

Religion, Business, and Global Visions: An Exploration of South Korea's Discourse on *Halal*

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*If Malaysia and Korea's globally competitive Hallyu (Korean Wave) were to cooperate, then dominance in the global halal market is possible.*¹

- President Moon Jae-in at a Korea-Malaysia expo for 'Hallyu' products and halal foods (One Utama Shopping Center in Kuala Lumpur, March 12, 2019)

Readers unfamiliar with Korea's efforts to participate in the global halal market may find this epigraph surprising. *Halal* is an Islamic legal category that means 'lawful' or 'permissible,' and one that is most often brought up in the context of Muslim dietary practices. So, why would a non-Muslim country like Korea be interested in the halal market? Why does halal even matter for this non-Muslim country that is home to a Muslim population that barely exceeds 150,000? To answer these ques-

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1 'Hallyu,' which is commonly translated as "Korean Wave," is the term used to designate the widespread popularization of Korean dramas and K-pop music around the world.

tions, I present a frame analysis of two competing sets of discourses on halal in Korea that were dominant from 2009 to 2019. The discourse in favor of further halal developments were generated by the Korean national government, affiliate organizations, and economic actors while anti-halal Korean Protestant evangelicals, largely driven by Islamophobic sentiment, were the predominant creators of the opposition discourse.

These discourses are examples of how halal was signified in conflicting ways by two groups of communicators keen on influencing Korea's globalizing trajectory. As Korea competes against other industrialized nations to gain an advantageous foothold in the global halal economy, it is simultaneously wrestling with questions about multiculturalism, and social issues that have emerged domestically as Korea began to globalize. An examination of the public debate concerning halal in Korea will reveal that different competing visions of Korea were disputed through discourses aimed at influencing Korean people's stance on halal matters. In short, there was more at stake than just promoting or opposing halal developments. Underlying the debates about halal were concerns about Korea's international image, questions about how to navigate the changes that come with being an immigrant-receiving country, and aspirations of succeeding economically on the global stage. Ultimately, the (ongoing) question is: What kind of country do Koreans want Korea to be in this globalizing world?

President Moon's aspirational statement about cooperation between Malaysia and Korea in the global halal market captures the value that the Korean government sees in halal and the kind of globalized, regional power the Korean government aspires to be. However, to many Korean evangelicals, Islam is a Trojan horse, a creeping threat that Korea must be prepared to ward off. As enticing as the possibility of tapping into a multibillion dollar revenue stream was to many optimistic businessmen and government officials, there were many who were left uncertain about this foreign concept called *halal*—a concept rooted in a religion that was viewed unfavorably by a significant portion of Korean society. For example, at the time of the 2008 International Social Survey Programme Topi-

cal Module: Religion, 33.9% of Koreans polled held negative attitudes towards Muslims while 54.2% were ambivalent.² This largely negative sentiment towards Islam and Muslims appears to persist even now as Gi Yeon Koo shows through her analysis that online search terms related to “Islam” in Korea remain largely negative (e.g. ‘terrorism,’ ‘violence,’ ‘hate’).³ Halal is no longer the exclusive concern of Muslims, and what halal means for Korea remains contested. These contested meanings signal a need for an approach to studying halal in Korea that can account for how these meanings are constructed and communicated. This study is a modest attempt at addressing this need for more macro-social studies of halal (and Islam) in Korea.

To date, there is only a small number of studies on Islam in Korea—let alone halal—when compared to the number of studies on other religions of Korea. Much of the literature can be described as anthropological investigations of the lived experiences of Muslims in Korea.⁴ These micro-social studies of Muslim experiences in Korea brings rich details and texture to the study of a nascent minority religion that is continuing to grow in presence, but there is still a need for broader macro-social investigations into Islam in Korea.⁵ Thus far, studies on Islamophobia in Korea

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- 2 Hoi Ok Jeong, “South Korean Attitudes Towards Muslims: Revealing the Impact of Religious Tolerance,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28, no. 3 (2017): 388.
 - 3 Gi Yeon Koo, “Islamophobia and the Politics of Representation of Islam in Korea,” *Journal of Korean Religions* 9, no.1 (2018): 177-8.
 - 4 Hee Soo Lee, *Survey of Muslims in Korea – 2011* (Tokyo: Institute for Asian Muslim Studies-Waseda University, 2011); “A Survey Report on Halal Food Consumption Among Muslim Students and Housewives in Korea” in *Proceedings from the International Workshop on Halal Food Consumption in East and West*, 63-76 (Tokyo: Institute for Asian Muslim Studies, 2017).
 - 5 For more ethnographic works on Muslim life in Korea, see: Doyoung Song, “The Configuration of Daily Life Space for Muslims in Seoul: A Case Study of Itaewon’s ‘Muslim’ Street,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 43, no. 4 (2014): 401-440; Farrah Sheikh, “Korean Muslims: Shaping Islamic Discourse and Identities Online,” *European Jour-*

and the marginalization of Muslims in Korean society are currently the most prevalent studies engaging with broader sociological questions concerning the relationship between Korean society and Islam.⁶ However, animosity and rejection are not the only ways that Korean society has responded to the influx of Muslim visitors and the overall growing presence of Muslims in Korea. Despite the presence of Islamophobia in Korea, halal has been enthusiastically embraced and promoted by government entities and the business sector. Halal is no longer meaningful only to Muslim consumers in Korea; it has become something valued by political and economic actors within the country as well. This study tries to fill the gap between the more macro-focused research on Islamophobia in Korea and the micro-focused ethnographic accounts of Muslim lives in Korea.

After a brief overview of the methodology employed for this study, I will discuss one of the earliest public debates about Islam in Korea that revolved around the question of whether Islamic finance and banking could have a place in Korea. After assessing the arguments made by proponents and opponents of such developments, I will proceed to unpack the competing discourses surrounding Korea's participation in the global halal market, and how these competing discourses tried to frame halal—in terms of economics, multiculturalism, or religion. As halal advocates responded to the arguments put forth by halal opponents, this dialectical relationship influenced the ways each camp sought to persuade the broader public to their position.

nal of Korean Studies 19, no. 2 (2020): 129-147.

6 On Islamophobia in Korea, see: Jin Gu Lee, "Protestant Church's Images of Islam in Multicultural Korea: A Focus on Islamophobia," *Critical Studies of Religion and Culture* 19 (2011): 163-192; Nami Kim, *The Gendered Politics of the Korean Protestant Right: Hegemonic Masculinity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016); Eum Ik-Ran, "Korea's Response to Islam and Islamophobia: Focusing on Veiled Muslim Women's Experiences," *Korea Observer* 48, no. 4 (2017): 825-849; Park Jong Soo, "The Phenomenon and Issue of Islamophobia in Korean Society: Focus on Interculturalism," *Journal of Religion and Culture* 29 (2017): 49-70; Koo, "Islamophobia and the Politics of Representation of Islam in Korea."

Methodology

As stated previously, this study is a discourse analysis of how the Korean government entities, economic actors, and anti-halal evangelicals generated discourse about halal in the public sphere between 2009 and 2019. It is an examination of how halal was used as signifiers, and how its meanings were socially constructed and contested through various discourses in Korea. As the dominant generators of discourse on halal, government organizations, economic actors (e.g. Korean banks and corporations), and evangelical activists played a significant role in influencing the Korean public's perception of halal as well as the meanings that were ascribed to it. I focus on how these communicators framed halal and what kinds of discursive techniques they used in their framing processes.

Political actors, like the Korean government and anti-halal evangelicals, frequently used *frames* to influence public opinion and mobilize action by shaping the way people perceived events as well as other people. A *frame* is a “schemata of interpretation” that enables individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their life space and the world at large.⁷ Frames are used to imbue occurrences in our lives with meaning, organize experience, and guide action. My use of frame analysis in this study is derived primarily from the works of David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, two sociologists who have further developed Erving Goffman's analysis of frames through their research on contentious politics and social movements.⁸

7 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 21.

8 For more on frame analysis, see: David A. Snow, et al., “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (August 1986): 464-48; David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization,” in *From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movement Research Across Cultures*, eds. Bert Klandermans, et al., 197-217 (JAI Press: Connecticut, 1988) and “Master Frames and Cycles of Protest,” in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon D.

I also draw from Vivien A. Schmidt's study of discourse and discursive institutionalism as I examine the ideational powers that discourses can yield. Following Schmidt, I take 'discourse' to mean the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed.⁹ Schmidt's categorization of *normative* and *cognitive* ideas will help us analyze the Korean government's various policies and programmatic ideas in support of halal development while illuminating some of the underlying weaknesses that made their arguments vulnerable to anti-halal pushback. Schmidt asserts, "the success of a program does not just depend on the presence of *cognitive ideas*... It also depends on the presence of complementary *normative ideas* capable of satisfying policy makers and citizens alike that those solutions also serve the underlying values of the polity."¹⁰ As we will see, the presence of both cognitive and normative ideas in evangelical arguments against halal made them compelling, prompting a shift in the pro-halal discourse that largely framed halal as an economic benefit.

The data analyzed in this study comes from Korean news outlets reporting on halal developments in Korea as well as fieldwork I conducted over the course of two years (2018-2020). During fieldwork, I was a participant observer at weekly evangelical prayer meetings dedicated to the topic of Islam. While attending a host of evangelical events about Islam and halal, I collected documentary materials, such as recordings of protests and public sermons. As for gathering data representing the government's position on halal, the sheer amount of public discourse generated by the government meant there was ample data found in newspaper articles, promotional materials, and advertisements that captured the government's framing of halal. Also, while interning at a halal consulting and

Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller, 133-55 (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

9 Vivien A. Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 305.

10 Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism," 308.

marketing firm, I gained access to notifications of funding opportunities designed to encourage small businesses branch into the halal market, which served as further evidence for the government's continued interest in halal. In addition to these funding notices, I also collected training and informational material used by the Korea Tourism Organization to educate government employees about halal and Islamic culture.

Islamic Banking: Korea's First Foray into Halal

As previously mentioned, Korea's interest in the global Islamic economy started in the late 2000s during the Lee Myung Bak presidency. In 2009, the conservative Lee administration tried to push for a controversial tax reform bill that would have made changes to the Korean tax laws to attract capital from Islamic investors.¹¹ Islamic law prohibits collecting interest on debts owed, for it considers this practice exploitative of the debtor, making the purchase of bonds or other debt securities that generate interest income also prohibited. Korean banks and businesses had been "eager to advance into the Islamic capital market, which had seen explosive growth on the back of oil money."¹² However, Korean banks and businesses needed to find an alternative to issuing conventional interest bearing bonds to Islamic investors who were prohibited from participating in such investment practices. This alternative was the Shariah-compliant *sukūk* (Islamic bond).

What the tax reform bill drafted by the Ministry of Strategy and Finance tried to accomplish was to provide the same tax benefits as other

11 Ministry of Strategy and Finance, "Press Release Reference Sheet, September 29, 2009," *Ministry of Economy and Finance*, retrieved from http://www.moe.f.go.kr/com/synap/synapView.do;jsessionid=ioA1cOyPaMHkWFW1a7fJPKvP.nod e40?atchFileId=ATCH_OLD_00004004604&fileSn=414041.

12 Yoon Ja-young, "Banks to Tap Lucrative Islamic World," *The Korea Times*, April 7, 2008, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/biz/2008/04/123_22065.html.

foreign currency-denominated bonds. At the time that the Lee administration was trying to advance into the Islamic capital market, it was unclear whether *şukūk* bonds met the definition of a security bond in Korean law. This meant that *şukūk* bonds were not subject to the tax benefits other foreign currency-denominated bonds received, and they “incurred an additional tax burden, such as value added, acquisition tax, and registration taxes.”¹³ Two years after the Bank of Korea first advised the government and Korean businesses to prepare to work with Islamic financing, the tax reform bill looked like it was going to create the momentum needed for Korean institutions to enter the Islamic economy.

However, the bill was rejected by the Strategy and Finance Subcommittee on December 22, 2009, before it could make it to the National Assembly floor for a vote.¹⁴ This was a significant setback for companies, such as Korea Investment, GS Caltex, and Korean Air, who had already been preparing to issue *şukūk* bonds in 2010, anticipating the tax bill’s approval. It was reported by *The Star Online* in April 2009—months before the tax reform bill was to be discussed in the National Assembly—that GS Caltex, South Korea’s second largest oil refiner, was considering issuing *şukūk* bonds to raise as much \$286 million in capital. It was also a major setback for the Korean government, especially after conducting an “investment roadshow” in the UAE the month before the tax bill was scuttled. A delegation of government officials and business leaders met with several Gulf investors during this tour with the sole purpose of discussing Korea’s first *şukūk* issuance.¹⁵

The main opposition to this bill was headed by Korean evangelical

13 Yoon Ja-young, “Islamic Bonds to be Issued Next Year,” *The Korea Times*, September 29, 2009, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2009/09/129_52688.html.

14 Lee Sun-young, “Islamic Bond Plan Suffers Setback,” *The Korea Herald*, December 25, 2009, <https://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=104&oid=044&aid=0000087904>.

15 Sarmad Khan, “South Korea Weighs First Islamic Bond,” *The National*, November 3, 2009, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/south-korea-weighs-first-islamic-bond-1.596331>.

churches who ran a highly-organized campaign to protest this legislation. Korean evangelicals circulated Islamophobic claims that the invested capital would fund terrorist activities, making the *şukūk* bill a very unpopular piece of legislation to support. Pastor Cho Yong-gi, the founder and former head pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, reputedly the largest Christian congregation in the world, made his opposition to the *sukūk* bill explicitly clear when he warned the government that, “if the government continues to pursue the *sukūk* bill, it would be the start of President Lee’s resignation campaign.”¹⁶ Evangelicals also expressed concern that courting Islamic businesses would somehow encourage the funding of Islamic schools and infrastructure in Korea, fearing that “more Koreans may become Muslim.”¹⁷ Despite the fact that the bill was proposed by a conservative administration holding the majority of seats in the National Assembly, it failed to gain support in the National Assembly.¹⁸ Likewise, Islamophobic misinformation claiming that the funds raised would somehow “find its way to terrorists,” associated this bill with the growing threat of terrorism.

A Discourse Analysis of *Şukūk*’s Failure

So, why did the executive branch’s arguments supporting the merits of the *sukūk* bill fail to persuade enough of the public and their legislative

16 Kim Chong-ch’öl, “*Cho Yong-gi moksa ‘chǒngbu sukukūpǒp ch’uch’inhamyǒn Yi Myǒng-bak haya undong*” [Pastor Cho Yong-gi says, “If government continues to pursue *sukūk* bill, it is resignation campaign of President Lee], *Ch’ǒnchi Ilbo*, February 25, 2011, <http://www.newscj.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=70445>.

17 Frances Yoon, “Korea Revives Sukuk Bill Opposed by Pastors: Islamic Finance,” *Bloomberg News*, August 25, 2010, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2010-08-25/korea-reviving-sukuk-bill-scuttled-by-christian-leaders-islamic-finance>.

18 Kim Juyeon, “Islamic Bond Bill Faces Lawmakers’ Opposition,” *The Korea Herald*, February 17, 2011, http://khnews.kheraldm.com/view.php?ud=20110217000831&md=20120422222231_BL.

counterparts? Were the evangelicals' Islamophobic arguments against the bill inherently more compelling because it exploited people's fears? Vivien A. Schmidt distinguishes between two types of ideas that political actors use to create effective and persuasive programs: cognitive and normative. Cognitive ideas are intended to persuade people that a given program will provide robust solutions, while normative ideas "attach values to political action and serve to legitimize the policies in a program through reference to their appropriateness."¹⁹ Cognitive ideas need complementary normative ideas that communicate to the broader public that the proposed policies serve the underlying values of the polity.²⁰ The Korean government's rationale for supporting the bill—economic arguments about how Islamic finance will boost Korea's economy—contain cognitive ideas, but lack normative ideas that speak to underlying values. On the other hand, the evangelicals' Islamophobic arguments against the *sukūk* bill, albeit favoring normative ideas, includes both types. Exploitation of people's fear is a powerful tool, but it is not the only reason for why evangelicals' arguments were compelling. In the face of the evangelicals' normative and cognitive claims against Islam and the *sukūk* bill, the government's support for the bill appeared to be merely political and economic expediency, and worse, a gross disregard for national security.

However, despite these setbacks, the conservative Lee Myung Bak administration was undeterred from making inroads into the Islamic economy. Those working in the government, as well as major industries, knew that Korean banks needed to diversify their financing channels, looking beyond just American and Chinese investors. Korean corporations continued to do business in the Middle East, hoping to lure money and investors from oil-rich countries. This outlook continued through Park Geun-hye's presidency. Although the internal division within the conservative Grand National Party regarding participation in the Islamic economy persisted, President Park and the executive branch did what they could with-

19 Schmidt, "Discursive Institutionalism," 308.

20 Ibid.

in their powers to foster economic relations with Muslim majority countries. For example, President Park met with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, in March 2015 to talk about various business enterprises. But, the most notable development during this visit was a signed MOU with plans to nearly double Korea's halal food exports by 2017—a most ambitious goal that was never realized.²¹ President Park's visit can be seen as the start of Korea's second push for entry into the global Islamic economy after the failed attempt to incorporate *sukūk* bonds into the economy.

Setting the Terms: *Halal* as (Economic) Progress

On December 5, 2015, following President Park's visit to the UAE, the Korean Broadcasting Station (KBS), the national public broadcaster of South Korea, began to air a three-part mini docuseries on the global halal market titled *1.8 Billion (Muslims), The Islamic Market Rises*. The title of the series immediately highlights the fact that this growing population of Muslim consumers is a valuable consumer market. The first, and longest, episode of the docuseries (running 15 minutes long) begins with a scene of the circumambulation of the Ka'ba that Muslims perform during the Hajj with the narrator's voice introducing Islam as one of the world's major religions, emphasizing again the global population of Muslims. Then, the scene cuts to London during the 9th World Islamic Economic Forum in 2013—the first time the WIEF was hosted outside of a Muslim country; it is a clip of David Cameron addressing the audience at the 9th WIEF, and speaking about how the British economy can change to accommodate Muslim citizens. A minute in, the narrator recounts England hosting the WIEF in October 2013, and states that the “world's view of

21 Lee Hyo-sik, “Korea to Export More Halal Foods to Middle East,” *The Korea Times*, March 6, 2015, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2019/04/693_174723.html.

Islam is changing.”²² The tone of the narration and the jubilant scene of applauding audience members at the WIEF 2013 seems to suggest that the narrator is implying that the world’s view of Islam is changing in a positive way. According to the narrator, this attitude shift is a result of the fact that “we can no longer ignore the 1.8 billion Muslims and \$2 trillion that make up the Islamic market.”²³

From the beginning, the emphasis is put on economic and financial matters, and of the 15 minutes, only about two and a half minutes are spent defining what halal is. The two main points that this episode emphasizes are: 1) the halal market is growing and everyone is capitalizing on this opportunity; and 2) halal matters have nothing to do with religion, and everything to do with business. This latter point is explicitly stated in the episode at the 1:52 marker when the title for this episode is revealed to be “Part 1: Islam: Not Religion, But Business.” Parts 2 and 3 also continue this focus on the economic aspects of halal as evinced in their respective titles: *\$2.7 Trillion: Seize the Halal Food Market*, and *The ‘Blue Ocean’ of the Future: Muslim Tourism Market*.²⁴

Recall from our earlier discussion on the *şukūk* bill, the Korean government and economic experts already had concerns about finding alternative streams of revenue and investment capital as early as 2008. Since 2009, Korea went from being fourth among the 37 OECD countries in terms of economic growth to 18th in 2018 with a real GDP growth rate of 2.67%.²⁵ Facing economic stagnation as a looming issue, concerned ac-

22 The narrator is speaking in Korean and various interviews shown in the docuseries are also in Korean. All translations of Korean are author’s own.

23 *1.8 Billion (Muslims), The Islamic Market Rises*, KBS, December 5, 2015, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3iz5qy>.

24 “Blue ocean” is a common imagery used to depict the wealth of potential and uncharted nature of an unsaturated market—an apt metaphor for the global halal market. Parts 2 and 3 can be watched here: Part 2: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3iz990>; Part 3: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3iza79>.

25 Son Hyae-yong, “Is the Korean Economy Really Struggling?” *Chungang Daily*, June 9, 2019, <https://news.joins.com/article/23491716>.

tors turned to the global halal market as a potential boost to the Korean economy, a lucrative opportunity in which they hoped their citizens would invest.

Framing the topic of halal in terms of business emphasizes the market aspect of halal while putting distance between halal and Islam. Halal has religious significance for Muslims, but in the form of consumable products, halal goods are consumable by everyone. This point is demonstrated best in a scene showcasing a halal restaurant in London's Brick Lane. The narrator begins by stating, "All the food here is *halal*. But, the majority of the diners have no relations with Islam. Irrespective of religion, these people are just here to enjoy the food." The emphasis on halal food now going beyond religion is the tenor of the message for the entirety of the episode, which ends with a statement by Tun Musa Hitam, the Chairman of the World Islamic Economic Forum: "No religion. No politics. We don't discuss, we don't touch religion and politics. Because, only then will we be able to focus on business opportunities and business activities that will then improve the happiness, the development, the economic development of Muslim communities in Muslim countries."

The episode communicates clearly that going halal is a good business move, and that it has nothing to do with religion. Viewers are informed that some of the largest multinational corporations such as Subway, KFC, Nestle, and Unilever, have already tapped into the global halal market. By drawing attention to the fact that such name brand companies are investing in the global halal market, the creators of the series accomplish two things: 1) demonstrate that the halal market is widely popular and lucrative; and 2) normalize halal, and make this concept that is related to Islam less foreign and more palatable. Kim Jaesu, the former President of Korea Agro-Fisheries and Food Trade Corporation further emphasizes this point when he says, "Regardless of religion, from an economic perspective, by exporting our products to the \$1.3 trillion Islamic market, we can open a new future for our [Korean] agricultural and food products. The Islamic market is like an uncharted ocean full of potential to boost our economy."

However, this purely economic and cognitive framing of halal—the

same weakness found in arguments for the *şukūk* bill—left the pro-halal argument vulnerable to normative critiques made by anti-halal evangelicals. Evangelicals opposing halal developments in Korea utilized Islamophobic talking points that evoked fear and anger while making normative claims about what is good and evil, and presented concrete action plans for how to prevent the destabilization of Korean society (i.e., cognitive ideas). Halal was painted as a proxy for Islam’s spread in Korea, and as a proxy for a dangerous religion that promotes terrorism and violence, it had to be stopped. For these anti-halal evangelicals, the problem was Islam, and the unabated global spread of Islam was a major cause for concern, something that must be prevented even if it meant rejecting participation in the lucrative global halal market.

“People say they just want to make money and that’s why they get into the halal business. But where does that lead? In order for them to sell their goods, they have to follow these [Islamic] rules and accept them, which means that they are allowing Islam to control them. Once they accept halal, it opens the door to accepting Islam, and makes it easier for Islam to set root, and this is bad.”²⁶

This statement made by an evangelical prayer meeting organizer shows that she is familiar with the economic discourse on halal that has been popularized by halal business advocates in Korea. She is aware that there are non-Muslim Korean businesses interested in participating in the halal market having been drawn by the prospects of tapping into a lucrative market that is predicted to continue growing for years. However, she considers such financially motivated decisions to be misguided, and believes that such individuals will unwittingly become controlled by a sinister religion looking for ways to “set root” in Korea. To this organizer, participation in the halal market, as enticing an opportunity it may be, is a slip-

26 Field notes, Prayer Center (Seoul), May 9, 2019. All identities gathered during fieldwork have been anonymized.

pery slope that leads to people becoming Muslim. From her perspective, halal is essentially just a Trojan horse used by Muslims to spread their religion.

“Islam tsunami,” “occupy,” “invade,” “infiltrate,” and “set root.” These were words commonly used by evangelicals when they talked about the growing global population of Muslims and the increase in Muslim migration. They did not see the increased presence of Muslims in Korea as a favorable change, but rather as a sign that their enemies were at their gates. They considered their foreign mission sites as the forward bases from which the Gospel message would spread around the world. However, in recent years, they have witnessed their forward bases dwindling in numbers and their missionary work called into question back at home, all the while the number of Muslims in Korea, as well as around the world, have continued to climb.²⁷ If their aspirations were, as one evangelical missionary I heard speak put it, to “proclaim God’s glory and sovereignty over [the Islamic world] and pray that it will return to being God’s territory again,” then their global aspirations were being challenged on many fronts, even at home.²⁸

Evangelical Koreans were deeply concerned by these circumstances, and this anxiety they felt fed into a belief that every Muslim, whether they be study abroad students or migrant workers, seeks to spread Islam wherever they go.

After struggling for 22 years in Mecca, in 622 A.D., Muhammad moves to Medina, and in 18 months he conquers the city. From there, he raises an army, and then conquers the rest of Arabia. Now, if what Muhammad did is supposed to be considered examples to follow, then Muhammad going to another land as a foreigner and conquering it is one of his most exemplary acts. This is why Muslims don’t move to Islamic countries. They don’t

27 Lee “Protestant Church’s Images of Islam in Multicultural Korea,” 189.

28 Field notes, Mission School (Seoul), February 8, 2019.

go to Saudi Arabia, Dubai, or Kuwait. They go to Europe, and they don't go to Europe because Europe is better off, but because they *have* to go there to occupy it. They [Muslims] must follow exactly what Muhammad did. This is why we're saying that we can take in Muslim [Yemeni] refugees after investigating very closely, and making sure there is no law that allows fake refugees to get in.²⁹

These statements heard during a public prayer gathering were made by Pastor Yi Man-sök, arguably the most prominent evangelical figure in the Islamophobia network in Korea. He is also the one who first coined the term "Islam tsunami" in an online column he wrote to warn his readers of this looming threat.³⁰ We can see in his statements how Muslim migration is cast as a suspicious act spurred by a secret agenda to proselytize and "occupy" non-Muslim countries. Pastor Yi casts aspersions on Yemeni asylum seekers, claiming that "fake refugees" may try to disguise themselves as asylum seekers to enter Korea, and to begin occupying it in the name of Islam.

Pastor Yi's strategy of delegitimizing the halal market is very similar to his treatment of Yemeni asylum seekers:

[2015]: While keeping your eyes on the financial allure of halal, you will become a slave to Islamic law even before you know it, and invite more Muslims to Korean soil.³¹

[2016]: 'Halal' means 'permitted' things... And 'haram' means 'forbidden' things. This is what it means. However, these 'permit-

29 Field notes, Prayer Gathering (Seoul), September 9, 2018.

30 Yi Man-sök, "*Isüllam ssünami ka mollyö ogo itta*" [The Islam tsunami is coming], *Christian Today*, March 17, 2008, <http://www.christiantoday.co.kr/news/191021>.

31 Yi Man-sök, "*Hallal sikpum dui e sumün terö uihöm*" [The terrorist threat that hides behind halal], *GMW Yönhap*, December 15, 2015, <https://m.blog.naver.com/PostView.nhn?blogId=dreamteller&logNo=220568802906&targetKeyword=&targetRecommendationCode=1>.

ted' and 'forbidden' things are not only referring to food. It also applies to dress, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, lifestyle, and eventually, 'permitted' and 'forbidden' will apply to human beings themselves. And therefore, if we initially allow 'halal' to be applied to food, then it will apply to dress, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and inevitably one by one, our lifestyle system will become a slave to Islamic law. And we must know that this is their [Muslims'] goal.³²

Furthermore, evangelical activists, although deeply religious individuals, did not present their opposition to halal as a purely religiously based issue. In fact, much of their anti-halal discourse was framed in a manner that those unaffiliated with the evangelical church in Korea could find resonant. By taking on names that struck a patriotic chord such as Love of Country Citizens' Alliance, and People's Movement for the Establishment of a Righteous Country, evangelical organizations could attract a broad range of people to their cause. They framed their rejection of halal developments in Korea as a sacred duty which must be upheld by those who love their country, presenting an argument that spoke in both cognitive and normative registers. The security of the nation, and stability of Korean society was not an issue for only devout Christians, but every Korean who cares about the welfare of their country.

As was their strategy against the *sukūk* bill, evangelical activists used this call to protect the country from the threat of an "Islam tsunami" as a compelling counterpoint to the messaging promoted by advocates of halal development. Anti-halal evangelical activists did not simply try to discredit the economic claim that halal developments in Korea would be good for its economy by casting suspicion on how the capital generated by such ventures would eventually be used. They essentially tried to

32 Yesol Media, "Islamic (Anti-Halal Terrorism Ban) Crime Political Rally Part 2, March 19, 2016 Seoul Station Square," YouTube video, 1:24:40, April 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8N6NoCYKeE8>

change the conversation by responding to pro-halal economic arguments with arguments that framed these pro-halal stances as undermining national security and the cohesion and stability of Korean society. One of the popular signs used during the Iksan Halal Complex protests succinctly captures this anti-halal messaging: “National security is more important than economic decisions!”³³ This normative pushback against halal eventually encouraged pro-halal advocates to shift their framing of halal away from purely economic and pragmatic calculations.

Shift in Discourse: From Economics to Multiculturalism

“Halal and Hallyu” was the main talking point for President Moon during his state visit to Malaysia in 2019. In the context of President Moon’s trip to Malaysia, this message was an invitation for cooperation that succinctly expressed Korea’s vested interest in entering the global halal market, and its desire to further develop economic relationships with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) member states. Malaysia is one of the major players in the global halal market, and without their cooperation, a non-Muslim country like Korea faces enormous hurdles in successfully navigating it.

Korean foods and snacks that have received halal certification are already widely popular in the Southeast Asian halal market. Likewise, Korean brand cosmetics have become much sought after, increasing the demand for halal certified K-Beauty products in the region. Following these demands and the growing market for ‘halal entertainment’—entertainment deemed suitable for Muslim consumption—the Korean

33 Chŏn, Byŏng-sŏn, “Kangwŏn iksan ch’angwŏn ūi ‘hallal yuch’i’ pandae” se chiyŏk simindanch’edŭl hoegyŏn [Three local civic groups from Kangwŏn, Iksan, and Ch’angwŏn meet to oppose ‘halal bid’], *Kukmin Daily*, May 31, 2016, <http://news.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0923550783&code=23111115&sid1=chr>.

government aspired to partner with Malaysia in coming up with innovative halal products and services to corner the halal entertainment sector. The soft-opening of District K, a four-story Korea themed retail zone at the One Utama Shopping Center in Kuala Lumpur, which President Moon attended, was an indicator that there was keen interest from both parties to fully realize this “Halal-Hallyu” partnership.³⁴

In Malaysia, one can find a perfect blend of diverse ethnicities, religions and cultures and also experience a dazzling array of colors, tastes, sounds and fragrance. Above all, Malaysia respects and honors diversity and is brimming with limitless potential. I hope Malaysia’s spirit of tolerance will be spread all over the world. *I also hope Malaysia will share its wisdom with Korea...* We are also pioneering a new way for shared growth by connecting Korea’s culture and technology with Malaysia’s knowhow in terms of leading the global halal market. I look forward to another remarkable result coming out of this cooperation.³⁵

During the state dinner hosted by the Sultan of Malaysia, President Moon expressed these dual concerns over Korea’s economic growth and its international image as a diverse, multicultural state. However, unlike before, multiculturalism was not treated as an issue subordinate to economic development, nor was multiculturalism and diversity promoted purely for the sake of gaining an economic advantage. Likewise, President Moon did not simply recognize the global halal market as a means of economic growth, but he also saw it as an opportunity for expanding the

34 Natalie, Khoo, “1 Utama Shopping Centre to Open First Korean Themed Retail Zone in Malaysia,” *The Edge Markets*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/malysias-first-and-biggestkorean-themed-retail-zone-opens-1-utama>.

35 Remarks by His Excellency Moon Jae-in, President of the Republic of Korea, at the State Dinner hosted by His Majesty The Yang di-Pertuan Agong XVI Al-Sultan Abdullah, March 13, 2019.

reach of Korean culture. The global halal market was imagined to be a facilitator for the continued globalization of Korean culture, whether that be in the forms of Korean music, movies, TV shows, or Korean cultural products like foodstuffs, herbal medicines, and Korean traditional dress.

Perhaps this was an inevitable shift considering halal is a concept stemming from a culture foreign to Korea's, and a concern carried by a growing number of religious minorities living in Korea. However, I propose this shift in discourse manifested as proponents of halal and multiculturalism began responding to the normative arguments put forth by opponents of multiculturalism and halal. Anti-halal evangelicals argued that the economic growth promised by the halal market was not worth the national security risks that domestic halal developments and a growing Muslim population would pose. To counter these arguments, proponents of multiculturalism and halal needed to present normative ideas of their own. Just as multiculturalism could no longer remain chained to tired arguments that valued immigrants and migrant laborers solely for their potential economic contribution, the government's arguments in favor of halal needed to evolve as well.³⁶

Tracking the discourse generated by the government and affiliate organizations between 2009-2016, we can see that arguments for halal were framed in terms of the global halal market's economic benefits. Then, in 2017, there was a concerted effort to draw larger numbers of Muslim tourists from Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia to offset the drop in Chinese tourism that occurred due to political tensions between China and Korea over the THAAD missile defense system.³⁷

36 For a discussion on the development of multiculturalism in Korea, see: Timothy C. Lim, *The Road to Multiculturalism in South Korea* (London: Routledge, 2020); Yeogmi Yun and Ki-cheol Park, "An Analysis of Characteristics of Korea's Multiculturalism: Policies and Prospects," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 25, no. 2 (2011): 131-61.

37 Miranda Mazariegos, "South Korea Courts Muslims to Fill Tourism Gap," *Religion News Service*, November 2, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/11/02/south-korea-courts-muslims-to-fill-tourism-gap/>.

However, despite pressing economic concerns, it soon became clear that Korea's ability to accommodate this growing number of Muslim tourists was insufficient.³⁸ The Korean government and the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) had to act quickly in addressing this issue or risk alienating a demographic that they had invested considerable time and effort to attract. Once primarily motivated by economic calculations, hosting Muslim visitors in Korea soon became an issue of multiculturalism as concerns about properly accommodating Muslim visitors to the country took precedence.

Coinciding with the state's attempts to present multiculturalism as a virtue in and of itself, its promotion of halal matters was directly related to such efforts. The state was aware that the degree of comfort and hospitality Muslim visitors felt within the country reflected to what extent Korea had become a multicultural society that embraces diversity. It was a metric that could be used to evaluate Korea's ability to adhere to the "global standards" of multiculturalism, and to meet these standards the KTO began an impressive campaign to promote a "Muslim-Friendly Korea."³⁹

Despite some challenges, Korea has strived to present itself as a progressive, multicultural country, and its leaders have been responsive to the various complaints and concerns expressed by Muslims visiting and residing in the country. Once it became clear that the two biggest challenges faced by Muslims in Korea were a lack of halal food options, and difficulty in finding appropriate spaces to pray, various government bodies and private institutions began to address these concerns by constructing more prayer rooms, and encouraging the establishment of more halal

38 E. J. Kim, "Over 1 Million Muslim Tourists to Visit S. Korea This Year," *Yonhap News Agency*, September 15, 2019, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20190915000700320>.

39 Timothy C. Lim, "It's Not Just Talk!: Ideas, Discourse, and the Prospects for Transformational Change in a Homogenous Nation-State," *Asian Ethnicity* 21, no. 3 (2020): 350.



It is not easy for Muslim travelers to find appropriate food or prayer rooms in a non-Islamic country. If you are concerned about cultural inconveniences during your travel to Korea, please make use of the following information provided by the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), which is doing its best to make Korea a Muslim-friendly destination.

[Picture and introduction from the Muslim-friendly travel page on the KTO website]

restaurants.⁴⁰ Beginning in November 2016, the KTO began organizing an annual Halal Restaurant Week to promote domestic halal restaurants, and encourage “Muslim-friendly” tourism.⁴¹ To make it convenient for Muslim visitors, the KTO created a coupon voucher booklet that not only contained all the halal certified restaurants that registered with the KTO, but also a list of restaurants that served food options that Muslims could comfortably eat (i.e. “Muslim-friendly” restaurants).

However, one of the unintended consequences of the government’s efforts to reframe the discourse on halal in terms of multiculturalism was that by tying multiculturalism to the issue of halal, the government had given anti-halal evangelicals another reason to oppose the efforts to foster a multicultural Korean society. Often, anti-halal evangelicals have blamed European countries’ multiculturalism policies for what they perceive to be a dangerous “Islamization” of countries like the UK, France, and Germa-

40 You Soo-sun, “Muslim Prayer Room Opens at Lotte Dep’t Store,” *The Korea Times*, August 17, 2017, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/culture/2017/08/141_234839.html.

41 Although it is named, “Halal Restaurant Week,” the event spans a month.

ny. By pointing to the social issues that have emerged concerning Muslim immigrants to these European countries, and blaming Islam for the terrorist attacks in Europe during the last decade, evangelicals frequently warned of the possible “Islamization” of Korea that could happen if Korea takes the road towards multiculturalism, effectively linking multiculturalism with Islamic extremism and terrorism. Insofar as multiculturalism was tied to the possibility of increased Muslim presence in Korea, it would be something Korean evangelicals would continue to oppose.

In a column he wrote on February 3, 2011, Pastor Yi Man-sök discusses at length Korea’s efforts to push for multiculturalism, and the negative impacts that Koreans risk facing due to these efforts. He begins by painting a beautiful picture of multicultural society in which “individuals of different cultural backgrounds can all stand shoulder-to-shoulder in peaceful coexistence while preserving their unique identities.”⁴² He also recognizes the noble work that human rights groups do to help Koreans “break out of their prejudice” concerning foreigners. However, after painting this positive picture of multiculturalism and the good intentions behind efforts to promote a multicultural society in Korea, Pastor Yi juxtaposes this positive imagery with details about a criminal case concerning a Bangladeshi migrant laborer who had been convicted of sexually assaulting and murdering a Korean girl. By highlighting this particular case, one that involves a Bangladeshi *Muslim* man, Pastor Yi is implying that multiculturalism would lead Korean society becoming vulnerable to such dangerous elements, viz., Muslims.

A popular example evangelicals like to use to buttress their arguments against multiculturalism is Chancellor Angela Merkel’s controversial statement made in Potsdam, Germany on October 16, 2010: “This [multi-

42 Yi Man-sök, “On Multiculturalism,” *Christianity Daily*, February 3, 2011, <http://kr.christianitydaily.com/articles/47737/20110203/%EC%9D%B4%EB%A7%8C%EC%84%9D-%EC%B9%BC%EB%9F%BC-%EB%8B%A4%EB%AC%B8%ED%99%94-%EC%A0%95%EC%B1%85%EC%97%90-%EB%8C%80%ED%95%B4%EC%84%9C.htm>.

cultural] approach has failed, utterly failed.” Other popular examples are the various laws passed in other European countries limiting the public presence of Islamic expression (e.g. the banning of the burqa in public in France, and the banning of additional construction of minarets in Switzerland). By pointing to such instances, evangelicals opposed to multiculturalism claim that even countries that have a longer history of human rights protections and multiculturalism such as Germany, France, and Switzerland are giving up on multiculturalism. Furthermore, they add that multiculturalism did not fail in these countries because of immigrants in general, but specifically because of Muslim immigrants, and the growing presence of Islam, i.e., the “Islam tsunami.” Why should Korea take up multiculturalism when these countries are reversing course? In 2009, Pastor Yi warned the audience present at the inaugural prayer service of 4HIM (Halt Islam Movement) Ministry, “It is urgent to come up with countermeasures before we end up in a regretful situation like Europe unable to deal with Islam that is growing like cancer cells.”⁴³

It should be noted that evangelicals are not being told to oppose multiculturalism because it, in and of itself, is a bad thing. Rather, they are told that multiculturalism should not be accepted at this juncture because of what it could lead to: an increase in Muslim immigration to Korea, and a greater presence of Islam, an intolerant and violent religion that is incompatible with multiculturalism and diversity. Evangelicals who resonate with the mission and vision of 4HIM ministry believe that Islam must either be stopped from gaining ground in Korea, or risk the Islamization of the country which would throw the country into chaos. Therefore, multiculturalism must be abandoned, and a hardline stance against Muslim immigration be taken.

43 Ryu Jae-kwang, “4HIM Movement Begins in order to Halt Islamization,” *Christian Today*, April 6, 2009, <https://www.christiantoday.co.kr/news/201669>.

Conclusion

The national government attempted to frame the debate around the *sukūk* bill in economic terms, highlighting the potential economic stimulus that capital from oil rich Muslim nations could bring to Korea. However, even the majority party framing the discourse in this manner failed to persuade enough members within its own party for the bill to make it to the National Assembly floor for a vote. This same strategy was used in framing the discourse around the global halal market. Halal products were painted as the gateway into the deep “blue ocean” of lucrative opportunities. Again, the emphasis was put on the economic gains that halal industries could bring to Korea, and on multiple occasions the government failed to construct a Halal Industry Zone that would have allowed the mass production of halal Korean food products for export to Muslim-majority countries.⁴⁴

Once the Moon administration assumed office, we saw questions of multiculturalism and halal coming together. A separate, and older, debate about multiculturalism and what it would look like in Korea was raging before the public was ever introduced to the global halal market, but questions about how to better accommodate migrant workers, many of whom were and are Muslims, began to intertwine with ongoing debates about multiculturalism. However, the primary concerns at that time were not about halal accommodations, or developing and expanding halal infrastructure, but about how to help these migrant workers assimilate better into Korean society. These broader questions concerning multiculturalism remain unanswered and continue to loom over Korean society. However, we can observe a noticeable shift in the government’s treatment of multiculturalism—from being subservient to economic calculations to becoming a symbol of globalization and modernity.

All the effort to make halal more palatable to the broader Korean pub-

44 Chŏn, “Three local civic groups from Kangwŏn, Iksan, and Ch’angwŏn meet to oppose ‘halal bid’,” May 31, 2016.

lic indicates that there was concern about the Korean public's resistance to halal, a resistance that stemmed from the ever-spreading Islamophobia propagated by a network of evangelical figures and organizations that have worked zealously for years to stop every effort to promote halal developments in the country. While pro-halal advocates framed halal in terms of economics and multiculturalism, Korean evangelicals have steadfastly framed their discourse on halal in terms of morality and salvation (both material and spiritual). Anti-halal evangelical activists framed the "problem" they were trying to solve (i.e. Islam) in a more urgent fashion, and their utilization of normative ideas to frame this public debate about halal in terms of what is right and wrong made their case more compelling than the primarily cognitive framing present in pro-halal discourses.

One could argue that the *sukūk* bill was shuttered, and developments in the domestic halal industry stymied, because fear ultimately proved to be more persuasive than rational thought; that this was just another unfortunate result of Islamophobia. However, I think such a conclusion is too reductive and is not a sufficient explanation of why the anti-halal discourse was so effective. To simply chalk it up to Islamophobia is akin to saying that rhetoric designed to spread fear of Islam and Muslims is somehow just inherently more compelling. Instead we should recall Vivien A. Schmidt's assertion that effective and persuasive programs of change are based on both cognitive and normative ideas. This combination of cognitive and normative ideas is what ultimately made the evangelical stance against the *sukūk* bill and other halal developments prevail over their opponents,' and what also prompted the shift in the government's discourse concerning halal developments for the better. Only time will tell if the Korean government's efforts to connect halal to multiculturalism as a normative good, and something to be valued by Korean society, will bear positive fruits.

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<Abstract>

Religion, Business, and Global Visions: An Exploration of South Korea's Discourse on *Halal*

Ray Kim

Driven by economic exigencies, the Korean government began to strategize entering the rapidly expanding Islamic economy during the early 2000s. Subsequently, decisions to invest into the global halal market ignited public opposition from Korean evangelicals who rejected the positive economic framing of halal—an Islamic concept most commonly used to inform Muslim dietary laws. Based on fieldwork in Korea and analysis of Korean media sources, this article tracks the development of this “halal discourse” through a frame analysis of the discourses created by the Korean government, economic actors, and anti-halal evangelicals, and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments. As these competing voices debated halal’s place in Korean society, the supporters of halal had to respond to evangelical pushback against halal, leading to notable shifts in the public discourse on halal, an issue that was rooted in deeper underlying debates concerning multiculturalism, globalization, and competing visions of Korea.

Keywords: Islam, halal, globalization, multiculturalism, Islamophobia

〈국문초록〉

한국의 할랄 담론 탐색: 종교, 비즈니스, 그리고 글로벌 비전

레이 킴 (조지타운 대학교)

한국 정부는 경제 위기에 힘입어 2000년대 초반 급속히 팽창하는 이슬람 경제에 진출하는 전략을 세우기 시작했다. 그 후, 세계 할랄 시장에 대한 투자 결정은 할랄의 긍정적인 경제적 프레임을 거부한 한국 개신교인들로부터 대중의 반대를 촉발했다. 국내 현장조사와 한국 언론매체 분석을 바탕으로 한국 정부, 경제 주체, 반할랄 개신교인들이 만들어낸 담론의 프레임 분석을 통해 이 “할랄 담론”의 발전과정을 추적하고 강점과 약점을 평가한다. 이와 같은 단체들이 한국 사회에서 할랄의 위치에 대해 논의를 하면서 할랄 지지자들은 할랄에 대한 반대 단체인 개신교의 반발에 대응해야 했고, 이는 할랄에 대한 담론의 주목할만한 발전으로 이어졌다. 그리고 이러한 담론의 발전은 다문화주의, 세계화 및 한국의 미래에 관한 더 깊은 근본적인 논쟁에 뿌리를 둔 문제임을 드러냈다.

주제어: 이슬람, 할랄, 세계화, 다문화주의, 이슬람포비아

