
For several decades, social scientific scholarship on Islam primarily focused on various dimensions of political Islam. Much of this work was framed by an implied contrast between liberalism and Islam, in which the overriding question concerned the compatibility between Islamic political theologies and the political institutions that had emerged in the North Atlantic since the Enlightenment. More recently, a turn in social scientific work on Islam has focused less on the commensurabilities with the practices, discourses, and institutions of liberal democracy and more on the articulations and disarticulations between Islam and various forms of economic liberalism.

Patricia Sloane-White’s *Corporate Islam* is a welcome contribution to this burgeoning literature. Ethnographically rich, the book builds on over twenty years of fieldwork experience by the author in Malaysia. The result is a finely detailed, empirically thick depiction of the increasingly visible role of Islamic principles (*sharia*) in Malaysian workplaces.

The most compelling aspect of the study is the author’s extensive experience in Malaysia. *Corporate Islam* builds on the author’s earlier study of Islamic workplaces in Malaysia (Sloane 1999). This long view enables the author to identify a fundamental transformation in the assemblage of Islam and corporate capitalism in Malaysia. Whereas in Sloane-White’s earlier work, the Malaysian workplace and economic life more generally was framed in racialized terms, today religion (and specifically Islam) serves as a dominant feature of many Malaysian workplaces. Thus, in the 1990s, Sloane-White argued that the state sought to cultivate an indigenous (*bumiputera*) elite that was identified in ethnic-racial terms. In contrast, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, Sloane-White found a more marked tendency among corporate workers to seek wealth “in Islamically prescribed ways” (p. 9). Whereas in the 1990s, Sloane-White observed that Islam was “largely interiorized and personal” (p. 9), by the 2010s she found that Islamic discursive practice was pervasive in corporate workplaces in Malaysia.

The main intervention in the book is to develop the concept of “corporate Islam”. Corporate Islam is a broad category that refers to the introduction of Islam, mostly defined as principles of Islamic law, into a wide range of Malaysian firms. Sloane-White uses the notion of corporate Islam to refer to a wide range of practices that her interlocutors associate with Islam. Thus, at times corporate Islam refers to values of social and economic justice evident in the...
redistributionist practices of almsgiving (*zakat*) (pp. 128–41). At other times, the term is identified with what Sloane-White refers to as “personnel sharia” (pp. 76–92), which are techniques of labor discipline, surveillance, and workplace control that are facilitated through the enforcement of Islamic norms in the workplace. Corporate Islam is also deployed to refer to neoliberal dispositions, such as entrepreneurship, individual accountability, and risk-taking (p. 150). Finally, corporate Islam serves as a sign of individual and collective identity by which Muslim Malaysians distinguish themselves from other Malaysian citizens who do not practice Islam (pp. 8–14). In this sense, corporate Islam illustrates the effects of “four decades of Islamization” which made “a Malay-Muslim population attuned to pious practice and eager to demonstrate compliance with core Muslim values” widely available to firms in Malaysia (p. 50).

Sloane-White’s detailed ethnography reveals that Islam itself is not a homogenous category in the Malaysian corporate world today. This is perhaps most graphically illustrated in her retelling of an incident that took place in 2010 at the Kuala Lumpur Islamic Finance Forum, a massive biannual industry conference intended to promote Malaysia’s aspirations to make the country’s capital a hub for global Islamic finance. Sloane-White reveals how an audience member stood up in the massive conference room to confront Mohammad Daud Bakar, a jet-setting “shariah entrepreneur” and leading Malaysian shariah scholar and advisor (p. 43). The interlocutor pointedly asked Bakar why the assembled group of experts at the forum did not address what he referred to as “the real economic mission of Islam”: questions of poverty and inequality (p. 44). The tension in corporate Islam is revealed in Bakar’s response, which was to defer the question by asserting that the forum was not the proper place to address social justice in corporate Islam, intoning “we won’t entertain this question here” (p. 45).

Thus, the “Islam” in “corporate Islam” is a contested signifier. Subsequently, when Sloane-White asks another forum participant about the incident, he responds “we understand that Islam is really a business, built on system of ethics” (p. 45). The conflicting definitions of Islam brought to the incident reveal how the definition of Islam in the Malaysian corporate world is not a settled question. Indeed, an underlying tension in Sloane-White’s account is the uneasy accommodation between Islam and capitalism. Thus, some view corporate Islam as a social justice project that can address the poverty and inequality, while most others appear to see it as a means of deploying Islam as a means of improving Malaysia’s economic competitiveness through enhanced discipline and greater individual accountability.

The hotly contested debate over Islam in the workplace leads to a further set of questions for future inquiry. What is the geographical reach of corporate
Islam? Is it a specifically Malaysian phenomenon, the unique product of the country’s political economic history? Or is it something that might be found beyond Malaysia’s shores? If corporate Islam is a sign of identity, it would presumably be specific to Malaysia and possibly countries, such as Indonesia, with similar (but far from identical) colonial and post-colonial racial politics. However, if corporate Islam refers mainly to conjoining social justice principles or neoliberal dispositions with Islam, its scope could potentially be much greater indeed.

Daromir Rudnyckyj
University of Victoria
daromir@uvic.ca

Reference