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# Introduction: Islam and human resource management

Introduction

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685

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to introduce this special issue on Islam and human resource management (HRM).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper introduces the papers in this special issue, which further current understanding of the association between Islam and HRM, and HRM practices in Islamic countries. The papers debate whether it makes sense to talk about an Islamic HRM, and try to identify the key features of an Islamic HRM model that is substantially distinctive from existing normative models of HRM.

**Findings** – The papers examine the impact of Islamic values on HRM practices and organisational outcomes, but more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the role Islam plays at the work place, and specifically how Islamic ideals, culture, values and norms are used in practice and implications thereof on workplace environment and overall organisational performance.

**Originality/value** – The paper introduces the concept of Islam and human resource management.

**Keywords** Islam, Human resource management, Management research

**Paper type** General review

## Introduction

Until recently, the potential association between religious beliefs, management practices and organisational outcomes has been conspicuously ignored in the mainstream management research. Despite the fact that over 80 per cent of people worldwide report that religion constitutes an important part of their daily life (Sedikides, 2010), much of the research in business and management has considered organisations as a religion neutral sphere, and as a result religion was not deemed worthy of study. This is due in part to the scepticism that religion has any significant impact on how individuals behave at the workplace. Matiaske and Grözinger (2010, p. 5) note that by considering organisation a “neutral sphere”, members of organisations are expected to shed their “religious ideas upon passing through the “factory gate”- or at least outside the organisation”. In addition to the scepticism about the role of religion in the management of organisations, scholars that have examined management practices across cultures, where there is greater religious diversity, subsumed religion as part of national cultures. Hofstede (1997, p. 16) argues that culture precedes religion and puts it:

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[...] religious affiliation by itself is less culturally relevant than is often assumed if we trace the religious histories of countries, then the religion a population has embraced along with the version of that religion seem to have been a *result* of previously existing cultural value patterns as much as a *cause* of cultural differences.

As a result of framing religion as a subset of national culture, the extant literature on cross-cultural management downplayed the role of religion. For instance, there is an extensive body of research on the impact of rituals and ceremonies in Japanese organisations, but very little research is carried out on the impact of religious rituals such as group prayers on organisational outcomes.

However, in the wake of what has been variously referred to as a religious (re)awakening, the subject of religiosity and religion has recently come to the forefront of management and organisational research. The increasing interest management scholars have shown in religion and management recently is a reflection of the growing evidence affirming that religious beliefs and values have significant direct and indirect effects on a wide range of behaviours in the workplace including job satisfaction (King and Williamson, 2005), leadership styles and effectiveness (Reave, 2005), ethical behaviour at the workplace (Weaver and Agle, 2002), as well as legal challenges to deal with religious diversity in the workplace (Morgan, 2005) and on employment practices (Budhwar and Fadzil, 2000).

The recent explosion of interest in the association between religion and management is also reflected in the increasing number of articles published on the relationship between religion, management and organisational performance in both academic outlets (e.g. Garcia-Zamor, 2003; Mitroff and Denton, 1999), and business media (Gunther, 2001; Symonds, 2005). We are also witnessing an increasing institutional support in the form of dedicated journals, special issues and interest groups in key learned societies. To accommodate the recent interest in this growing field of research, several new journals have been launched to address the issue of religion and spirituality in organisations. For instance the recently launched *Journal of Management, Spirituality, and Religion* journal focuses specifically on the role of religion and spirituality in shaping aspects of organising and managing resources and people in organisations. Also, recently a number of scholarly journals commissioned special issues on the theme of religiosity in organisations (e.g. Matiaske and Grözinger, 2010; Sedikides, 2010). Other signs of recognition include the establishment of the Management, Spirituality and Religion (MSR) special interest group at the Academy of Management, which had 649 active members by March 2010. The formal domain of MSR is to “study the relationship and relevance of spirituality and religion in management and organisations”. Its major topics include applications of particular religions to work, management/leadership, and organisation. This special issue focuses on Islam and human resource management (HRM).

### **Islam and HRM**

The articles in this special issue further current understanding of the association between Islam and HRM, and HRM practices in Islamic countries. Islam is an Arabic word which literally means submission to the will of God in all aspects of life. Islam is the religious faith of over 1.5 billion people, and is the fastest growing religion in the world. Studies on Muslim managers and employees report that management practices are strongly influenced by their religious beliefs and religious prescriptions (Abuznaid,

2006; Ali, 2009; Ali and Al-Owaihian, 2008; Bouma *et al.*, 2003; Randeree and El-Faramawy, 2010). The key sources of Islamic prescriptions are the Quran, which is considered by Muslims as the verbatim word of God (Allah), and the Sunnah – demonstrations and real life examples of the Prophet Mohammed. It is worth pointing out that the study of the association between Islam and HRM is not only relevant for organisations operating in majority Islamic countries, but also in countries where Muslims are not in majority. A recent survey shows that one-fifth or 300 million Muslims, of the world's Muslim population, live in countries where Islam is not the majority religion (The Pew Forum, 2009, p. 1). For instance, China is home to more Muslims than Syria, more Muslims live in Russia than Jordan and Libya combined, and India has the third largest population of Muslims worldwide (The Pew Forum, 2009, p. 1). In these countries organisations need guidance on how to accommodate the religious practices of employees.

Although the last two decades have seen an explosion of interest in Islamic management, most of the research, however, has focused on Islamic finance and accounting (Chong and Liu, 2009; Napier, 2009), Islamic marketing[1] (Haque *et al.*, 2010; Hashim and Mizerski, 2010), Islamic leadership (Ahmad, 2009; Weir, 2008), Islamic work ethics (Ali and Al-Owaihian, 2008; Kumar and Rose, 2010), and gender and management in Islam (Metcalf, 2006, 2007). Little research has been conducted on Islamic HRM so far (Tayeb, 1997). Overall, the existing body of research on Islam and management deals with two interconnected issues:

- (1) description, among other things, of decision making styles in Islam emphasising the principle of consultation (*Shaura*), and Islamic core values including the principles of honesty (Al-sidq), trust (Al-Amanah), justice and fairness in dealing with employees (Al-adl), team work and cooperation (Al-Ta'waan), and perfection/excellence (Al-Ikhlās); and
- (2) discussion of the yawning gap between normative Islamic core values and reality in the workplace in Islamic countries (Abuznaid, 2009; Ali, 2010).

These practices range from the widespread authoritarian management practices to nepotism in recruitment and compensation, which are not compatible with the Islamic principles of *Shura* and equity and fairness respectively (Budhwar and Mellahi, 2007).

There is comparatively more research on HRM in Islamic countries than HRM from an Islamic perspective. A number of edited volumes on HRM in Islamic countries have been published in recent years – HRM in the Middle East (Budhwar and Mellahi, 2006, 2007), HRM in Asia Pacific (Budhwar, 2004), and Managing Human Resource in Africa (Kamoche *et al.*, 2004). These edited volumes cover several aspects of HRM in most Muslim countries. Other recent studies have focused on women in management in both Islamic countries (see Aycan (2004) for Turkey; and Metcalf (2006) for Bahrain, Jordan and Oman), and non-Islamic countries (Ghorbani and Tung, 2007). Given the cultural and institutional distances between most Islamic countries and Western countries, a number of scholars explored the transferability and applicability of Western HRM practices in Islamic contexts (e.g., Al-Husan *et al.* (2009) and Al-Husan *et al.* (2009) for Jordan; and Mellahi and Frynas (2003) for Algeria).

**Papers in the special issue**

The primary aim for this special issue was to initiate a debate whether it makes sense to talk about an Islamic HRM, and to identify the key features of an Islamic HRM model that is substantially distinctive from existing normative models of HRM. Two papers in this special issue (Ali, and Branine and Pollard) helped us achieve this aim by highlighting the practice of HRM as prescribed in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammed.

In the first paper, Ali raises a number of important questions that highlights the Islamic challenges for the HR function in present day organisations. These cover issues related to Islamic teaching and perspectives on HR, compatibility of treatment of HR issues with Islamic principles and evolving organisational concepts, and dominance of Islamic prescriptions on HR in organisations operating in Muslim majority nations. He further highlights the usefulness of philosophies like *ehsan* at the workplace towards the provision of a useful framework for safeguarding societal concerns. Such prescriptions offer useful avenues to practitioners on how to address HR issues in a meaningful way in Islamic societies and if internalised can assist in protecting against violation of human dignity and achieving a balance between organisational and societal interests.

Branine and Pollard, in the second paper further explores the implications of Islamic management practices on HRM. Acknowledging the expected gap between the theory of Islamic management and practice, they highlight that management in Arab countries is heavily influenced by a combination of non-Islamic traditional and national culture values, norms of different countries and western management thinking rather than Islamic principles. This creates the classic mismatch between global integration and local responsiveness. The key message from their analysis is that a better understanding of Islamic management principles and importance of their relevance in Arab countries will help in better management along with continued benefits from western management. They also stress the need for and usefulness of a more active reverse diffusion of such knowledge via MNCs and international managers.

An additional aim of the special issue is to highlight the emerging empirical research evidence along its theme. Three papers fall under this category. The paper by Katou, Budhwar, Woldu and Al-Hamadi examines the association between ethical beliefs, aspects of national culture and national institutions and preferences for specific HRM practices in Oman. Their findings highlight significant differences in belief systems of Omani's along different demographic variables and also an important linkage between the above mentioned constructs. This investigation further confirms that an understanding of the various aspects of national cultural values, institutions and ethical beliefs helps to differentiate among managerial styles and predict managerial behaviour such as ethical decision making and also the kind of HRM practices suitable for a given context. In the next paper, Elamin and Omair look at male's attitudes towards working females in the Saudi context. These researchers have developed and used a new scale on "multidimensional aversion to women work" for their analysis. Their findings reveal a general preference of Saudi males towards traditional gender roles, however, a significant variation along such a preference based on various demographic variables (such as age). The study has a number of key messages for different policy makers, including those responsible for HRM. The

following paper by Forstenlechner and Al-Waqfi examines the topic of religious discrimination against Muslim immigrant job seekers in Austria and Germany. Expectedly, this research found perception of discrimination encountered by Muslim job seekers in the two countries. However, the research also highlights high levels of commitment of Muslim immigrants where they felt not discriminated against their inherent expectation that they would be. The analysis stresses the need for accommodation of basic religious needs of immigrant employees that can help to significantly improve their commitment towards the organisation virtually at no cost.

A further aim of the special issue is to examine the impact of Islamic values on HRM practices and organisational outcomes. The last paper in this special issue by Hashim examines the impact of management of human resources from an Islamic perspective on organisational commitment in Islamic organisations operating in Malaysia. The results of this investigation highlight a positive impact of an Islamic approach to HRM on organisational commitment.

### Conclusion

The papers in this special issue have only lightly touched the surface of Islam and HRM. Much more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the role Islam plays at the work place, and specifically how Islamic ideals, culture, values and norms are used in practice and implications thereof on workplace environment and overall organisational performance. We hope that the papers included in this special issue will serve as a stimulus for continued research on Islam and HRM.

### Note

1. Indeed a number of journals have been launched recently to accommodate the increasing interest in Islamic marketing and finance (e.g. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, *International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management*).

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