ABSTRACT

In this ethnography, I explore the diverse understandings and practices of Islamic pieties that are being considered, negotiated, and enacted in the context of the new lifestyles, ethics, and economy of Amman, Jordan. Based on 21 months of qualitative, quantitative, and archival research in 2007-2009, the dissertation highlights – not specialized religious practices – but the variety of “everyday pieties” operative among the new middle class. I argue that these everyday pieties aim to negotiate new contexts and social relationships in a purposeful and Islamic way, often with some reference to Islamic law or ethics and, more particularly, a concern with “commanding right and forbidding wrong.” Furthermore, I consider the compounding influences of gender and socioeconomic class. In response to these influences, Islamic pieties are adaptive, fluid, and highly responsive to new circumstances.

I examine these qualities of piety through a variety of ethnographic materials, including consumption as represented in advertisements published in Amman during the 20th century, the government-enforced Ramadan fast and heightened religiosity during
the month, the social pressure for donning the hijab and the permeation of its ethic into both women and men’s lives, and in the production and consumption of Islamic banking methods and meanings. Each of these cases constitutes spheres for debate, contestation, and negotiation, as well as the spaces in which Islamic piety has become part and parcel of economic life in contemporary Amman. Therefore, public and personal piety lay solidly at the heart of this study, demonstrating that there are multiple varieties and processes of Islamic piety.

This dissertation builds on interpretive and constructivist theories of culture, highlighting what Islamic piety means to the study’s participants and how such meanings are socially expressed, sustained, and elaborated. The study also builds on the economic anthropology of consumption and distribution, examining how economic behaviors and religious ethics are embedded, thereby speaking to issues of Islamic authority. Finally, this ethnography demonstrates that, due to the diversity in Islamic pieties, attempts to construct a singular Islamic public remain a work in progress.