BOOK REVIEW

ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES ON MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION

By Abbas J. Ali. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2005. ISBN 184376766X, 260 pp.

Reviewed by Azhar Kazmi, Professor, Department of Business Administration, International Islamic University Malaysia, Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur

Management from Islamic perspectives (MIP) is an emerging area as evidenced by works reported in the literature from time to time. However, there is a certain lack of momentum among scholars and this significant field of enquiry lacks the push that characterizes some of the other areas such as the current interest in Chinese management, for instance. I am of the opinion that MIP is a part of a worldwide trend catalyzed by two simultaneous developments: the disenchantment with American management methods and the growing interest in non-American management models, several of which are rooted in unique cultural contexts such as the Chinese, European, Indian-Hindu, and Japanese (Kazmi, 2005).

Abbas Ali's book *Islamic Perspectives on Management and Organization* is unreservedly a welcome and timely contribution to the MIP literature. In Abbas own words, in this book he has "sought to capture the essence of Islamic thinking and the intellectual spirit of early Muslim thinkers and writers". Since most of the current research on Islam and business organizations is in a state of infancy, Abbas states that this book is intended to fill the gap and contribute to the intellectual discourse. Another important purpose seems to be to provide a reference to Western thinkers into the manner how Muslim organizations function. This becomes all the more important in view of the current hiatus between the Muslim and Western civilizations. Yet,

this task is daunting in view of the fact that historical and original sources are hard to find and current research in MIP is sketchy. Abbas's effort to face these challenges and come up with a highly readable book is a demonstration of his intellectual tenacity and sense of purpose.

Islamic Perspectives on Management and Organization is divided into eleven chapters. There are figures and tables interspersed in the text. A bibliography consisting of more than 250 sources of which a majority is related to works in MIP should be a feast for the eyes and mind of a potential researcher.

The book starts with a chapter on business and trade in Islamic thought. In it, Abbas provides a brief description of the economic, political, and social environment, as it existed on the eve of the advent of Islam in the seventh century (the first as per the Islamic *hijrah* calendar). What comes out of the discussion are that trade and other economic activities were an essential part of existence in the early Islamic period. For nearly six centuries – termed as the Islamic golden age – Islam provided an enabling environment for economic activity to flourish in the lands that the religion spread to. Subsequently, the decline and stagnation in the Muslim world is attributed by Abbas to "inflexible attitudes, rigid beliefs, and foreign domination". The historical narration in this chapter is known to most knowledgeable Muslims but could serve as an eye-opener for non-Muslims who may not be aware and therefore come to appreciate that Muslim societies provided a highly open and supportive environment for trade and business to flourish. I consider the enlisting of eleven organizational elements in Islam as a more important contribution. Here, the central role of religion in Muslim cultures is emphasized and those aspects that could create an impact on functioning of organizations are delineated. One would find in this part of the chapter the basic concept of Islam of unity of God to actions such as alms giving and tolerance that Abbas considers as contributing to ways how Muslims manage their organizations.

Chapter 2 is on human nature and motivation. It presents a comparison of human nature in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and refers to the four psychological levels of existence: *Sawwala, AmmᾹrah, LawwᾹmah*, and *Muᵗma'innah* mentioned in the Quran. Of greater interest to scholars would be the implications for management in several areas such as leadership styles, control systems, etc. Overall, the chapter

successfully demonstrates that Islamic perspectives offer insights that are consistent with humanistic and complex organization perspectives.

Islamic schools of thought are discussed in Chapter 3 where Abbas traces briefly the development of various schools of thoughts during the Ommayad, Abbbasid and Fatimid eras in the Muslim world. The schools discussed are Jabria, Tafwiz, Ikhtiar, Mutazilas, Ibn Rushd, and Ikhwan-as-Safa. For each school, the implications for organizations are discussed.

With the fourth chapter on Islamic work ethic and values, the book starts delving deeper into managerial issues. The chapter starts with identification of the Qurʾānic principles and the Prophetic prescriptions in the matter of human work and then pinpoints eleven elements of the Islamic work ethic (IWE) including pursuing legitimate business, and wealth must be earned. Four primary concepts of IWE: effort, competition, transparency, and morally responsible conduct are then discussed. Empirical research studies, some of them conducted by the author, are reported in the areas of Islamic work ethic and managerial value system. I believe this should amply demonstrate that empirical work in MIP can and should be conducted.

Chapter 5 on the structure and functions of groups starts with linking the nature and formation of groups of *Al Muhājirūn* and *Al Anṣār* in the post-Hijrah period at Medina. It refers to the typology of groups in Islamic history and discusses the functions of formal and informal groups. Of greater interest to the contemporary management scholar may be the investigation into the factors affecting group effectiveness and how it can be enhanced. There is an interesting contribution in the chapter highlighting the centrality of groups in Muslim societies and cultures.

The significant issue of power and authority is taken up in Chapter 6, where Abbas considers the evolution of power and authority in Islam over centuries and characterizes it as being regressive. The Prophet's style is identified as being based on reason and collaboration of highly engaged senior followers. Power usage and the evolution of authority are discussed through the examples of the rightly guided Caliphs. He proposes the concept of 'Sheikocracy', further elaborated in Chapter 9, as a form of management style which includes centralization of power and emphasis on personal relations are emphasized. This concept is akin to a sort of benign patriarchal-dictatorial leadership style and may

be of interest to scholars in the area of power and leadership styles.

Chapter 7 on decision styles and group dynamics starts the discussion by stating that in traditional Islamic thinking the intent of decision-making is to ensure justice and social cohesiveness. This chapter emphasizes the importance of consultation in Islamic settings and makes a comparison between decision styles employed by analyzing research studies in western and Arab contexts. On empirical evidence, the author concludes that the most preferred style by Muslim managers are consultative and participative, while the least preferred are autocratic and pseudo-participative. This finding may show that there may not be much difference to non-Muslim managers with regard to their preference for decision-making styles.

Leadership and organization constitute the contents of Chapter 8, where the author quotes from *al Qur'Ēn* and proposes that the Islamic concept of leadership is "an open-ended, shared influence process". The chapter identifies seven stages, starting with the Prophetic era, and of the changing nature of leaders and leadership through Islamic history. There is mention of the Khadra (1990) prophetic-caliphal model of leadership that is supposed to "capture the interplay of personalism and individualism". Abbas also presents his own model of leadership that interestingly starts with an input of personalism and idealism leading to great expectations. What emerges is an exposition of a model that in different stages leads up to either the lack, or presence of institutionalism. The material in this chapter is significant in the sense that it could constitute a strong foundation for further research into the phenomenon of leadership in Muslim organizations.

The topic of organizational structure is taken up in Chapter 9 where Abbas focuses on the forces that shape and influence organizational structure in Muslim societies. It presents a historical survey of types of structure in Muslim societies claiming that high-density and high-diversity social networks predominate in them. A significant point made is that Muslim organizations may adopt Western-style structures but work is done according to accepted societal norms and values. Empirical studies on structural issues in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates are also presented.

Chapter 10 is on human resources. It focuses on the perspectives and practices in human resource management and their variation across organizations and across time. The chapter notes yet again that

regression has taken place in Muslim cultures in terms of the nature of human resource management functions like recruitment and selection, and training and development. The welcome feature of the chapter is the derivation of the normative instructions from *al Qur' Én* and practice of the Prophet and the four Caliphs regarding performance evaluation. For instance, it is pointed out that in Islam there is emphasis on justice and responsible behavior in terms of compensation issues. The chapter ends with a special mention of women in management.

The last chapter, Chapter 11, focuses on organizational development (OD) in the Islamic context. It highlights the assumptions of organizational changes in Islamic settings by discussing the nature of the human being and contributes an understanding of OD applications across six Islamic schools of thought. It makes an interesting comparison of assumptions about change from three perspectives of Lewinian, Confucian, and Arab/Islamic perspectives and suggests developing OD models suited to Islamic cultures.

There are three points of criticism worth mentioning. First, the Arab perspective dominates throughout the book; hardly any reference or study is quoted in non-Arab contexts. This is despite the fact that more Muslims live outside the Arab world, in South and South-East Asia, than within it and studies of Muslim organizations are available in non-Arab contexts, too. Secondly, this book may be difficult to use as a textbook for those of us who are used to texts available with a lot of supplementary material for classroom instruction and examinations. Yet, the book can serve well as an authentic reference in MIP courses. Researchers would find this book a mine of information about potential research issues. Practitioners can hope to learn more about how things work or do not work in Muslim organizations. Non-Muslim managers especially in multinational corporations could use the book as a window into the world of Muslim organizations. Thirdly, I feel that Chapter 3 on Islamic schools of thought could as well be the initial part of Chapter 1, thus becoming logically consistent with the order of presentation. There is also some repetition of the discussion of schools of thought at other places in the book that could have been avoided.

The recurrent theme in the book is that the first six centuries after the advent of Islam is the golden age that can serve as the model for managing organizations and people. Principles enunciated, directly or indirectly, in *al Qur'Én*, *Aúadîth*, and sayings and actions of the rightly

guided Caliphs offer the guidelines for management of organizations. In doing so the book frequently moves between business and governmental organizations to exemplify the points. Most encouragingly, the book demonstrates that empirical research is possible and viable in MIP. Undoubtedly, this book is a timely contribution to the MIP literature and is to be welcomed.

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