

Beyond the decolonial: Critical Muslim geographies

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Abstract

This paper considers selected decolonial moves in geography, building on engagements with postcolonial theory since the 1990s and earlier currents of radical geography. Whilst the paper charts their interactions, including the impacts of selective intellectual influences from Latin America, it foregrounds Muslim geographies. The decolonization of Muslim geographies questions concepts and upgrades terminology, and speaks to crucial interfaces of circuits of capital, economic and political geographies and area studies. Such moves entail relearning from epistemological, social and spatial ‘peripheries’ and establish connections, notably with Black geographies. The conclusions consider how such links transcend decolonial geographies.

Keywords

area studies, black geographies, epistemology, Muslim, postcolonial, traditions

Introduction

The imperial context to the establishment of Geography as a university discipline was called out some decades ago (Hudson, 1977). Broader critique is now at hand. As Tolia-Kelly et al. (2020: 1, emphasis in original) argue in a *Journal of Historical Geography* editorial: ‘We are in the age of another shift in intellectual atmosphere, a metaphorical quake calling us to rethink and revise our intellectual foundations and ethical praxis ... decolonising ... recognising questions of *race* and *racisms* in scholarship, intellectual institutions, education curricula, networks, research and the economies of research posts and publications’. Mindful of such expansive themes in shifting milieus, this paper attends to recharged calls to decolonize geography, bringing these into dialogue with work on Muslim geographies and reconsidering how this

spatiality is studied by the discipline: as mirrors to what is at stake in decolonizing geography. The paper then propounds an alternative pathway ‘for learning from the periphery’ (Slater, 1992: 308) – be those peripheries social, spatial or epistemological. I begin by surfacing characterizations of Islam/Muslims in the work of two scholars with indisputable influence on human geography: the American political geographer Isaiah Bowman (1878–1950) and the French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991). A résumé of encounters between geography and the decolonial then segues into the subsequent section that develops

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decolonial Muslim geographies. The conclusions consider how this enriches decolonial geographies and wider decolonial theory, in part through connections between Black and Muslim geographies.

Bringing a decolonial perspective to Isaiah Bowman and Henri Lefebvre

At first glance, Bowman, the American geographer and imperial strategist, and Lefebvre, the French Marxist – along with the geographies their work informs – would appear to be on divergent paths. Whilst Lefebvre is fêted as an inspiration for critical geography, Bowman is read warily by such critical geographers as an establishment figure and a strategist for the American century. Bowman, born in Ontario, Canada but a naturalized US citizen as a child (when his family moved to Michigan), was educated at Harvard and Yale, and in 1915 became president of the American Geographical Society (AGS), a post he held for the next 20 years. Founded in 1851, around the time that geographical societies were being established in European imperial capitals and with a similar merchant and explorer ethos, the AGS also published the *Annals* for the American Association of Geographers, from the journal's establishment in 1904 until 1922. Bowman later became president of Johns Hopkins University. He was an advisor to US governments after the First World War and to Franklin D Roosevelt's State Department and was the first chair of the Council of Foreign Relations (Martin, 1980). Lefebvre was born in south-western France and educated at the Sorbonne. After wartime service with the French resistance and a brief career in broadcasting, Lefebvre worked as a professor of sociology, first in Strasbourg then at Nanterre. He became an influential scholar, publishing 'a series of contributions that develop Marxist thought in different and frequently neglected directions: everyday life, the rural, the urban, space, the state, the worldwide' (Elden, 2016: ix). Notwithstanding the obvious differences and distances between Bowman and Lefebvre, their

work shares a similar structural legacy of empire in regards to an explicit othering of Islam and Muslim cultures.

It will not surprise readers of *Dialogues in Human Geography* that Bowman relied on orientalist tropes. In recent years, Bowman's name has been attached to controversy surrounding the AGS's Bowman Expedition Program research on indigenous territories in Oaxaca that was funded by the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office (see Bryan and Wood, 2015). Yet Bowman himself is little read these days. Neil Smith's (2003a) meticulous examination of Bowman's geopolitical roles is less cited than Smith's better-known works on uneven development and gentrification. Elsewhere, Smith (2003b) commends Lefebvre, who is frequently mobilized in geography and allied urban studies. However, a situated reading of Lefebvre's work – and particularly *The Production of Space* – requires rethinking how and why we now engage with his theories. There has been a similar situated engagement with the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida, both of whom spent parts of their lives in colonial Algeria (see Ahluwalia, 2010; Goodman and Silverstein, 2009). Likewise, biographies of Michel Foucault reflect his exposure to student mobilizations in Tunis (where he was visiting professor of philosophy from 1966 to 1968) as constituting – in his own words – 'a formative experience' (cited in Miller, 1993: 171) whereby he was 'forced to enter the political arena ... not [via] May '68 in France, but March '68 in a third world country' (cited in Elden, 2017: 8). Foucault's subsequent travels to Iran in 1978–1979 and writings on Iran's revolution have been subject to extensive debate (Afary and Anderson, 2005; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016). Such re-examination of Lefebvre is overdue. Latterly his influence and reputation show little sign of dipping, exuding, for example, through extensive debates about 'planetary urbanization' (Schmid, 2018) that place *La Révolution urbaine* as a 'pathbreaking' point of departure (Smith, 2003b). There are indeed good reasons to engage Lefebvre for his insights on how capitalism survives and continually expands by producing new spaces. But we must do so with more circumspect sensibilities. Whilst feminist and

queer readings of Lefebvre do so by focussing on what ‘has been largely overlooked’ (Blum and Nast, 1996: 559) in Lefebvre’s project, and his sweeping disavowal of the relative distinctiveness of state socialist urban modernity has been subject to critique (Murawski, 2018), we cannot continue to elide or downplay Lefebvre’s discussions of Islam.

A century ago, Bowman published the first of several editions of his soon widely circulated *The New World: Problems in Political Geography*. Then in his early 40s, the director of the AGS was, according to Smith (2003a: 25): ‘the most geographically articulate among the official architects of the American Empire’. Bowman served President Woodrow Wilson’s administration in the diplomatic negotiations following the World War, after which he returned to New York and wrote ‘the first major American political geography text, a world geographical survey ... a handbook for the budding American Century’ (Smith, 2003a: 26). In the revised fourth edition of *The New World*, the third chapter, entitled ‘The Mohammedan World’, begins by postulating Islam as a *problem* for colonial governmentality, with attendant denigrations, distortions and silencing:

The two largest colonial empires are those of Great Britain and France. It follows that these powers have to deal with many social and religious as well as political problems. Among them none is so wide-ranging, none so fateful, as the question of control over large and bigoted if not fanatical Mohammedan populations We may well ask whether anything in that history or in the present situation of the Islamic world furnishes ground for fear that it may issue forth from its vast realm to the undoing of western civilization. (Bowman, 1928: 124)

By the time that Lefebvre published *La production de l’espace* in 1974, British and French government concerns about ‘fanatical Mohammedans’ were being redirected inwards to metropolitan France and the UK. When it was translated in 1991, an Afterword by Harvey (1991: 425) pronounced that: ‘The publication of Henry

Lefebvre’s magisterial *La production de l’espace*, in an excellent English translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith, is a cause for considerable celebration’; chiming blurb endorsements welcomed: ‘A brilliant and definitive work’ (Neil Smith) that ‘reveals Lefebvre at the height of his powers: imaginative, incisive and immensely suggestive’ (Derek Gregory).

Unremarked is how ‘racialized boundaries of modernity’ – a ‘persistent legacy of empire in European thought’ (Smith, 2020: 51) – anchor depictions of Islam and Muslims in *The Production of Space*. Thus, ‘the Alhambra of Granada’ – the palace complex commissioned in the mid-13th century by the Emirate of Granada, the last Muslim-ruled kingdom in Iberia – is, to Lefebvre (1991: 137), an architectural space ‘dedicated to voluptuousness’. Lefebvre then reproduces one of the most enduring of what Kabbani (1986: 6) has termed *Europe’s Myths of the Orient* as ‘a place of lascivious sexuality’. To Lefebvre (1991: 167): ‘It may reasonably be asked whether an appropriation of sexuality has ever occurred except perhaps under certain transitory sets of circumstances and for a very limited number of people (one thinks, for example, of Arab civilization in Andalusia)’. What circumstances and appropriation does he have in mind? The eight centuries of Muslim civilization in Spain were hardly transitory. Are the thousands of inscriptions of *La ghaliba illa Allah* (there is no victor except Allah) within the Alhambra’s walls dedications to voluptuousness? In another account (posthumously discovered, translated and published quarter of a century after his death), with a constructive introduction by Łukasz Stanek, Lefebvre (2014: 22) describes how:

The Alhambra does not exist in its original state. In our imagination it is covered with rugs and couches, perfumed, populated with birds and fountains and the beauties of the *Thousand and One Nights*. But what did the arabesque mean to the Arabs – ... For us, twentieth century westerners, it suggests it, but for others, perhaps, it may have evoked serenity more than passion

Likewise, who, what and where was Lefebvre (1991: 122) considering, when claiming that: ‘In some cases entire countries – certain Islamic countries, for example – are seeking to slow down industrialization so as to preserve their traditional homes, customs and representational spaces from the buffeting of industrial space and industrial representations of space’. Perhaps he had in mind the sultanate in Oman before the 1970 palace coup, during its first years of war against the guerrillas staging a revolution in Dhofar province (with support from the neighbouring Marxist regime of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen that had come to power following British withdrawal from Aden). Prior to 1970 in Oman, what Takriti (2016) describes as an absolutist ‘Anglo-Sultanic’ sovereignty based on the political culture of the British Raj and buttressed by British troops was besieged by ‘a multifaceted, complex, and

transnational revolutionary movement’ (MacLean, 2014). Shell had struck oil in 1963; Oman’s first pipeline was ready in 1966; exports began in 1967. Under British tutelage, Oman had also administered territories on the coast of what became Pakistan and Tanzania into the second half of the 20th century – the remnants of a vast 18th- and 19th-century mercantile and political Indian Ocean presence that profoundly configured oceanic commerce and governance (Figure 1).

It is not clear that the Omani sultanate matched Lefebvre’s characterization of preserving ‘traditional’ representational spaces, then already being transformed by oil-fuelled infrastructural development (Limbert, 2010). Perhaps Lefebvre had politics closer to home in mind. In Morocco, in the years leading up to independence in 1956, the physical structures of medinas were regulated by the French colonial state in forms of racialized socio-

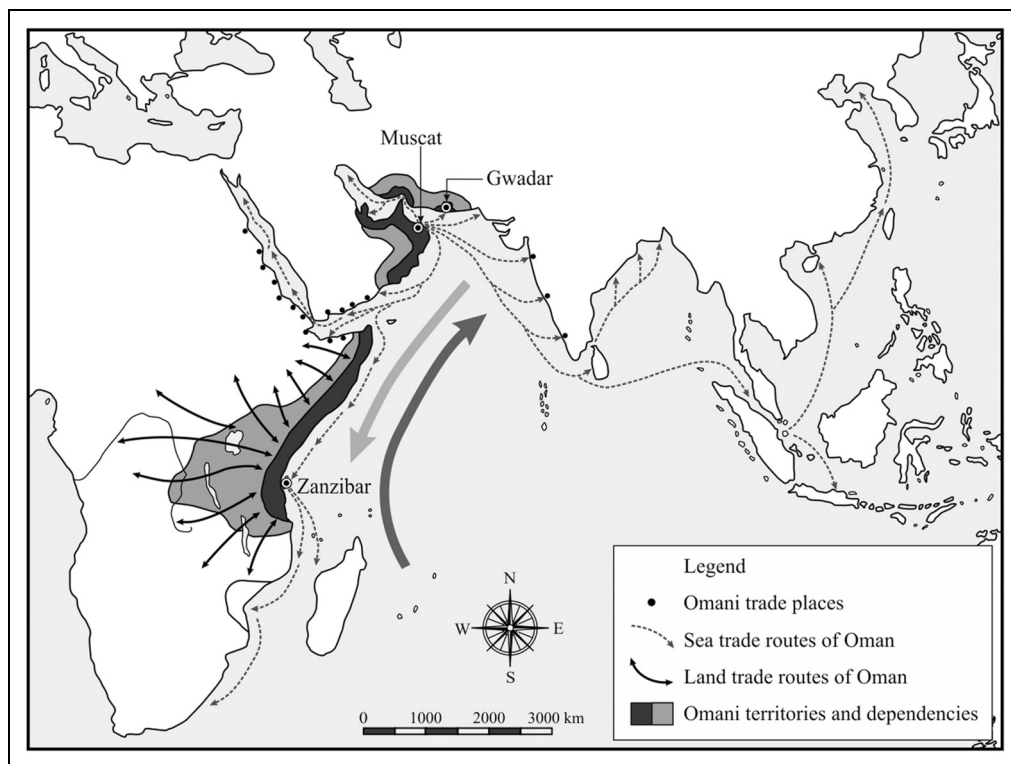


Figure 1. The Omani trade realm in the 18th and 19th centuries. Source: Adapted from Wippel (2013).

spatial segregation – what Abu-Lughod (1980) called ‘urban apartheid’. Yet, long before Lefebvre compiled *La production de l’espace*, Casablanca, Tangier and Agadir were vaunted sites for architectural modernism. Abu Dhabi, Doha, Dubai, Kuwait City and Riyadh (and subsequently Mecca) were less spectacular in the mid-1970s, when *La production de l’espace* was published. But, pioneered by Kuwait, skyscraping cityscapes were also in the pipeline across Arabia. Further west, Colonel Qadhafi’s visions of remaking Libyan society, later dubbed ‘the elusive revolution’ by the exiled South African Marxist Ruth First (1974), were still embryonic. But neighbouring Algeria, since 1962, had been a nucleus of socialist experimentation – portrayed by the historian Byrne (2016: 4) as: ‘an exemplary and prominent participant in the Third World [*tiersmondiste*] movement’ – enacted on the ruins of French settler colonization. Tellingly, there is no reference to Algeria at all in *La production de l’espace*. What does this oblivion leave unsaid, given that four-fifths of the territory of the French Republic became – only after a famously violent struggle and the departure of nearly a million European citizens – *République algérienne démocratique et populaire* in 1962. Even when writing in the thrall of the *événements* of May 1968, Lefebvre’s (1969) dispatch remains mute on how ‘May ‘68 began as a *tiersmondiste* event. Along with Nanterre, it happened mostly in the Quartier Latin, which at that time was a little third-world itself, full of Vietnamese, Algerians and West Africans’ (Young, 2021: 433; also see Kalter, 2016).

Simultaneously, prominent when *La production de l’espace* appeared was the extensive infrastructure of oil and gas industries in North Africa, Arabia and Iran, and the recycling of petrodollars into global economic and urban circuits. These render Lefebvre’s claims therein about ‘certain Islamic countries’ outlandish. Like Louis Althusser – another theoretically creative French Marxist – Lefebvre’s outlook was arguably shaped by a formative Catholic background (Boer, 2007). However, Lefebvre’s suppositions about Muslim predilections ‘to preserve ... customs and representational spaces from the buffeting of industrial space

and industrial representations of space’ (p. 122) invoke the Weberian Protestant spirit of capitalism thesis. Lefebvre (1991: 266) offers Eurocentric accounts of how the ‘adoption, first of Protestantism, then of Jacobinism, and so on’ are ‘perfect epitomes of the commercial town ... a space of exchange and communications, and therefore of networks’. These postulates of a progressive/industrial West vs. static/premodern East have been thoroughly problematized in postcolonial critique (Chakrabarty, 2000) and elsewhere in reading Lefebvre (Smith, 2020). However, it is worth restating the views in 1966 of a contemporary of Lefebvre, Rodinson (1974: 117), on attributing supposed Protestant and other ethics to the rise of capitalism:

it is impossible to prove that these features were not created by the economic regime they accompany Accordingly, there is nothing to indicate in a compelling way that ... [Islam] prevented the Muslim world from developing along the road to modern capitalism Islam did not prescribe to or impose upon the people, the civilization, the states that adopted its teaching any specific economic road.

Rodinson, a Marxist from a secular Jewish family (his parents were murdered in Auschwitz), pioneered post-orientalist French scholarship on Islam and the Arab World (Ali, 2021). Rodinson cites Lefebvre, but there is no evidence the engagement was reciprocated. Either way, Lefebvre’s views on Muslims keep closer company with Bowman’s than has been held to account.¹ Such casual orientalism and exclusions in past and present influences in human geography invite further careful attention to bids to decolonize the discipline.

The uneven development of decolonial geography

As Jazeel (2019: 22) notes in a review of the field, ‘it was not until the mid-1990s that geographers began to concertedly engage with postcolonial theory’. Elsewhere Jazeel (2017: 334) comments that ‘the

task of decolonising geographical knowledge is now too important to be left to subfields like postcolonial geography alone'. Whilst references to decolonizing geography have become more vocal (Esson et al., 2017), their transformative impacts vary greatly, reflecting the uneven structures and outcomes of Empire and ensuing configurations of racism and racialization. A review of work *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* by Walter D Mignolo and Catherine E Walsh describes the field as: seeking 'to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis and thought' (Walsh, 2018: 17). The inspirations reverberate across disciplines (Cupples and Grosfoguel, 2019), including fertile reception in geography (Asher, 2013; Daigle and Ramirez, 2019; de Leeuw and Hunt, 2018; Ferretti, 2020; Radcliffe, 2022). These discussions also intersect with Black geographies that in the last few decades have pared disciplinary openings in North American and British universities as well as in Europe. As Bledsoe (2020: 472) comments: 'Over the past 20 years, the subfield of Black geographies has become an increasingly important focal point for the wider discipline of Geography'. Engaging the work of Clyde Woods, Bobby Wilson, Ruth Gilmore and others, Bledsoe (p. 472) wants to:

highlight the need to analyse Blackness ontologically. A scholarly commitment to rigour and a political commitment to social justice demand that Black Geographies attend to the logics that structure anti-Blackness, as this is an important step toward acknowledging the struggles of all sections of the African Diaspora.

A key enabling condition of possibility for the field that Bledsoe traverses is the scholarship of Black geographers in what, in the United States (and other hubs of the Anglophone discipline in Canada, the UK and Australasia), has long been 'a white discipline' (Pulido, 2002). This is a significant advance on the situation of two decades ago, when Pulido (2002: 45) noted that whilst 'white geographers have produced exceptional work', only the

presence of a 'critical mass' of scholars of colour in the discipline would foreground race and racism as centre-stage concerns in the study of space, place and landscape and in disciplinary histories: 'we need sufficient scholars [of colour] to generate an intellectual synergy around race. A similar process can be seen in feminist geography. Only after women gained access to academia did the study of gender flourish. Men *could* have taken the lead, but they did not' (Pulido, 2002: 46).

Arguably a parallel critique might apply to Muslim geography and geographies. A critical mass of scholars from Muslim backgrounds has barely emerged within Anglophone geography. Moreover, few Muslim geographers writing in/ from Africa and Asia are read by the wider discipline. Where references to Islam and, more often, Muslims appear, these are frequently positioned as discourses outside the discipline, rather than containing intellectual traditions with the potential to inform disciplinary debates. But what happens when, to cite from the introduction to Gade's (2019: 1) valuable study of *Muslim Environmentalisms*, perspectives from Islamic scholarship are 'afforded power to intervene intellectually, something beyond a merely superficial inclusion'? The rest of this paper explores how deepening intellectual engagements with Islam might proceed and what this promises for wider disciplinary decoloniality. Whereas some geographers continue to express 'disappointment and frustration at the marginalization, dismissal and erasure of themselves and/other alternate epistemologies within the discipline' (Oswin, 2020: 10), it seems that perspectives from Muslim geography and geographers have barely registered in ensuing discussions; and where they are, Islam features in particular ways, as an object of study, rather than a resource in intellectual traditions that could inform research. In this way, Islam remains one of contemporary Anglophone geography's ultimate others.

Yet, as decolonial scholarship of Islam from other disciplines signals, 'In order to resist coloniality, traditions must be understood in their own terms and translated into a decolonial language' (Salaymeh, 2021: 272). A precursor was Sayyid's

(1997) *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (re-published in 2015 with an introduction by Hamid Dabashi). Subsequently, *ReOrient: The Journal of Critical Muslim Studies* (published in the UK since 2015) has become a key forum. According to *ReOrient's* website, the journal is:

dedicated to rethinking those entities and events considered to lie outside the conceptuality of Western hegemony, culturally, geopolitically and philosophically. The journal encourages a decolonial and non-orientalist approach to the analysis of the historical and contemporary political, socio-economic, and cultural processes constitutive of the Islamicate in its widest-ranging permutations. <https://criticalmuslimstudies.co.uk/about-us/> (accessed 26 July 2026)

Such work offers a rich resource that decolonial geographies have yet to capitalize. The London-based Muslim Institute (<https://musliminstitute.org/about>) and the related publication *Critical Muslim* (<https://criticalmuslim.com/>) have similarly broad aims but with less theoretical ambitions than *ReOrient*. Whilst shaped by Critical Muslim Studies, what follows also draws on other scholarship and traditions focused on the Balkans and eastwards across to Bengal and beyond, and on Africa and its transatlantic entanglements. The rationale for these moves is set out in the first subsection below, on the ways that human geographers tend to approach and categorize Muslims and Islam. Two further subsections foreground intersections with work on political economies and area studies.

Decolonizing Muslim geographies?

Learning from dīn

Geographical scholarship on Islam comprises three broad clusters. One, frequently located in geographies of religion, is itself a field that has grown significantly in the last few decades. Writing 12 years ago, Kong (2010: 755) noted that:

The last decade has seen much growth in geographical research on religion. No longer can

geographies of religion be considered a moribund interest within the larger geographical enterprise, as evidence of renewed interest and energy appears increasingly in the pages of journals across the discipline.

In this context, Islam becomes one of a set of 'world religions', joining Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism, studied at different scales in association with world regions and places. Problematically, this imposes a Eurocentric frame of comparison that is then projected onto a range of categories and communities as though they are counterparts or analytically interchangeable.

This relates to the second cluster, of studies framing Muslims in the West as a minority and thereby approached analytically against an assumed non-Muslim norm. Such work is plentiful, and often rewarding, such as the collection on *Muslim Spaces of Hope: Geographies of Possibility in Britain and the West* (Phillips, 2009). Yet its starting point is the difference, which with other work in this cluster is more often read through frameworks of integration and segregation, mapping distributions of Muslim populations (Gale, 2013), and/or studying them through a lens of difference/otherness, Islamophobia and conflict (Najib and Hopkins, 2020), and inclusion/exclusion (Isakjee, 2016). Much of this field negotiates gender codes and racialized hierarchies (Khan, 2021).

The third strand, the study of Muslim societies in situ, is found in geography's interface in area studies and proceeds – at best – through engagements with place, language, economy and culture in Muslim-majority lands. This rich field, located mostly in various strands of area studies, has long been accorded a more marginal status in geographic work on Muslims and Islam vis-à-vis geographical work on Muslims as minorities in the West. This point and some alternatives for 'Provincializing Geographies of Religion: Muslim Identities' beyond the 'West' are presented by Amy Mills and Banu Gökankırsel (2014: 902):

Research on Islam and Muslims, within geographies of religion, focuses on Muslims in diaspora ...as minorities, and as separate from others

By contrast, research conducted in predominantly Muslim societies illuminates the relational, historical and cultural dynamics ... [yielding] a more dynamic and productive theoretical conceptualization of place.

But, in turn, this invites a series of questions about the way that Islam is categorized and how the majority Muslim areas are demarcated, visualized and theorized.

Arguably, therefore, a first step in decolonizing Muslim geographies is to problematize the categorization of Islam as a religion. Although Muslims frequently adopt the term religion as an expediency, no traditions of Islamic scholarship use the phrase as anything other than as an approximation of concepts integral to Islam. Only a fraction of this vast scholarship in Arabic is translated – though it informs the precepts and praxis of being a Muslim, imbibed through custom, education and observation. Nowhere in this sea of scholarship, extending from the early centuries of Islam to the present, is there a self-recognition of the practices, traditions, interpretations and legal rulings to which they relate as ‘religion’. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2021a) notes that the etymology of the term religion is traceable to (*re*)*ligate*, signifying ‘to tie up or back, to restrain, bind fast, to make fast, secure, in post-classical Latin also to gather (people)’ (OED, 2021b). Systems of belief, practice and philosophy beyond the West, when encountered by imperial scholarship were misleadingly termed religions. Accordingly, the study of ‘world religions’, approached through the sets of labels and categories that have survived formal empire, has been adapted into geographies of religion without much critical reflection on the genealogy of mapping ‘Buddhists’, ‘Hindus’ and so on, as though these categories are commensurate with those traditions. As work in postcolonial geography points out, such categorization: ‘internalizes and then universalizes a western category (religion) attributing a wide variety of social practices to one or other manifestation of this supposed universal’ (Sidaway et al., 2014: 6).

There is some irony therefore in a situation in which, according to Hopkins (2009: 214),

‘research about Islam and Muslims forms the largest body of scholarship within the geographies of religion’. Muslim scholarship and everyday discourse have a different term – *dīn* (also anglicized as *deen*) – to describe the totality of Islam (constituting a range of understandings and schools, and fields of knowledge). The Malaysian scholar Al-Attas (2020: 1) notes that Islam ‘contains within itself all the relevant possibilities of meaning inherent in the concept of *dīn*’, which refers at once to a coherent system (of action and knowledge) and judicious power, inclination, habit, disposition, as well as obligation – which includes a related set of commercial forms associated with mercantile capital, linked to the Arabic verb *dana*, which derives from *dīn* and which includes the term for a town or city (the place where *dīn* is realized/actualized): *madinah*.²

The range of meanings related to *dīn* is therefore both specific and expansive. Elsewhere, Al-Attas (1980: 6) notes the ‘close conceptual connection between the Quranic concept of return or *raj*’ [sometimes interpreted as rain], and its concept of *din* ... and it is a fact that one of basic meanings of the term *dīn* is recurrent rain something that returns again and again, and that brings good ...’.

Dīn also finds expression in multiple practical sciences, such as *al-jabr* (the reunion of parts, anglicized as ‘algebra’), astronomy and mapping – whose central feature of projection ‘is disclosed by the Arabic word for it which is *tastih* or “flattening”’ (Keller, 2001: 55). This gave tremendous impetus to direction-finding – and thence geography and navigation, which was long ahead of (and later informed) Western navigational technologies (Sidaway, 1997). Because Islam’s injunction that *salah* (formalized worship) involve *qibla* (direction-finding: to face Mecca), Muslim science finessed the methodological insights that calculate bearings at a planetary scale:

They called this the *da’ira ‘udhma* or ‘great circle,’ and by means of it al-Biruni more than nine hundred years ago calculated with nearly perfect accuracy the qibla for Ghazni, where the great Friday mosque was built by his patron Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni some 1933 miles

from Mecca in present-day Afghanistan. (Keller, 2001: 19)

Hence, *dīn* cannot be reduced to compartmentalized fields, such as law, culture, science, belief, philosophy, logic or conduct. Although other terms related to the Arabic words *sirah* and *siratal* – denoting journeying or movement in time and space (which may include prophetic biography and refer to the path of guidance and reward that Muslims seek to follow) – may be translated as path, *dīn* too may signify a path or way of conduct and choice, about what is valorized, as in an oft-invoked Quranic injunction, *Lakum dīnukum waliya dīni* (Surah 109, Ayah 6), whose *tafsir* (interpretation) can be rendered as ‘To you be your Way, and to me mine’.

Muslim geographies should therefore transcend colonial logics of mapping religion towards a more holistic understanding working with Islam’s own conceptual terms, rather than imposed frames that render Islam and Muslim as adjectives and objects of scrutiny. Muslim is more than an adjective to categorize or signify difference. As Reda (2018: 313–314) notes: ‘*Islām* is a *masdar*, a verbal noun that is similar to an English infinitive or gerund and therefore denotes action [that] carries the meanings of wholeness, peace, well-being and safety (*salām, salāma, silm*)’. And for many Muslims, Islam denotes notions largely absent from geographical, and much other social science, such as *fiqh, ibadah, iman, tawhid* and *taqwa*.³ Such recognition invites more discerning thematizing of Islam as concerning identity/difference towards a deeper scholarly engagement with its structures and epistemologies. This echoes, but exceeds, the parameters of a call by Hammond (2020: 8), who, in advocating conversations among geography, urban and Middle East studies, thinks that geographers would ‘benefit from greater engagement with traditions of scholarship that diverge from geography’s disciplinary traditions’. The next subsections broach such engagements, traversing economic, political and urban geographies, simultaneously mindful of the words of Rabat-born, Chicago-based scholar Lyamlahy (2009), referencing the work of the Moroccan writer Abdélkebir Khatibi (1938–2018):

‘Writing about Islam, according to Khatibi, demands a translating of its principles, working on both a linguistic and a metaphysical level’.

Disentangling political economies and political geographies

Accompanying nuanced engagement with epistemological positions and vocabulary developed within Islamic scholarship, a parallel decolonial step is to modify the parameters of geography’s treatment of Islam and Muslims as a subject predominantly of social and cultural work, in which Islam features mostly as a form of social life and cultural difference, towards broader understanding of how circuits of capital, urbanization and power intertwine with Islam. Although some have focused on Islamic banking (Pollard and Samers, 2007), the phenomenon is relatively modern – with origins in the 1960s – and deeply influenced by Western cooperative and mutual financial institutions. The critical lens of financialization of capitalism is therefore a more apt starting point (Hanieh, 2020). This demands critical consideration of the comparatively distinctive interpretations of Islam that came to dominate Saudi Arabia, and the relationship of that polity (and neighbouring sultanates in the Persian Gulf) to British and American imperialism, and to global labour, commodity (especially hydrocarbons and weapons) and capital flows. At its heart, since the 1940s, this has turned on broadening entanglement between America and Saudi Arabia. As summarized by one ground-breaking account: ‘Arms sales, bases, military assistance, petrodollar recycling, petrochemical projects, construction boondoggles, joint covert ventures across Africa and Asia [and Central America], and negotiations over oil prices are a few of the hallmarks of U.S.–Saudi relations from the 1980s until now’ (Vitalis, 2009: 272).

The propelling centrality of the polities of the Arabian Peninsula to globalizing capitalism and attendant ideological and material transformations since the early 1970s rests on hydrocarbons but greatly exceeds petro-capitalism, through connections with financial, real estate, transport, military

and logistic circuits of capitalism. In 1974, Halliday (1974: 17) could describe how ‘Arabia underwent a striking transformation in the two decades after 1950 ... it became the scene of intense development and acquired enormous strategic importance for world capitalism’. Its centrality included massive financial ‘recycling’ of petrodollars (Saddy, 1982) into globalizing banking circuits, yielding the Third World debt crisis of the early 1980s. In the years since, Khalili (2020: 3) notes, Arabia’s networks of pipelines, ports, petrochemical plants and shipping infrastructures have become, ‘not simply an enabling adjunct ... but ... central to the very fabric of global capitalism’. Moreover, as Hanieh (2011: 53) notes: ‘throughout each phase of internationalization and financialization, the Gulf region has become increasingly central to the functioning of the overall system’. Denial of that centrality not only yields incomplete accounts of economic globalization but also, to cite from Wearing’s (2018: 44) study of Anglo-Arabian relations, overlooks how business and political elites in the West and the Gulf have made ‘common cause (albeit not as equal partners)’.

This demands a critical interpretation of the intersections of sovereignty, Islam and capital. Capitalism is both racialized and routed through urbanized nodes in Arabia, whose port cities especially become sites where these interfaces are especially legible: places like Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Doha become world cities par excellence (Mohammad and Sidaway, 2012, 2016), and the *more than world city* of Mecca also becomes a domain for vast redevelopment, accompanying the urbanization of Saudi and international capital into condos, mega-malls and hotels (Mater, 2016).

Such considerations need to be staged in tandem with two related moves that involve decentring the Middle East as the default focus in terms of Islamic areas and shifting from the default categorizing of Muslims as migrants producing diversity in Western cities to deeper historical geographies of the production of difference. Whilst the scale of the urbanization and financialization of capital routed through its firms and ruling families means that the Arabian Peninsula matters, it is important to recognize that other scales/areas can fruitfully

offer decolonial pathways in the interface between geography, Islam and area studies.

One starting point is to reappraise the apparatus of surveillance and validating scholarship on ‘radicalization’ and ‘fundamentalism’ with attendant security narratives concerning terrorism. There is, of course, substantial critical literature – notably in the wake of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* – examining representations of Islam, including designation of a mirroring and problematic popular ‘orientalism in reverse’, which inverts and caricatures the dichotomy of Western superiority that Said examined. The way that both discourses occlude the interactions, connections and many commonalities between East and West (and/or Muslims and others) has been critiqued at both macro-scale (Al-’Azam, 1981) and as what Robina Mohammad’s (1999) micro-scale study termed ‘the production of the “other’s” “other”’. In the decades since, the growth of security concerns has seen the discourse proliferate into an apparatus of heightened surveillance, reworking imperial tropes of knowledge production. The spectre of Bowman’s ‘Mohammedan fanatics’ has morphed, via the increased hostility in official responses and stances in the West (and presently governing elites in India and China) intersecting with new racisms and sometimes yielding a full-blown Islamophobia whereby, as Ali (2020: 579) describes: ‘Muslim difference is hypervisibilized or seen as potentially threatening and coded as part of racialized symptoms which constitute radicalization and extremism’. The critical move in understanding this is to shift attention from a focus on the identities of Muslims, which Massoumi et al. (2017: 4) note in a key essay: ‘only offers a partial view of Islamophobia. A more satisfactory approach than starting with how the meaning of Muslim identities are constructed and contested, for example, is to focus on the set of institutions and policies that disproportionately impact upon Muslims’. Such work in geography (Fernandez, 2018) is less frequently undertaken than work focused on one or other aspect of Muslim identities.

Presciently, Muslim traditions contain a term (*ghuluww*) to apprehend the phenomenon of extremism, without the imperial and sovereign imaginaries of the ‘war on terror’, ‘prevention’, ‘radicalism’ or

'Jihadist'. The Cambridge-based Muslim scholar Abdal Hakim Murad (2020: 127) reports how *ghuluww* has been defined as 'exaggeration' and 'harshness' and that a hadith (recorded in the most authoritative compilation of these) declares: 'no-one shall practice *din* harshly without being overpowered by it'. When such excess is empowered by states, those rejecting their compulsions and codes frequently reject affiliations with Islam (albeit often behind closed doors). Public and private departures from Islam and variable levels of *iman* (faith) require circumspection about over-precision in mapping Muslim populations. Besides, whenever any population is mapped, analysis must proceed, as set out in a classic note elaborating political economy, 'not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations' (Marx, 1973: 100). Hence, ideas of a 'Muslim world' – rooted in early 20th century pan-Islamism promoted by the Ottoman Empire in the lead up to and during the First World War – need to be duly historicized (as in Aydin, 2017; Hyde, 2017; Zarakol, 2022). Therefore, whilst caution is needed in approaching Islam and Muslims as transparent categories, Figure 2, derived from the Pew Research Center's (2009) *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population*, nonetheless serves to adjust some familiar taken-for-granted meta-geographies of Islam and Muslims. For example, it depicts Russia containing as many Muslims as Western Europe and North America combined, and most Muslims in Europe west of Russia being in the Balkans. It should be added that both Russian and Balkan Muslims are not descended from recent migrant populations. The next subsection further defamiliarizes where and who Muslims are assumed to be, and who and what typifies them.

Tracing new architectures for area studies

Figure 2 also indicates that there are more Muslims in Africa to the south of the Sahara than in North Africa. More widely, the African continent has a Muslim majority and contains more Arabic speakers than Arabia; Ethiopia has a larger Muslim population than Saudi Arabia; China has more Muslims than Syria; Nigeria contains as many Muslims as Egypt; and Indonesia has the largest Muslim

population (over 200 million) of any country. The numerical mass of Muslims in South Asia looms largest, greatly outweighing the Middle East, even when the two non-Arab states with the largest Muslim populations in the broader region (Iran and Turkey) are considered. These distributions and the intellectual histories shaping Islam's conceptions of itself led one important account of the historical geography of Islam to propose an analytical focus on what it called the 'Balkans-to-Bengal complex': 'the vast region extending from the Balkans through Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia down and across Afghanistan and North India to the Bay of Bengal. ... [which] in spite of local variations in language and ethnicity and creed, comprised a relatively distinct and integrated world' (Ahmed, 2016: 73). Shahab Ahmed's book comes with a map (see Figure 3) that represents an expansive area, first of the Timurids, then of three other great Muslim imperial formations, Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal, and several more historically significant ones, and extends across Bengal and the Persianate emirates of Kokand and Bukhara. Ahmed's (2016) is arguably the most important book-length contribution to the question of what and where is Islamic since Marshall Hodgson's (1974) more than four decades before. Hodgson proposed the Nile to the Oxus (more frequently known now as the Amu Darya) as a geographical focus, and by bringing Cairo (recognizing the ongoing centrality of Al-Azhar University) into the map, Hodgson saw Islam as an assemblage of scholarship, civilization and institutions. Sadly, both books appeared posthumously and so it was not possible for their authors to become involved in responses and subsequent debates. Since it appeared the same year as Ahmed's book and map, a wide-ranging review of *The Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power and Civility* (Salvatore, 2016) does not mention it. However, Salvatore (2016: 27) gives due place to Hodgson:

Marshall Hodgson's three-volume *The Venture of Islam* (1974), his posthumously published magnum opus, had the merit not only of framing Islamic history in the context of an integrated inter-civilizational vision but also of problematizing

sociological notions of religion, civilization, civility, tradition, and institution. Hodgson was well aware of how much the inherited conceptualizations related to Islam came to depend on the Western historic experience and in particular on the hegemony of Western modernity.

Both visions, of the Balkans-to-Bengal and Oxus-to-Cairo, have their merits and inevitable lacunae. Neither, for example, give sufficient weight to the Sahel or to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. Both understate the contemporary roles of Islam and Muslims in North America. However, Ahmed (2016: 75, emphasis in original) presents the Balkans-to-Bengal as a mapping of interconnections, conceived as a:

Common paradigm of Islamic life and thought by which Muslims (and others) imagined, conceptualized, valorized, articulated and gave mutually-communicable *meaning* to their lives in terms of Islam. This common paradigm of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex is readily manifest in and articulated through a critically overlapping discursive canon, embedded in which is a conceptual vocabulary, an array of expressive motifs, and other mutually-held and/or mutually-translatable modes of valorization and self-articulation.

Such diverse scholarly, literary, commercial and architectural refractions and entanglements prolifically enriched Islamic discourse. As Moosa (2005: 7) noted:

Those who articulated and explained Islam were no longer only Arabs: non-Arabs like Ghazali also played a prominent role. No less an authority than the Tunis-born historian and sociologist Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (d. 784/1382) credits non-Arab intelligentsia with making up the largest number of those who shaped and determined the intellectual legacy of Islam.

Born nearly 500 years after the Prophet, Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111 CE) (hereafter Ghazali) is an emblematic figure in the formation of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. As Safi (2006:

105) notes, Ghazali's life 'is well documented in biographical dictionaries and has received a lot of attention from contemporary scholars'. In fact, Ghazali's *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*Revival of the Knowledge of the Deen*) has arguably been the single most important text in Islam after the Quran and collections of hadith. Ghazali's travels – between his birthplace in Tūs (located in what is now eastern Iran) to work as a scholar in Baghdad and Damascus, with time spent in Mecca and Medina – also epitomize the intersections between the Balkans-to-Bengal complex and the Hijaz (the western littoral of Arabia that was the locus of Islam's formative stage). Although his work has not gone uncontested, Ghazali remains widely read to inform the praxis of being Muslim in one of two summations: *Bidayat al-Hidaya* (*The Beginning of Guidance*) and *Minhajul Abidin* (*Best Way for Worshipers*). Of course, such classical works and the traditions they inform interact with other currents of thought that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries yielding varied hermeneutical, legal and political methods of understanding Islam,⁴ including those acquiring influence since the 1970s through Saudi state sponsorship.

This leads us back to petrodollar circuits and the evolving forms of instruction in Saudi institutions, whose institutional logics, according to a key study, are:

tied in large part to the political and economic fortunes of the Saudi state. Just as its foundation and evolution cannot be understood in isolation from the Cold War, intraregional rivalries, shifts in the oil economy and the efforts of the Saudi royals to shore up their power in the face of challenges emanating from inside and outside the country, so do wider political considerations continue to play a role in steering its course. (Farquhar, 2017: 194)

Such nation-state roles have supplanted and, in Ahmed's (2016: 526, emphasis in original) account, produced the 'historical *disintegration*' of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex in its original form, though its vocabulary and expressive motifs endure; its unity in diversity is fractured but not entirely erased, manifesting a 'dizzily diverse

historical array of societies of Muslims' (Ahmed, 2016: 506).

However, other area studies lenses also offer the potential to compose decolonial geographies, especially when area studies become: 'a milieu in which difference is *practiced* and geographical concepts can be "diffracted"' (Sharp, 2018: 835, emphasis in original). Three decades ago, Mazrui (1992) proposed that Arabia and Africa be seen as a single continent – *Afrabia* – with Islam as a key historical connection dating to the years of the Prophet when some of his companions sought sanctuary in Ethiopia. Mazrui argues that the Sahara and especially the Mozambique Channel are broader divides than the Red Sea, yet Madagascar (along with Mauritius and Seychelles) are members of the Organization of African Unity. Other conceptions trace the Sahara as an interactive space, notwithstanding its colonial partitioning. Hence, an expansive notion of West Africa that includes the southwestern Sahara, Sahel, and sub-Saharan Africa west of Lake Chad and extending to the south to encompass Cameroon emerges as another scholarly focus for geographies of Islam. This area with 'rough edges' is the focus for an account by the African American Muslim historian and ethnographer Ware (2014: 14), who notes that: 'West Africa has drawn relatively little attention from scholars interested in the history of Islamic knowledge. Scholarly studies of Islam here – as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa – turn on binary oppositions of syncretism and orthodoxy: "African Islam" or "Islam in Africa"'. Ware argues that there are active echoes of colonial and orientalist scholarship in these assumptions, which rework the traits of a racialized and spatialized hierarchy envisioning Islam in Africa as syncretic products of an original Islam – a centre – and a range of 'peripheral' African cultures.

In fact, all formations of Islam are in some mode or other syncretic, in reflecting and responding to diverse local contexts. This includes the original Muslim community – *salaf al-ṣāliḥ* – in the Hijaz that formed around the Prophet. Prophetic biography and this community continue to be examined via the evolving body of scholarship known as *sirah* forming a vast evolving corpus of historical

reflection and authorship. As a textbook (itself drawing on contemporary historiographical scholarship on the *sirah*) summarized: 'different historical periods projected an image of the Prophet that (consciously or subconsciously) responded to the needs of the time' (Mohiuddin, 2016: 350). The *sirah* has evolved through multiple, interacting centres of study. However, Ware (2014: 22) sees hidden assumptions from 'sturdy old civilizational models of diffusion and reception' at work in contemporary representations of Islam: 'When applied to Islam, they tend to carry the implicit (or explicit) notion that the center's claims on normative authority are spatially and structurally immutable'. He calls for African historical experience to occupy a more pivotal location in accounts of the spatial and temporal diversity characteristic not just of the putative margins of Islam but of Islam as a whole.

Such a move further allies and articulates decolonial Muslim geographies with Black geographies, via the historical agency of African Muslims across the Black Atlantic. The biggest 19th-century transnational New World slave rebellions, which took place in Brazil and Cuba a few decades after the better-known Haitian Revolution, were Muslim-led and closely linked to the contemporaneous establishment of the Sokoto Sultanate across what later became Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. These subaltern Muslim geographies are amply documented in historical scholarship (Barcia, 2013) but remain marginal to contemporary representations of the geography of Islam.

Further north, in the United States, this takes multiple contemporary forms through African American Muslim cultural, political and scholarly leadership and influence over the last century (especially of public figures like Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali). However, it also extends to enslaved Muslims in antebellum America, amongst whom were scholars who have left a corpus of writing (Austin, 1997). Therefore, Islam is not reducible to a migrant supplement in American spaces, another ethno-social minority to be mapped. Rather, it is a constitutive trace within the forging of the United States and other republics in the Americas, especially Brazil and Cuba. This reality necessitates other connections between

decolonial and Black geographies. A review of the latter signals a potentiality ‘for future research, including the need for more studies that provincialize North America and connect with Latinx and Native/Indigenous geographies’ (Hawthorne, 2019: 1). The fact of Muslim history being interwoven with Black history signals other potentials and promises, fortifying Black geographies’ homing-in on an agenda that ‘pushes the conceptual boundaries of the wider discipline of Geography’ (Bledsoe, 2021: 1).

Conclusions: Beyond decolonial geography

This paper has posited dialogues between Islam and developing decolonial geographies. These steps simultaneously seek to decolonize geographical scholarship on Muslims and enriches decolonial theory, which thus far has (with good cause) focused on the whiteness of the Anglophone discipline, indigenous geographies and the reception of theoretical work from Latin America. Of course, the conquest of Latin America, which decolonial theory takes as the foundational moment in the establishment of a colonial matrix of power, followed Castille’s conquest and destruction of the Islamic civilization in Andalucía. As Robin Yassin-Kassab (2013: 41) notes:

By 1489 Muslim power on the Iberian peninsula had been reduced to the city of Granada. The final fall of the city in January 1492 was witnessed, fittingly, by Christopher Columbus. He considered his voyage to Americas later that year as an extension of the anti-Muslim crusade. Believing that he was sailing to the East Indies, he took the Arabic-speaking Jew Luis de Torres to act as interpreter to the supposedly Arabic-speaking traders he would find there.

Such geographical ignorance did not end with Columbus and whilst decolonial theory and moves to decolonize geography are injecting new political impetus and broader horizons, the challenges have perhaps been underestimated. In a sympathetic critique of ‘the decolonial bandwagon’ that considered

‘the dangers of intellectual decolonisation’, Leon Moosavi (2020) asserts that the field risks oversimplifying the tasks and ignores much scholarship from the Global South. Echoing arguments that decolonization is not simply a ‘metaphor’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012), Moosavi (2020: 332) offers ‘a warning that some manifestations of intellectual decolonisation may not only be inadequate but may even reinscribe coloniality’. In fact, the process is complex, with selective engagement with some Southern scholarship by Global North-based scholars. Notably, selected decolonial work and concepts from Latin America circulate widely, including in decolonial geography. Whilst rewarding, this risks bypassing other regions, or making tokenistic reference without the sustained effort of effecting transformation through deeper engagement. The field of postcolonial studies tended to neglect modernist Islamic thinkers, despite the considerable impacts of their work. Young’s (2001) survey of the canon of postcolonial thought makes no reference to such key figures as the Algerian Malek Bennabi (1905–73), who has had wide readerships in his native Algeria and has been influential far beyond the Maghreb (Naylor, 2006; Walsh, 2007) or the Iranian Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), despite decades of availability of his extraordinarily influential text *Gharbzadegi* (variously translated as ‘Weststruckness’, ‘Occidentosis: a plague from the West’ or ‘Westoxification’).

Both Ahmad and another influential Iranian writer, Ali Shariati (1933–1977) – who translated Franz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la terre* into Farsi – are amongst 20th-century Muslim writers whose agendas connect with wider decolonial currents (Dabashi, 2021; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016). Their horizons of thought brim with potential for what a key proponent of postcolonial work in geography once termed ‘learning from other regions’ (Slater, 1992). David Slater was a British geographer, who in the early 1970s was based at the University of Dar es Salaam, then a key node of radical anti-colonial scholarship and mobilization (O’Keefe, 2020, 2021; Sharp, 2019). Writing 15 years after he had returned to Europe, Slater (1992: 307) argued that without historicizing

critical perspectives’ ‘First World geographers will not be able to grasp the meanings and dispositions of the societies in which they live, and in this important sense will remain “intellectual prisoners of the West”’. Slater drew mostly on writings in Spanish from Latin America. It’s unlikely he had Islam in view. And in the decades since he wrote, visions for decolonial geography have scarcely registered Muslim epistemologies. Yet, the plenitude of Islam’s historical and living geographies and scholarship provides a path from intellectual prisons. That path is, in an important sense, *beyond* the decolonial. It invites us therefore to literatures, configurations of power, people and places that predate and preconfigure the post-1492 world, where Europe was the margin of the margins. To take this path invariably means ‘exploring premodern and non-European imperialism’ (Jones and Phillips, 2005), bringing many other geographies and destinations into view. Engaging with the historical and geographical richness⁵ of Islam points the way to something even more expansive than the decolonial. Such an expanded canvas subverts the spatial and civilizational categories that figures like Bowman and Lefebvre mobilized and that continue to haunt geography. It invokes something better, involving deeper scrutiny of circulations and intersections that crisscross⁶ humanity.

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Notes

1. In a constructive and sympathetic reading, Stefan Kipfer and Kanishka Goonewardena note that Lefebvre’s ‘search for a more genuinely world-wide form of knowledge was frustrated by the Eurocentric residues and habits of his own engagements’ (Kipfer and Goonewardena, 2013: 105–106). Further tempering the regard for Lefebvre in critical geography is Andrew Smith’s (2020) incisively staged dialogue between the Trinidadian Marxist CLR James and Lefebvre. From Lefebvre’s lauded *Critique of Everyday Life*, Smith (p. 51) notes how Lefebvre ‘defends the dignity of “everyday life” with a geographical-cum-cultural metaphor: “the polar and equatorial zones are scarcely fit for habitation, and all civilization has developed in the temperate zones – the zones of everyday life” [citing Lefebvre, 2014: 144]. James, of course, fought a life-long battle against this particular lie, insisting repeatedly on the path-breaking cultural and intellectual contributions of those from the Caribbean all products of an “equatorial zone”’.
2. Here, it is important to note that Arabic is built around a structure of short base-terms that represent a core meaning or concept; so, for example, there is a common structure to nouns of place: Maktab, Madrasah, Medinah, etc.
3. Brown (2014), Mawdudi (2014) and Siddiqui (2008) are useful entrées. Asad (1980) offers an accessible modernist *tafsir* and Barlas (2002), Hidayatullah (2014) and Wadud (1999) readings of the Quran from a woman’s perspective.
4. My wording here is from the rich account by Hamdeh (2021: 24).
5. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this formulation.
6. I adopt this term from Burak et. al.’s (2022: 575) focus on how ‘the threads and circuits of texts that crisscross the inherently trans-imperial spaces of early modernity map their own kind of geography’.

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