



Islamic human geography - Making space for a conversation of difference

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Abstract

Whether acknowledged by the West or not an Islamic epistemology exists for both natural and human sciences. And since advancing postcolonial geography must also include the decolonization of knowledge, it is timely to consider if an alternate, Islamic human geography has instructive worth with respect to mainstream human geography. This paper sketches a broad outline of an Islamic human geography and shows how it (i) addresses some of the fundamental epistemological questions non-Islamic, largely secularised, geographies of the West have abandoned or silenced; (ii) incorporates a number of ideas within mainstream human geography; and (iii) outlines novel frameworks for synthesizing differences that trouble mainstream human geography. While the showcasing of Islamic geography may not alter its irrelevance to secular and non-Islamic geographies its illumination confirms its relevance to Muslim contexts and, by refraction, the situated nature of mainstream human geography. As such, this exploration serves the purpose of opening out the kind of conversation across difference that post-colonialism seeks to advance.

Keywords: decolonization of knowledge, democratization of knowledge, human geography, Islamic geography, mainstream geography, post-colonial studies

Introduction

On top of also being the subjects of Eurocentrism and Orientalism themselves, Muslim geographers living a lifetime of colonialism and post-colonialism must know how to simultaneously lead a double intellectual life. One is professionally where they mimic secular geographers, and the other privately as true Muslims do or should do. Thus academically they learn, for instance, to always use 'nature' instead of 'God', and to express their thought in phrases that confer autonomous causal and creative power to abstract concepts and categories, objects, subjects, matters and things instead of predicating them on the manifestation of a living God as Cause of causes. Similarly, they learn to reduce Islam to culture although privately as Muslims they profess the Islamic teaching that Islam subsumes, circumscribes, and is above culture. They do all this epistemic suppression and silencing voluntarily because it is the only way to make a living as geography practitioners in modern, contemporary institutions of higher learning where secularism tacitly reigns supreme.

It is not that there has not been any endeavour on their part to address their academic subjugation. At the international level the first and second international Islamic Geography conferences were respectively held under the auspices of Imam Muhamad Ibni Saud Islamic University in Riyadh in 1979 (Riyadh. Research Center Imam Mohammed ibn Saud Islamic University, 1984) and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists in Ames, Iowa in 1983. These were the Muslim geographers' direct response to the need to reinterpret the Muslim world and redefine the Muslim contribution to geography and science 'with an objective perspective' (Mushtaq Rahman, 1983). The second conference registered participants from

thirteen countries and resulted in the establishment of the International Islamic Geographical Society whose task was to continue coordinating research efforts of Muslim geographers. The third conference on Development and the Muslims was held in Malaysia in 1988 (Kadir H. Din, 1996).

Since then nothing is ever heard of any contemporary Islamic geography, except perhaps for a piece written on a preliminary Islamic review of epistemological problems in human geography (Amriah Buang, 1992) which was virtually ignored by mainstream human geographers (Buang, 2011). Other than that Islamic geography is about the past and the medieval (see for egs. Nafis Ahmad, 1965; Buang, 1997; Al-Monaes 1991; Pourahmad, 2004; Fuat Sezgin, 2010; Ahmed Essa, Othman Ali, 2010), or little more than a collection of idiographic descriptions of urban forms and architecture befitting the acceptable format of contemporary mainstream regional geography or cultural geography (see for egs Besim S. Hakim, 1999; Saoud, 2002; Muazaz, Hassim and Kausar 2010; AyÖe Sema Kubat, 2010) rather than that of an autonomous Islamic geography.

On the surface, time may be blamed for the stunted nature of 'progress' in Islamic human geography. As consumer of social and human sciences, Islamic human geography has to wait for Islamic social and human sciences to 'progress'. 'Classical physics had first to fall under the weight of new discoveries in the first three decades of the (20th.) century. Then it began to replace old conceptions with a new paradigm in physics. The social sciences had to wait another fifty years till the new developments sank in before sheepishly following the new physical science paradigm. As far as Muslim social scientists are concerned, they first had to see all of these changes unfold before they could allow themselves to act' (Ragab, 1993:10).

A closer look at the issue, however, may reveal four factors that have really contributed to the stagnation and marginalization of contemporary Islamic geography. First, the routine demand of mainstream academia ruled and still ruled by western secularism meant that time and energy devoted to Islamic geography is limited. The regular task of teaching, conducting research and publishing in the standard conventional way typically exhaust geographers. Doing another geography is simply impracticable.

Second, it does not pay, professionally speaking, to embark on pursuits not recognized by mainstream secular academia. To many Islamic geographers, the crucial question always falls back to the pragmatic : What is the point of labouring alternative courses if it will not count for your promotion and advance your career ultimately. Achievement in an academia ruled by mainstream (western) secularism is formally measured by the courses you teach, researches you conduct, and publications you do according to the format set, and by editorial boards and publishers recognized and approved, by the mainstream, secular western dominated academic elites. Local non-western universities which want these elites' seal of approval so that they can feel they have internationally arrived must play this academic political game at the expense of nurturing their own brand of scholarship. For example, while the philosophy of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia "affirms the integration of faith in Allah and constructive knowledge; along with the amalgamation of theory and practice as the core fundamentals in the advancement of knowledge, the building of an educated society and the development of the university" (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2013), the inception of full pledged Islamic Geography courses is yet to see the light of the day since the university's four decades of existence .

Third, there is real anxiety on the part of many Muslim scholars trying to engage in rational argument with secularism that the rational manner in which they would interpret and articulate Islamic theological doctrines might not be taken kindly by orthodox Islamic circles. Modern Muslim geographers are just modern scholars (*ilmuan*) and not what would normally be recognized as the religiously learned *ulama* who went through all the primary, secondary and tertiary years of classic Islamic religious education and training, memorized the Quran and the prophet's traditions, and are fully knowledgeable in all the detailed *tasauf*, *fiqh*, *muamalat*, etc. branches of the Islamic theology. In contrast, modern Muslim geographers went through whole passages of mainstream secular education which not just eroded their Islamic theological command but also confounded in varying measures their ways of perceiving, understanding, and knowing the world.

Finally, articulating an Islamic discourse for a secular audience is also daunting in itself as it involves the ability and willingness of the audience to appreciate the far reaching distinction between Islam and other religions. Western secular scholarship evolves as a revolt against Christianity epistemology and a Muslim scholar often finds himself at pains trying to show how different it is with Islamic epistemology. Although Muslim scholars basically understand the fundamental difference between the two faiths' theological doctrines, many of them do not feel up to the task of articulating this fact in the erudite manner and language that meet the expectations of a sophisticated secular scholarship. For the Muslims this challenge is compounded by the difficulty that comes with the often uncomplimentary way Islam is perceived by the west both because of history and some misguided conduct of some contemporary Muslims.

The making of the obscurity of indigenous Islamic geography, therefore, goes beyond mere epistemic violence which Spivak (1988) applied to describe the destruction of non-Western ways of knowing the world, and the resultant dominance of the Western ways of perceiving, understanding, and knowing the world: "The Subaltern must always be caught in translation, never truly expressing herself", because of the colonial power's destruction of her culture, and the marginalization of her way of understanding and knowing the world" (Sharp, 2008). To be sure, Muslim geographers never truly express themselves not so much because the colonial and post-colonial academia's destruction of their faith in the Islamic epistemology and worldview as because of personal strategy for professional survival in an academic world ruled by western secularism. In fact, for most Muslim academicians colonialism and post-colonialism never destroy their intrinsic Islamic faith including its epistemology. What really happened in an academic world ruled by western secularism is the absence of recognized epistemic democratization, a situation where no subaltern ways of perceiving, understanding, and knowing the world enjoy the opportunity to be introduced, develop and prosper at the same level as that enjoyed by the western secular mainstream. They were left to exist outside the mainstream secular academic circuit. In Malaysia, for example, Islamic geography formed part and parcel of the academic curriculum of the Dar-al Hikmah College, a learning institution privately run outside the mainstream national education system (<http://hikmah.edu.my/>).

This paper thus represents the rare occasion where Islamic human geography is allowed to be heard at the mainstream level. But since the space of a paper is necessarily limited, the following sections offer but only glimpses of Islamic human geography which bear directly on some of the crucial issues in contemporary mainstream secular human geography.

Islamic human geography – Taking on the fundamental epistemological questions

An Islamic human geography recognises and incorporates the idea of God and the guidance of revealed knowledge (*naqliyah*) in its epistemology. This does not mean the negation, relegation or obliteration of knowledge by thought (*aqliyah*) which forms the whole basis of secular mainstream human geography, but rather a more precise empowerment of it. The Quran extols rational thinking not just as an indispensable instrument of truthful knowledge but also of faith itself:

How little do you reflect (A'raf 7:3)

God sets those who do not use their reason in a mire of uncleanness (Yunus 10:100)

... We set out in detail the signs for people who will reason and understand" (Rum 30:28).

It contains numerous references to learning, education, observation and the use of reason. Indeed, reason, after revelation, is the second most important instrument for discovering and delineating the signs of God and for 'approaching' God. The cosmos is presented as a "text" that can be read, investigated, reflected upon and understood with the use of reason: "in the alternation of night and day, in the rain God provides, sending it down from the sky and reviving the dead earth with it, and in His shifting of winds there are signs for those who use their reason" (45:5). Thus, reason is the path to salvation, it is not

something you set aside in order to have faith, it is the means to faith (Ziauddin Sardar, 2008). In fact, the finality of prophet-hood in Islam may be taken as signaling the increasing role rational thinking would assume in the affairs of seeking knowledge and pursuing truth.

Mainstream human geography has given us ample evidence of the power of pure thought in producing knowledge over the past 100 years or so - from the chorology of Hartshornian regional geography to the positivism of spatial science, to the structuralism and historical materialism of Marxist geography, to the phenomenology, idealism and existentialism of humanistic geographies, to the structuration theory and critical theory, to the cultural turn of post-structuralism, feminist geography, post-colonialism, and to the strand of non-representational theories of post-humanism (Figure 1). All these notions are markers of progress of modern geographical thought as each appears, or is supposed, to be the improvement of the ones preceding it.

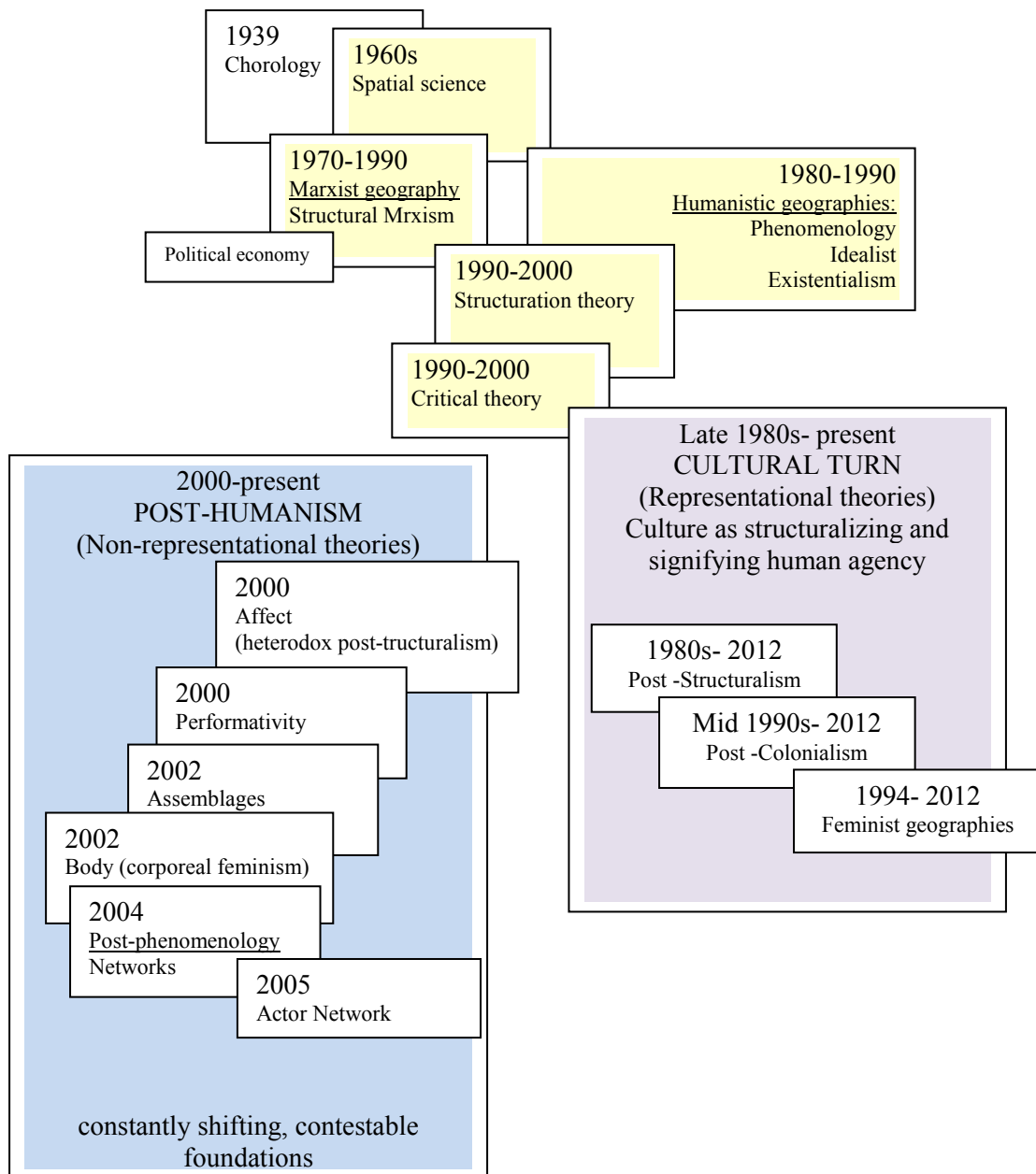


Figure 1. Progress in mainstream secular human geography

But human geography is still saddled with the familiar problems of not being able to unify its ever diverse notions about the truth of human phenomena in this earthly life into a coherent whole. All that can be thought of seemed to have been tried. Every conceivable grand theory (that single or tightly bounded set of methodological and theoretical principles which would provide unity and intelligibility to the disparate material studied regardless of the kind of phenomenon investigated) had been conceived only to be critiqued and abandoned or sidelined as most human geographers seem to conclude that no single theoretical system can possibly ask all the interesting questions or provide all the satisfying answers (Gregory, 2009a: 315). First, spatial science was faulted for its positivism which reduces human subjects to simplistic organisms; the phenomenology, idealism and existentialism of humanistic geographies were criticized for conferring too much autonomy to encumbered human actors; and the structuralism and historical materialism of Marxist geography were chastised for its narrow and totalizing economic determinism that seeks to explain nearly all human experiences, differences and power relations as a function of an individual or group position within the relations of production (McCarthy, 2009: 447). Structuration theory which carried so much hope for transcending the bedeviled structure-agency dualism to finally unify theoretical (abstract) and empirical (concrete) research was subsequently inflected and extended into something else as 'strange' as non-representational notions of 'affect' and 'performance' (Gregory, 2009b:727). And critical theory ends up functioning more as an exercise in critical reflection on capitalism and modernity than a credible cohesive linking between structure and agency.

After that mainstream human geographical thought drew away from familiar foundational philosophies like positivism, phenomenology, realism, and structuralism to transform the discipline's enquiry by entirely new *modi operandi* like deconstruction, discourse and performativity which then opened up wholly new non-representational areas of geographical reflection. The net result is a complex terrain in which different philosophical concerns have been brought into relation and juxtaposition with one another only to signify further a divide — even a 'rift' — between 'spatial-analytical geographies' invested in the development and use of quantitative techniques and geospatial technologies on one side and 'socio-cultural geographies' involved in the development and use of critical social theory and more qualitative methods on the other (Kwan, 2004). Although it is comforting to note that all the decades of theoretical debates have not replaced the intimacy between theory and practice which is the source of continued vitality of mainstream human geography, the inability to transcend the structure-agency and other related theoretical-practical divides remains and continues to stamp 'progress' in human geography with a stubborn question mark.

From the Islamic point of view this lingering disability denotes not so much the failure of pure thought as its finitude. Take for example the case of structuration theory.

The chances of structuration theory to solve human geography's prevailing epistemological impasse will depend on its ability to: (1) solve the problem of operationalizing its framework empirically so that empirical (concrete) research can be conducted to substantiate it; (2) unify analyses of the micro-, the meso-, and the macrostructures into a coherent whole.

With regard to (1) the integration of the empirical with the actual and the real is not possible in structuration theory due to the absence of a principle which unifies and transcends the peculiarities of differing approaches to knowledge. This theory has come a long way in recognizing the relevance and utility of (double) hermeneutics. One pertains to the empirical, the life-world (the everyday taken-for-granted life where we disen-tangle such conjunctures sufficient only for us to cope with everyday tasks). The other relates to the real, our deeper construction of reality where, as theorists, we seek to understand the world by making rational abstractions which isolate unified objects, structures, or groups, and from which we then start to conduct concrete research. These two should not be separated. Hence, structuration theory needs to sustain substantive social theories capable of identifying the relations between different ontological domains while simultaneously recognizing their integrity as differentiated features of social reality (Layder, 1981; Gregory, 1982; Gregory, 1994). Yet the theory does not possess a sensible foundation in which to ground them. In the operationalization of the structuration theory, there seems to be a lurking skepticism about the ability of pure thought to guarantee the validity of the truth asserted. Refuge is sought in empiricism, but this must lead to futility as the abstractness of the truth is not

submissible to direct sensing. It points to the inadequacy of pure thought as a mode of dealing with social reality. The reality to be apprehended and comprehended requires an additional method. To return to pure thought, then, would only mean to reinstate the problem.

With regard to (2) structuration theory tries to circumvent incoherence by positing an integrating role in spatiality (regionalization). Space matters, but if space is not just a reflection of society but is society itself, how do we reconcile this place-centered regional ontology of human spatiality with the reality of naturalistic (physical) space without the benefit of (a reconstituted) essentialism? Structuration theory is averse to the belief that there is an essential and more real reality behind social life. This is understandable in the context of Western theistic notions of essentialism. But the incoherence remains in structuration theory even when this more essential reality is replaced with infinite humanism, however capable and knowledgeable the human subjects are. Humans rule in every tier of social life, in every stratification of reality; this seems to be the structuration theorist's way of mitigating reductionism and materialist determinism. But if humanism is adequate, how do we account for consequences and eventualities in history and social life which are not intended by finite human authors in the first place? (Amriah Buang, 1992).

The same shortcoming seems to plague subsequent theoretical maneuvers seeking to go beyond humanism to non-representational post-humanism. Take for example the recent case of the ANT (Action Network Theory). Here is an approach - a sort of sensibility - that asserts two novel epistemic ideas : (1) the constitutive role of the non-humans in the fabric of social life, and (2) that agency is a relational effect that is the outcome of the assemblage of all sorts of social and material bits and pieces. The gist of the approach is that it is these actor networks that get things done, not subjects or objects in isolation. Actors are thus networks and *vice-versa* (Bingham, 2009 : 6-7). Thus, life in this world involves more than just the agency of humanity but that of a network of capable but not necessarily conscious agents or actants (Whatmore, 2002). It is a world composed of associations of heterogeneous elements. How the world is made is uncertain because it depends on 'what counts' in a given situation, which stands in marked contrast to the approach of traditional 'sociologies of the social', where the salient factors are more or less determined in advance (Latour, 2005).

For human geography, in particular, the excitement with ANT has been that it speaks to two of the discipline's most long-standing concerns. On the one hand, the approach has proved useful to those seeking to enrich and enliven understanding of the relationships between humans and non-humans whether coded 'technological' or 'natural'. On the other, ANT's tendency to at once 'localise the global' and 'redistribute the local' has enabled it to be both employed and extended by geographers seeking to understand how action at a distance is achieved in a variety of contexts (Thrift, 2005; Murdoch, 2006).

Despite the novelty of ANT's contribution, however, there now exists a couple of criticisms against ANT. One is the charge that it ignores the structuring effects of such classic sociological categories as race, class, and gender and underplays the influence of powers in society. Another is the difficulty of operationalising ANT's methodology in practice; of giving things some room to express themselves such that the investigator can, or rather should, 'follow the actors', letting them define for themselves what is or is not important.

There can be other real matters of epistemic concern too. For one, how does this analytical approach couched in a thoroughly empirical philosophy accord causalities. While it is not difficult to envisage the ability of mankind to express themselves how do things (networks) define for themselves what is or is not important? For another, how do such attributions of causalities be interpreted and justified?

Take for example the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States. If we were to 'follow the actors' that gave rise to this event (phenomenon) which has significance beyond the geography of the United States our tracing of the ANT may include something like the following assemblage:

The ANT of the first black American president

Kenyan Muslim turned atheist father – white American agnostic mother – Hawaiian multi-culturalism – childhood in Third World Indonesia – growing up under the care of white grandparents - B.A. in political science - community organization in Chicago South Side–Harvard Law School –academic career at University of Chicago Law School – marriage to Michelle – publication of *Dreams from My Father* - Senator - publication of *The Audacity of Hope* - Americans' growing disenchantment with Bush's and Cheney's wars on terrorism –deterioration of USA's international image and Bush's approval rating– running Democratic presidential primaries - campaign slogans 'change we can believe in'; 'yes we can' - internet technology MySpace , Facebook- political strategist firm Blue State Digital – viral videos – You tube - music videos – fund raising via the internet - support from superdelegates – winning Democratic presidential primaries - running U.S. presidential campaign - fund receipts US\$670.7M – 'fight the smears' website - Neighbor-to-Neighbor tool on My.BarackObama.com - e-mail and text message campaign –onset of U.S and global economic recession - 'Hope' posters - winning U.S. presidential election – inauguration as U.S. president.

aaa = the agency of human subjects

aaa = non-human actants

Moving further and deeper, the questions now arise as to how did things in this assemblage 'know' that they were that much necessary to the happening of the Obama presidency? How did they 'decide' to relate with one another in order to make the presidency happen? How did they 'know' when to be and to matter in the networking? How did they and their networking imbue themselves with the purpose of making the presidency happen? How do we prove that they did all this? If the ANT answer is that they did not 'do' all these things what then was the actual nature of their role in the rise of the phenomenon? How do we account for the real causality or causalities of the phenomenon?

It may be said that the world was caught by surprise at the successful ascendancy of a black US president. In the first place, why should there be a black US president? Why can't it take another white in 2008 to do what a Lincoln had managed to do in 1860? Why did the winning message had to be the renewal of universal hope? Why did this cause need a half black with some Third World root and understanding - and some Islamic connection at that – to espouse? It is as if the world is using the US presidency as its most potent strategy for its own larger than American purpose.

Yet, for a black to be able to be a president in the most powerful nation on earth at this juncture of human history, he has to be acceptable by a significant portion of the American whites. For this reason he has to have some genetic white origin and be a professed Christian. And as if it had known all the prior circumstances that must go with the making of such a black presidency the world has somehow managed not only to prepare and produce those circumstances but also to mobilize and 'network' them with precise timing. It was as if having decided that this most powerful man on earth will be black and that he should ascend in 2008, it had started the weaving of all the processes of this outcome 47 years earlier when nobody on earth could have perceived it.

It seems that for the ANT to advance further to become epistemologically satisfactory it has to avert the perpetual plight of moving in circles and step into the deeper realm of ultimate causalities. It has to be more than ANT.

In an Islamic epistemology it is necessary to recognize the existence of the profoundest Reality behind social reality in order to comprehend the reality of the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena. But this Islamic "essentialism" is not Christianity's anthropomorphic God or the scholastic cosmology which "tries to reach the Infinite by merely negating the finite. For the Infinite reached by contradicting the finite is a false Infinite, which neither explains itself nor the finite which is thus made to stand in opposition to the Infinite. The true Infinite does not exclude the finite: it embraces the finite without effacing its finitude, and explains and justifies its being" (Iqbal, 1934: 28).

Nor is the supreme reality the scholastic teleology which infers the existence of a "skilful external contriver working towards a pre-ordained end and on a pre-existing dead and intractable material the

elements of which are, by their own nature, incapable of orderly structures and combinations. To endow the world process with purpose in this sense is to rob it of its originality and its creative character. God is an organizing and not a formless principle of unity, a synthetic activity which holds together and focalizes the dispersing disposition of the living organism for a constructive purpose. To predicate this power to a finite humanity is to fail to acknowledge the finitude and creature status of the human species (Iqbal 1934:28).

Consider, for instance, the statement made by the geographer Urry (1985): "The social world should be seen as comprised of space-time entities having causal powers which may or may not be realized depending on the patterns of spatio/temporal interdependence (between them)". From the point of view of an Islamic epistemology, the statement is problematic, incoherent or meaningless if space-time entities, the accordance of causal powers to them, the contingency of the exercises of these powers, and the enactment of time-space coincidence necessitated by the contingency are not predicated on the idea of God as the ultimate reality:

By involving God, however, we will not be causing humanity to vanish in the face of God's immanence. We, the finite egos are part and parcel of Him — the Absolute Ego. Our life is organic to His being. But this does not mean the loss of our egohood or freedom. God has of His own accord chosen human beings, the finite egos as participators in His life. An Islamic epistemology therefore has no difficulty in reconciling real space and time (they are the possibilities of the Ultimate Ego) with the regional ontology of human spatiality. Indeed, conceiving space as a necessarily dynamic and infinite continuum because it is a possibility of the Profoundest Reality is the very essence of an Islamic epistemology. It is thus to God's immanence that micro-, meso-, and macroscales of social realities are to pertain, and it is to His transcendence that we are to attribute or predicate the holistic and coherent linkages of these multiscale constitutions of social realities (Amriah Buang, 1992):

To Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: To Him do all questions go back (for decision) (Qur'an 3: 109), and to Him goeth back every affair (for decision)... (Qur'an 11: 123). And He it is that encompasseth all things (Qur'an 4: 126)....He who standeth over every soul (and knoweth) all that it doth (Qur'an 13: 33). No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things (Qur'an 6: 103).

And have ye made it your livelihood that ye should declare it (God) false? Then why do ye not (intervene) when (the soul of the dying man) reaches the throat, and ye the while (sit) looking on. But We are nearer to him than ye, and ye see not. Then why do ye not... call back the soul, if ye are true (in your claim of independence)? (Qur'an 56:82-87).

Islamic human geography – Incorporating the mainstream

Having its own version of (theistic) essentialism and foundationalism does not mean the rejection of anything secular. On the contrary secular pure thought (*aqliyah*) serves as the very instrument of the Islamic's own vindication: it complements and illuminates *naqliyah*, knowledge by revelation, the other pillar of the Islamic epistemology. It is through studying human rational thinking and enquiry that the Most Knowing reveals knowledge to, and educate mankind :

By the Pen and that which (men) write (Qur'an 68:1)
Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous, Who has taught
by the pen. He has taught man that which he knew not. (Qur'an 96: 1-4)

Islamic scholars are instructed to pay attention and make the best of the *aqliyah* sources of knowledge:

.. ..so announce the Good News to My Servants...Those who listen to the word, and follow the best in it: those are the ones whom Allah has guided, and those are the ones endowed with understanding (Qur'an 39: 17-18).

Islamic human geography therefore recognizes the multifarious achievements of mainstream human geography and celebrates them as indispensable contributions to its schemes of knowledge construction; they are sectional views of the Ultimate Reality (see below).

Recognising the creative activities of the Almighty is foundational in an Islamic epistemology. Thus spatial science will be incorporated in Islamic human geography in so far as it illuminates how the naturalism of physical space, which manifests God's glory of creation, influences the constitution of social life through its structures and processes. But spatial fetishism may be excluded as they obstruct or distort the comprehension of the truth of social reality. The incorporation of spatial science also means the incorporation of the quantitative and geo-technology methods in Islamic human geography,

Since matters concerning mankind as unique subjects are central to the Islamic cause, humanistic geographies will be highly regarded in Islamic human geography for its substantive contribution to the refinement of our understanding of the intricate nature of human subjectivity and human agency in the constitution of social life. This it will do while taking care to eliminate their much critiqued excesses in voluntarism. The incorporation of humanistic paradigms also means the incorporation of the qualitative methods in Islamic human geography.

Islam also takes issues with the way – the mechanisms and processes- social life is lived. As such the like of Marxist geography will be an invaluable component of Islamic human geography because it vindicates the point of social inequality which is rooted in the unjust mechanism of usurious capital accumulation and concentration which the Quran strongly repudiates (Qur'an 3:130). This blessing of the Marxist approach notwithstanding, Islamic human geography will nevertheless exclude its absolute materialist philosophy and reductionist economic determinism.

The institution and mobilization of power strike at the heart of the Islamic worldview. As such, Islamic human geography embraces all elucidation and explication by mainstream human geography about how power in its various guises is usurped, used and mobilized in ways that distort understanding of the truth of social reality and contributes to the making of all forms of social difficulties, injustices and sufferings. This includes advances made in the studies of political economy, critical theory, moral geographies, feminist geographies, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism.

The ultimate goal of the Islamic epistemology is the unity of Truth. Unity of knowledge is part and parcel of this goal. As such, Islamic human geography will be extremely interested in the recent advances made by post-humanist non-representational theories in mainstream human geography. These are set to complement their representational counterparts and leading to the unity of Truth, thus furthering the Islamic epistemological cause.

Above all, Islamic human geography will regard the 'discovery' of situated knowledge as the greatest contribution of mainstream human geography to the Islamic cause. The realization on the part of mainstream human geography itself of the situated nature of its corpus of knowledge should only allow for the emergence of alternative epistemologies including Islamic human geography.

Islamic human geography – Frameworks for Syntheses

The epistemic-methodological framework

The Islamic methodological framework would be one in which empirical (concrete) research, theoretical research and introspecting can be conducted and harmonized. The challenge posed by, and still unresolved in, mainstream human geography is how to "break into" the continuous recursive

interrelationship of structure and agency in order to undertake empirical research? The Islamic answer is that we "break into" the continuous flux of human social life by integrating field observation with introspection:

Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts. (Quran 22:46)

The verse outlines the methodology of seeking the truth or knowledge. This consists of an empirical method (for "travel through the earth" denotes fieldwork and field expedition) as well as a hermeneutic/interpretative method. The verse instructs the researcher to gain truthful knowledge through empirical investigation (*mulahaah*): one cannot engage in armchair scholarship. But empirical investigation alone is not sufficient: it must be reinforced with introspection and an incisive, profound, refined, and critical interpretation of the empirical data. The shortcoming of many scholars is their failure to produce a valid interpretation, a result which is due mainly to their own inability or unwillingness to recognize the truth of the matter for various reasons (prejudice, bias, reluctance, ignorance, stereotypes, etc.) much like the notion of situated knowledge that contemporary mainstream human geography has furnished us with.

The empirical mode, however, is not the only mode of knowledge in Islam. In Islamic epistemology, the truth can be reached in a number of ways. The empirical and positivist mode (*mulahazah*) has just been cited. Apart from this, there are *badahah* (reasoning with self-evident truth or common sense) and *tajribah* (reasoning with human experience) (Ghorab 1981). These two stipulate that we can recognize the truth if we care to reflect upon what is real in human living and if we are not making it unnecessarily difficult for ourselves to be realistic about it. We can then perceive that, for instance, living in a human society is structured by its mode of economy and politics. That the Qur'an itself contains numerous economic guidelines, such as forbidding the institution of interest, is further proof that Islamic epistemology does recognize the reality of the economic mechanism in human social life. This reality is not in any way lessened or affected just because the mechanism is abstract. And, as the Qur'an informs us, the operating reality of such a mechanism can be apprehended through a reflective study of its empirical consequences:

Do they not reflect in their own minds? Not but for just ends and for a term appointed, did Allah create the heavens and the earth, and all between them... (Quran 30: 8)

Esponsing the view that the nature of the ultimate reality is spiritual, it builds in itself the facility of another mode of reasoning called intuition. Thus the path of knowledge begins with the concrete empirical, passes through the abstract theoretical, and ends up in an affirmation of the intuitive. In an Islamic epistemology (Qur'an 22:46), the "heart," (*qalb*; pl. *qulub*) is a kind of inner intuition or insight which brings us into contact with aspects of reality other than those open to sense perception. Islam regards it as a mode of dealing with reality which represents yet another level of human experience having the capacity to yield knowledge by interpretation (Iqbal 1934: 15).

The integration of the empirical with the actual and the real is possible in an Islamic epistemology due to the presence of a principle which unifies and transcends the peculiarities of differing approaches to knowledge: the unity of knowledge or the unity of truth. In Islam, this unity devolves from Allah's absolute unity and is convertible with it (Al Faruqi 1988). He is the Creator of all reality as well as all truth. In other words, He is the reality. And, according to the Qur'an, this reality can be approached in more than one way. An Islamic epistemology therefore has no difficulty in integrating the empirical with the rational and the intuitive, for they are regarded as sectional views of Reality when taken in isolation and, when taken collectively, they complement each other in producing a total view of Reality (Amriah Buang, 1992).

Framing the content of Islamic human geography

It appears that by virtue of the Islamic epistemology's own methodological plurality much of mainstream human geography will form part and parcel of Islamic human geography, but what makes it distinctly Islamic is the way it is couched in Islamic values and worldview regarding humanity and its life on this planet. The gist of this Islamic worldview is that mankind being appointed as God's vicegerents on earth is privileged to shape the good life in this world:

It is We Who have placed you with authority on earth, and provided you therein with means for the fulfillment of your life: small are the thanks that ye give! (Quran 7: 10)

We have honored the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of our creation (Quran 17: 70)

It is He Who hath made you (His) vicegerents on earth: He hath raised you in ranks, some above others: that He may try you in the gifts He hath given you.... (Quran 6: 165)

but through its own volitions has desecrated this privileged role:

Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of (the meed) that the hands of men have earned, that (Allah) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil) (Quran 30:41)

Mankind's earthly sojourn is thus a constant striving and struggle –of ups and downs- between achievements in shaping the good life (*alfalah, makruf, tazkiyah*) and violating (*zulm, munkar, dassaha*) it. Islamic human geography studies all the possible facets of this constant struggle (the what is) by identifying, describing, analyzing, elucidating and interpreting them as accurately as is humanly and geotechnologically possible, and ventures possible prescriptive policy pointers (the what should be).

To begin with, and as can be discerned from the Quranic verses above, the physical environment is organic to mankind's life shaping career. As such man-environment relations, in particular, the manner in which environmental resources are treated or mistreated by mankind, figure critically in Islamic human geography, with distinct morality values such as gratitude to the Creator, environmental justice, and sustainable development being its constitutive elements. In this vein, how locational attributes, spatial structures and processes are mobilized and manipulated in the course of this mankind's life shaping career will also be central to Islamic human geography.

What is not so central are the formal forms Islamic human geography assumes. As explained above, Islam is more in tune with the unity rather than the fragmentation or compartmentalisation of knowledge as it views different approaches to knowledge as only sectional views of the same Reality when taken in isolation. Thus, considerations for maintaining familiar mainstream categories such as economic, social, cultural, political, and regional geographies and the like will now be mainly for convenience sake and for the purpose of communication and comparison with mainstream human geography.

But Islamic human geography may choose to veer in emphasis and prioritization from its mainstream counterpart in tandem with the spirit of the Quran. For instance, given the frequency, intensity and gravity with which social inequality is addressed in the Quran as compared to other matters, Islamic human geography might focus on issues pertaining to the powerful and the privileged (the *mustakbirin*) versus the weak and the vulnerable (the *mustadhaaffin*) more than, say, on the aesthetic form of the Islamic city:

Seest thou one who denies the Judgment (to come)? Such is the (man) who repulses the orphan (with harshness). And encourages not the feeding of the indigent. So woe to the worshippers, who are neglectful of their prayers. Those who (want but) to be seen (of men). But refuse (to supply) (even) neighbourly needs (Quran 107: 1-7)

And why should ye not fight in the cause of Allah and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated (and oppressed)? Men, women, and children.... (Quran 4:75)

The Quran casts a wide net on who the powerful and the privileged are. They include any body, party and groups who are in the position (military, bureaucratic, institutional, organizational, political, economic, commercial, social, gender, android, generational, cultural, religious, technological, academic) to take unfair advantage of and oppress those who are not. It will not be surprising, therefore, if this theme will contain the bulk of the Islamic geography works as it can readily benefit from and build on much that has been started by its mainstream counterpart. It is here that much of the mainstream works in feminist and post-colonialist geographies may be incorporated in Islamic geography.

Whatever are the formal forms that Islamic human geography may couch itself in it is fundamentally obliged to uphold absolute impartiality in analyzing and presenting the truth of their enquiries:

O ye who believe! When ye go abroad in the cause of Allah, investigate carefully (Quran 4:94)...
O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do (Quran 5:8).

O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in upholding equity, bearing witness to the truth for the sake of God, even though it be against your own selves or your parents and kinsfolk... Do not, then, follow your own desires, lest you swerve from justice: for if you distort [the truth], behold, God is indeed aware of all that you do! (Quran 4:135)

The implication of such Islamic injunction is far reaching for Islamic human geography. Among other things it means the need to distinguish between true Islamic ideals and their interpretation and actualisation by human societies from place to place. Some close approximations of Islamic ideals may be found actualized in and by non-Muslim societies (eg. social support for the vulnerable in many western countries) while some of the grossest mistranslation of the Islamic ideals may be committed by Muslims themselves (eg. acts of terror that cost lives of and untold miseries to innocent people). Islamic human geographers are not to lose sight of such ironical and paradoxical truths.

Finally, as an enterprise of enquiry and truth seeking, Islamic human geography is to abide by the Islamic imperative of celebrating the unity and brotherhood of mankind:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things) (Quran 49:13).

Conclusion

If the import of post-colonialism can be summarized in a statement it would be the de-universalisation of mainstream human geography. In this context this very preliminary exploration of Islamic human geography is driven mainly by the purpose of offering a glimpse of what an alternative take at the subdiscipline – a non-secular one - may look like. While the showcasing of Islamic geography may not alter its irrelevance to secular and non-Islamic geographies its brief illumination here confirms its relevance to Muslim contexts and, by refraction, the situated nature of mainstream human geography. As such, this exploration serves the purpose of opening out the kind of conversation across difference that post-colonialism seeks to advance – paving the way, hopefully for that final goal of democratization of

knowledge in the subdiscipline which would surely be the ultimate crowning of a post-colonialism advancement.

The last point deserves serious practical and strategic consideration. For it will help open the much needed wider and fresher window on Islam so the world would have greater mainstream opportunities to know and understand some of its constructive and salutary aspects as a civilization other than the terrorism and mistreatment of women that have been choking global imagination about it hitherto. Geography for world peace and mutual understanding does look like a most sensible common goal to which this whole conversation of difference might be geared to.

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