Journal of Business Research xxx (2015) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

The ontological pitfalls of Islamic exceptionalism: A re-inquiry on El-Bassiouny's (2014, 2015) conceptualization of "Islamic marketing"

Aliakbar Jafari [a,*], Özlem Sandıkcı [b]

[a] Department of Marketing, University of Strathclyde Business School, 199 Cathedral Street, Glasgow, G4 0QU, United Kingdom
[b] School of Management and Administrative Sciences, Istanbul Şehir University, 27, Kuşbakışı Caddesi, 34662 Altunizade-Üsküdar, Istanbul, Turkey

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 August 2015
Accepted 30 September 2015
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Islamic marketing
Moslem consumers
Marginalization
Exceptionalism
Ideology
Ontology

ABSTRACT

In response to Jafari and Sandıkcı's (2015a) critique of her 2014 article entitled "The one-billion-plus marginalization", El-Bassiouny (2015) dismisses the authors' key ontological debate over exceptionalism as a historical and political discourse and diverts attention to new areas of enquiry (e.g., disciplinary legitimacy, Islamic jurisprudence and methodological pluralism) to further her original "transcendental values integration" approach to marketing theory, practice and education. While offering new insights, El-Bassiouny's account is still largely driven by discourses of marginalization, exceptionalism and Islamism. This article therefore: (1) reappraises the oversimplification of the marginalization discourse; (2) reiterates the pitfalls of Islamic exceptionalism at an ontological level; (3) cautions against the consequences of ideological readings of Islam in marketing and consumer research; and (4) re-emphasizes the importance of understanding identity dynamics in the analysis of the complex intersections of Islam, marketing and consumption. In conclusion, the article offers some areas for future research.

1. Introduction

In her article entitled "The one-billion-plus marginalization", El-Bassiouny (2014) argued that since Moslems are marginalized in global markets and demands for *Shari'ah* compliant products and services are growing around the world, firms should accommodate the religious and moral needs of "Islamic consumers" who have a "distinct" and "unique" worldview and lifestyle; otherwise, such companies would encounter significant opportunity costs. To this end, the author used the notion of "transcendental values integration" (p. 45) to outline the Islamic marketing "paradigm" from the perspective of Moslems as "the engagement in mutually-beneficial transactions related to products, services, and ideas that benefit society while adhering to the principles of the Islamic legislation (*Shari'ah*), and is a process that holds ethical responsibility for every person/entity engaging in these transactions in front of God" (p. 43).

In response to this account, we offered a critical appraisal (Jafari & Sandıkcı, 2015a) that rotated around the following three themes:

(1) Marginalization: we provided numerous examples to demonstrate that Moslem consumers are not as marginalized as claimed by El-Bassiouny. We proposed that the marginalization discourse be systematically analyzed in an interdisciplinary manner and in the light of many interrelated critical factors such as the post-911 identity anxieties (McGinty, 2012; Kabir, 2012; Sandıkcı & Jafari, 2013), globalization's acceleration of self-reflexivity (Beck, 2011; Jafari & Goulding, 2013) and the policies and politics of commoditizing and commercializing Islam in the age of neoliberalism (Jones, 2010; Süerdem, 2013).
(2) Exceptionalism: from an 'ontological' perspective, we questioned El-Bassiouny's exceptionalist depiction of Moslems as a collectivistic set of "distinct" and "unique" market actors (e.g., Moslem consumers as a market segment as well as Moslem marketers and educators) whose market behaviors are essentially ruled by the *Shari'ah*. Associating such exceptionalism and essentialism with the historical and political projects of Orientalism (Said, 1978; Abdel-Malek, 1981; Asad, 1993; Al-Azmeh, 2003, 2006, 2009) and self-Orientalism (Jafari, 2012), we highlighted the drawbacks of such restrictive and deceptive discourses. From an axiological standpoint, we also raised concerns about the author's representation of 'the Islamic' as a superior moral order in the global diverse value systems and cautioned that such exclusivity could jeopardize the foundations of scientific inquiry and hamper inter- and intra-cultural dialogs.
(3) Islamicness: we critiqued El-Bassiouny's imprecise use of terms such as "Islamic religiosity", "Islamic ideology", "Islamic theology", "*Shari'ah*", "Islamic creed", and "*ad-din*" that tend to freeze Islam as a rigid set of legislations. We drew attention to the changing landscape of religions and religiosity in contemporary society (Gauthier & Martikainen, 2013) to stress that Islamicness

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 141 5483768; fax: +44 1415522802.
E-mail addresses: aliakbar.jafari@strathe.ac.uk (A. Jafari), ozlemsandikci@sehir.edu.tr (Ö. Sandıkcı).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.09.016
0148-2963/

is not uniformly experienced, internalized and enacted by Moslems (Jafari & Süerdem, 2012). With a focus on self-reflexivity, we also argued that we should collectively honor our position as 'social scientists' (rather than hardline ideologists) and endeavor to primarily analyze and explain how, why and under which conditions and mechanisms people in different roles (e.g., as consumers, marketers and educators) and from diverse backgrounds (e.g., religious, social, cultural, political and ideological) may or may not interact with 'the Islamic' in relation to marketing, markets and consumption.

In developing the above discussions, we were especially cautious about presenting a systematic and thorough critique of El-Bassiouny's thesis. Yet, the author's (2015) response (entitled "Where is 'Islamic marketing' heading?") dismisses our key 'ontological' debate and diverts attention to new areas of enquiry (disciplinary legitimacy, Islamic jurisprudence and methodological pluralism) to expand on the "transcendental values integration" thesis.

As stated in our previous work (Jafari & Sandıkcı, 2015a), we maintain interest in enriching the field by engaging in critical debate and tapping into (new) subject areas where theory would fructify. We, therefore, acknowledge El-Bassiouny's reciprocity in continuing this intellectual conversation. Yet, simultaneously, we stress that debate requires scholars' mutual sensitivity to theoretical reasoning and commitment to accuracy in analyzing and representing ideas. In our view, these two elements are missing from El-Bassiouny's response. Firstly, while in our critique we adopted a post-colonial approach (e.g., Said, 1978) as a central 'critical theory' to guide our discussion, El-Bassiouny's response is wrought with a wide range of ideas such as disciplinary legitimacy, sustainability, morality, ethics, marketing pedagogy, Islamic jurisprudence and methodological pluralism. Each of these concepts carries its own specific theoretical trajectories and criticisms whose analysis cannot be deservedly delivered in a single article. This lack of precision seems to be driven by the author's insufficient attention to the difference between critical theory (at an ontological level) and critique (at a level of a critical review), a topic we will elaborate in Section 4 of this essay. Secondly, in our critique we meticulously used sufficient direct quotations from El-Bassiouny's article to analyze her argument and synthesize our counter-argument on a point-by-point basis. In return, the author's response dismisses the core of our debate and turns to new areas where decontextualized extracts from our work result in the distortion of our ideas. Despite these drawbacks, it is still heartening to see that El-Bassiouny acknowledges the importance of debate to advancing theory in marketing at large.

In the remainder of this article, similar to our previous work (Jafari & Sandıkcı, 2015a) and in order to sustain accuracy and preempt misunderstandings, first we summarize El-Bassiouny's core argument. Next, we critique her ongoing marginalization discourse with reference to disciplinary legitimacy. Then, we reiterate the pitfalls of Islamic exceptionalism at an ontological level. Next, we highlight the negative consequences of ideological readings of Islam. In this section, we also highlight the importance of understanding identity dynamics in the analysis of the complex intersections of Islam, marketing and consumption. In conclusion, we highlight some areas for future research.

2. El-Bassiouny's core argument

The author begins by offering a brief review of the history of the development of different schools of thought in marketing to argue that while these schools have enjoyed the liberty of stretching their domains to diverse topics, religion has remained marginalized in the field. The author specifically expresses discontent with critical marketing studies that despite their criticality "are still confined to the groups of scholars advocating them" (p.1[1]). Then, she finds the rise of interest in researching religion promising and introduces her research as part of a "sub-discipline" that investigates "different religious paradigms and approaches, including Islam and 'Islamic marketing,' an emerging sub-discipline that caters to the growing needs of Islamic consumers" (p. 1). Here, El-Bassiouny seems to be suggesting that the "discourse on religion and marketing" be recognized as a "sub-discipline" to which "Islamic marketing" belongs (p.1).

In Section 2 of her essay, the author seeks to justify the value of Islamic marketing and its benefits to the field. Yet, a lack of theoretical focus on a particular topic leaves little room for the author's deep theoretical engagement with the various subjects set forth. El-Bassiouny paradoxically talks about the moral vacuum in marketing education and the marginalization of morality in marketing scholarship on the one hand and the abundance of research on morality on the other hand. Equally confusing, oscillating between macromarketing and micromarketing discourses, she argues that Islam as "a global religion and way of life" and "ideology" (p. 2) offers a holistic moral framework to guide Moslems at a behavioral level. Acknowledging the fact that not all Moslems at all times synchronize their practices and beliefs based on the scripture, El-Bassiouny contends that "understanding Islamic marketing in the context of scripture, and not just the practice (without undermining the importance of also understanding the various cultural faces of practice), is more relevant to the discussions around a 'sustainable society.'" (p.3).

In Section 3 of the article, a particular interest in the scripture determines the author's preference for conceiving Islam as a religion over understanding Islam as culture. In this section, inaccurate engagement with our work (Sandıkcı, 2011; Jafari, 2012; Sandıkcı & Jafari, 2013; Jafari & Sandıkcı; 2015a) renders the discussion less effective as the author strives to prove that religion-oriented research is valuable, as if we had said otherwise. The technical problem here is that El-Bassiouny misinterprets our thesis on exceptionalism (to be discussed in Section 4 of this essay). Nevertheless, making a distinction between Islam as religion (at a metaphysical level, the sacred) and Islam as culture (at a practice level, the profane), the author acknowledges the diversity of cultural practices among Moslems. Yet, prioritizing religion over culture, El-Bassiouny's writes: "Mirroring the basics of Islamic creed ("aqidah") of God-consciousness and individual accountability, Islamic consumers should engage in a continuous self-reflective process about their consumption styles and habits in terms of Islam's values, and Islamic marketing scholarship should aid in this critical self-reflective process." (p. 3). In other words, for El-Bassiouny, Islamic marketing should remain loyal to the basic tenets of 'the scripture' – albeit with some degree of sensitivity to cultural variations in practice – in order to guide consumers. With this view, the author then outlines the objectives of the *Shari'ah* (*Maqasid Ash Shari'ah*) (p. 4) to mean that what Islamic marketing should consider are the objectives of Islam and not Islam itself. She also maps out (p. 5) how Islamic marketing's principles at a macro level can help implement the objectives of *Shari'ah* via engagement with the individual consumer, professional marketers and regulatory bodies and marketing educators. Then, with reference to empirical evidence from past research, she argues that Moslem consumers are increasingly interested in *Shari'ah* compliant products and services. On this basis, the author contends that since Moslems are large in population and also widely spread (geographically), researchers and practitioners should not be misled by occasional erring (e.g., engagement in extravagance and overconsumption) of Moslems from the *Shari'ah* and focus on addressing the religious and moral needs of Moslems who yearn for *Shari'ah* compliant products and services.

Towards the end of her article, El-Bassiouny uses a milder tone and her discussions become more encouraging. She dedicates Section 4 of

[1] Page numbers in reference to El-Bassiouny (2015) apply to the iFirst version of the manuscript.

Please cite this article as: Jafari, A., & Sandıkcı, Ö., The ontological pitfalls of Islamic exceptionalism: A re-inquiry on El-Bassiouny's (2014, 2015) conceptualization of "Islamic ma...., *Journal of Business Research* (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.09.016