than they need.

In a race against time, everyone wants to live longer, look younger, and have as much fun as possible before our days are over. Muslims are not immune from this quest of empty happiness. Muslims are in constant fear of death and in constant pursuit of happiness as defined by models of the free market. In the process, and in an unjust world, they consume more than their share of the limited resources of earth and encroach on the share of future generations. Media outlets, including radio talk shows, are culprits in this unchecked chaos of the free market. Thus the claim of many Muslims to stewardship of resources becomes shallow.

Commercializing Islamic symbols and values by those who can afford buying media time and space is a prevailing characteristic of affluent Muslim countries. This untamed quest for happiness leads to profaning truths by coloring them with the wishes, wants, and desires of the wealthy and powerful. Truth, in Islamic discourse, is sacred. Therefore, it should not be subjected to the manipulation of



commercial interests. In Islamic culture, justice is not only concerned with equal access to resources it is also a question of substance. That is to say, individual access to resources must be serving the collective good. Sacrifice of one's own selfish wants in this sense contributes to a just and equitable sharing of resources. Any extravagance, more likely than not, is at the expense of others, which goes contrary to Islamic teaching on justice.

On the face of it, Fulla may seem innocent, if not a most virtuous model Muslim girl. But when seen through the prism of equality and communal justice, she becomes a culprit. She contributes, in collaboration with her cohorts of advertising techniques, to tipping the balance sharply in favor of cut-throat market values. An Islamic prophetic critique exposes such deep-seated implications of a doll by measuring its social impact against the values this same doll is said to promote.

As the advertisements for Fulla and other products demonstrate, commercial media (television, radio, magazines, etc.) that use Islamic symbols for marketing purposes contribute to a process whereby religious perspectives are made to seem wholly compatible with consumerism.²⁵ Like their Western counterparts with televised megachurches, some religious figures in the Middle East are also media icons with mass followers and admirers. The Arabic edition of *Forbes Magazine* in 2007 listed the ten richest "star preachers," the religious scholars and teachers who gained celebrity statuses in Muslim societies through their presence in the popular media. The richest one on the list earned \$2.5 million in 2007 alone.²⁶ The magazine calculated this income based on media production, show hosting, and intellectual property royalties paid to each star preacher, apart from income from other activities such as hosting workshops and leading lectures and training sessions. In such examples we see how the values of commercial media extend beyond simple consumer items like Fulla, penetrating to the heart of religious leadership itself.

Conclusion

There are different meanings of the term "prophetic" in the Islamic context. There are, however, similar approaches to social critique in Islam in general, with different terminology. This chapter addressed the issue of whether an Islamic-oriented critique of the media is even possible in the context of rich Muslim-majority countries. It also considered how such a critique might be conducted by exploring possible foundational values and principles that such critiques utilize to support their case.





Islam has a credible record in its core teachings and in its social history of promoting economic justice through distinguishing between wants and needs and emphasizing the priority of meeting the needs of everyone in the community before acquiescing to elitist consumerism. The ideal justice in Islam sees it as quite legitimate to legally require the rich to share their wealth with the poor, and this stands in stark contradiction to the consumerist paradigm which encourages those who have more money to spend it on more of their desires. The distinction that is helpful for our case here is the one Islam makes between material needs and material desires. While it is not against modest fulfillment of material desires, Islam has institutional support for the priority of fulfilling everybody's needs in society before some of its members can indulge in their want-satisfaction endeavors.²⁷

This element of social justice is openly expressed and standardized in Islamic literature. Although it has not always been fulfilled in practice, there is enough historical practice to sanction it, especially in the founding years of the community of believers during the times of the prophet Muhammad and the following years of the state of Medina, governed by the prophet's closest disciples. Consumerism, on the other hand, fuels material want-satisfaction as a prevalent lifestyle. The individual's pursuit of commodities that exceed his/her basic needs is the central value of consumerism. Social justice in Islam, in the socio-economic sense, stands in opposition to this value, while the Islamic code of the individual's piety demands a level of self-control concerning material wants, even when the needs of the community are generally satisfied. What Islam also adds to this is seeing the community as a community of believers, which is borderless. If one country or a group of countries claims that its entire citizenry is satisfied in terms of needs, the social Islamic perspective will seek to extend this satisfaction to the brothers and sisters outside the country borders. In short, Islamic teachings stand in principled opposition to the tenets of the consumerist paradigm. The totality of this Islamic moral body forms a legitimate tool of effective critique of the consumerist media in Islamic context. Thus, while this chapter is an Islamic reading of the media and consumerism in the Muslim world, it is indirectly, but essentially, about the repressed values of justice and the protection of genuine religious identity.

All forms of media in affluent Muslim countries are evidently very active in promoting this wave of subjecting religion to consumer culture. Yet there is no evidence of any parallel increase in religious piety in the audience—unless piety itself is redefined as the outward expression of religious affiliation, represented by the popularity of religious commodities. Media critics, therefore, have a lot of



fertile ground for exploration of the increasing use of religion to advance materialism and consumerism, which is the antithesis of spirituality and piety. Such further explorations and discussion may lead us to dwell on the common ground between all prophetic approaches to communication ethics. Such an approach will likely be communitarian in nature, whether it emanates from a religious perspective or a secular one. The common ground between these approaches may in fact be greater than most mainstream media critics would like to admit. Fulla is “living” proof as a sign of our times that the meaning of life is becoming rubberized, plasticized, and garbed in fake truths and sacred costumes to hide the fact of the advancement of the profane.

Notes

1. Petra Kuppinger, “Barbie, Razanne, Fulla: A Tale of Culture, Globalization, Consumerism, and Islam,” in *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption: Politics, Culture and Identity between the Local and the Global*, ed. Johanna Pink (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 187–224.
2. *Khaleej Times*, November 25, 2005, http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle.aspx?xfile=data/todaysfeatures/2005/November/todaysfeatures_November54.xml§ion=todaysfeatures (accessed May 31, 2012).
3. Johanna Pink, “Introduction,” *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption: Politics, Culture and Identity between the local and the Global*, ed. Johanna Pink (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), ix.
4. Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, *The Second Message of Islam*, trans. A. A. An Na'im (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 84.
5. Clifford G. Christians, “Communication Ethics as the Basis of Genuine Democracy,” in *The Democratization of Communication*, ed. P. Lee (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 1995), 75–91.
6. Taha, *The Second Message of Islam*, 67–87.
7. *Ibid.*, 65.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Haydar Badawi Sadig, “Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha: A Story in the Embodiment and Communication of Absolute Individual Freedom,” in *Ethics and Evil in the Public Sphere: Media, Universal Values and Global Development*, eds. Robert Fortner and P. Mark Fackler (Cresskill, NY: Hampton, 2010), 243.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Qur'an, Sura 24:43.
12. See, for instance, Clifford G. Christians, P. Mark Fackler, and John P. Ferré, *Ethics for Public Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
13. Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, *Tatweer Shari'at Al-ahwaal as-shakhsiyya (reform of personal-affairs Shari'a)* (Arabic) a book printed and disseminated by the Republican Brother's Movement, Omdurman, Sudan (1971).





14. Ahmed bin Hanbal, ed., "Al-Musnad" (The Predicate), Hadith #18449, Hadith Encyclopedia Online (Islamweb.net), http://www.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?bk_no=121&hid=18449&pid=672977 (accessed July 4, 2012).
15. Mohamed bin Issa At-Tirmizi, ed., "Sunan At-tirmizi" (The Hadith Collection of At-Tirmizi), Hadith #2169, Hadith Encyclopedia Online, http://www.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?bk_no=195 (accessed July 4, 2012).
16. Quoted in Ahmed bin Hanbal, ed., "Al-Musnad" (The Predicate), Hadith #10863, Hadith Encyclopedia Online, http://www.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?bk_no=121&hid=10863&pid=672358 (accessed July 4, 2012).
17. Christians, "Communication Ethics as the Basis of Genuine Democracy," 75–91.
18. Noor-addin Al-Haithami, ed., "Kashf Al-Astaar" (The Revelation of Secrets), Hadith #1177, Hadith Encyclopedia Online, http://www.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?bk_no=4205&hid=1177&pid=561140 (accessed July 4, 2012).
19. Sohail Rahman, "Between Piety and Consumerism: Hotels and Shopping Malls in Mecca Are a Temptation at a Time Muslims Are Expected to Forgo Life's Luxuries," *Al-Jazeera Reports*, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2010/11/201011184020995283.html> (accessed December 4, 2011).
20. The Qur'an, Sura 25: 7, 20.
21. Patrick Haenni, "The Economic Politics of Muslim Consumption," in *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption: Politics, Culture and Identity between the Local and the Global*, ed. Johanna Pink (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 327–342.
22. Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004).
23. Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).
24. Diane M. Badzinski, "Merchandising Jesus Products," in *Understanding Evangelical Media: The Changing Face of Christian Communication*, eds. Quentin J. Schultze and Robert H. Woods, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 173.
25. Vít Šisler, "Video Games, Video Clips, and Islam: New Media and the Communication of Values," in *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption: Politics, Culture and Identity between the Local and the Global*, ed. Johanna Pink (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 241–270.
26. BBCArabic.com, February 24, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/business/newsid_7261000/7261877.stm (accessed September 12, 2001).
27. See, for example, Taha 1987. Consider also the Islamic pillar of "Zakah," "a tax, comprising percentages of personal income of every kind, levied as almsgiving for the relief of the poor: the third of the Pillars of Islam" (dictionary.com).

