

Viewing the Globe from a Mountain Top: Between the Perspectives of Al-Bīrūnī and Sloterdijk¹

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Abstract

In this paper I wish to examine our imagination of the unity of the earth and the process of globalization by contrasting it with the early origins of mapping and measuring the globe. I will pay particular attention to the work of Abū Rayḥān Al-Bīrūnī. I will demonstrate that the assumptions which allowed for Al-Bīrūnī's advances in the measurement of the globe were based upon a certain understanding of the relationship of place within the sacred order of the cosmos and the role of reason in this connection. This carries over to his anthropological works which considers the history of other religions and cultures. It shows an approach where objectivity in scientific investigation can stand alongside a diversity of religious faiths or visions. I wish to use these insights to consider the positions of such Western writers on the philosophy of globe-formation, such as Carl Schmitt and especially Peter Sloterdijk. Sloterdijk understands the development of our imagination of the globe as a singular history which was achieved primarily through conquest. Comparing these thinkers is important because our understanding of geopolitics and globalization often involves imposing one definition of humanity, reality or the sacred, which marginalizes or vilifies those with differing views. I hope to demonstrate by these contrasts that a unified imagination of the earth through globalization poses extreme dangers, and that the fragmentation of the globe through many religious and secular and artistic projections is the only possibility for a future. That is: the possibility of a future is dependent upon many opposing images of a future. It is only by a return to the initial impulses which led such scientists as Al-Bīrūnī that a true relationship of the human to the earth can be preserved.

Keywords: Al-Bīrūnī, Peter Sloterdijk, Carl Schmitt, Spherology, Globalization, Cultural difference

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The Global Meeting of the Flat Earth Society

I am reasonably certain that the earth is round, that it approximates a perfect sphere. And if I consider my various air travels pieced together, I have even circumnavigated the globe. When I fly, I enjoy the window seat. I enjoy viewing the clouds, the subtle curvature of the earth and the strange encounters with the sun while flying east across the globe. I love looking down at the landscapes below; the river systems, mountain forests, cities, and mosaics of agricultural land.

I can look down and see that the land use in Thailand is arranged differently than in the United States, in the Philippines, in Tanzania or in the other places I have lived. I imagine the various historical, cultural, political and religious forces which have left their imprint on the earth. And I imagine all this at 35,000 feet moving over 400 miles per hour.

And when on the ground, I am a part of these forces which imprint themselves on the earth. I can study these cultural and artistic traditions with a sense of intellectual piety. I am supposed to be a scholar. And perhaps a part of the path to becoming a scholar is an intellectual curiosity and ability to appreciate and adapt to cultural differences. When I write, I straddle these two worlds. The round one and the flat one.

I have been very curious about the Flat Earth Society. I have even been tempted to join in order to understand their belief system. It is certainly an interesting problem. Or am I perhaps in danger of thinking too deeply about this?

But yet, are we not in danger of thinking too much about the globe itself? In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke reflects on the solitary lives of human beings living together in a large city. In the book, Malte relates a story about his neighbor Nikolai Kusmitsch whose mind becomes preoccupied with charting out the span of his own life, and with his place in it. These

visions of totality become increasingly maddening until his neighbor becomes attentive to the movement of the earth itself.

Under his very feet there was something like a movement, not just one but several strange movements interlocking confusedly. He was rigid with terror: could it be the earth? Certainly, it was the earth. Yes of course it moved. He'd heard about it at school, but the topic had been dealt with rather cursorily and later it had been readily hushed up as it wasn't considered suitable for discussion. But now that he'd grown more sensitive he could even feel it. Did the others feel it? Possibly, but they gave no indication of it. Perhaps, being sailors, they didn't mind. Of all people Nikolai Kusmitsch was somewhat sensitive on this point, he avoided even the trams. He staggered about in his room as if he were on deck and needed to hold on right and left. Unfortunately he recalled something else about the tilt of the earth's axis. No, he couldn't bear all these movements. He felt ill. Lie down and rest he'd read somewhere. And since then Nikolai Kusmitsch had been lying down. He lay and kept his eyes closed. There were times, during the less choppy days, so to speak, when it was quite bearable. And then to help him he had thought up this procedure in regard to poems. It was unbelievable how much it did help him. To recite a poem slowly, maintaining a consistent stress on the end-rhyme, one produced, to a certain extent, a kind of stability that was visible and gave one inner understanding. By a happy chance he knew all the poems. But he had always been especially interested in literature. I was assured by the student who had known him a long time that he didn't complain about his situation. Only, in the course of time an exaggerated admiration had developed in him for those who, like the student, walked around and endured the motion of the earth.²

This is my danger as well. As a scholar I have been tempted to wrap my arms around the entire globe and to focus my vision on the complete trajectory of human history, and tempted to look out into the infinite cosmos. But at other times I see this as a very crude conceit. How can I look into the distance when I cannot see what is closest to me? Is it time to lie down and recite a poem? Or to follow resolution of Rilke:

Following this experience, I resolved in similar cases to go straight for the facts. I realized how simple and easy they were as opposed to suppositions. As if I hadn't known that all our insights are entered up later, settling our account, no more than that.³

² Rainier Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. trans. Michael Hulse. Penguin Classics, 2009, entry 49

³ Ibid, entry 49

Are all of our musings merely an unfolding of things, our minor place in the surrounding chaos? Will we be remembered for these empty shells and husks? The result of our minor lives on the level patches of the earth looking out towards its mildly sloping horizons.

Spherology

The philosopher Peter Sloderdijk's major philosophical project was called *Spheres*. It was written in three volumes: *Bubbles*, *Globes*, and *Foams*. It was an investigation in how the image of the world and the human subject has been historically constructed in relation to the earth, and its trajectory into the future. In a way it is a project which gains its inspiration from Heidegger's essay "The Age of the World Picture." In that essay, Heidegger was concerned about the uprooting of the human being from the earth based upon its increasing reduction to mere representation. Sloderdijk is providing a history of this process of representation. While to summarize this vast project would be a daunting task, allow me to focus on his vision of globe formation before I suggest a blind-spot.

In the first chapter of his book *In the World Interior of Capital* – an extension of the Spheres project – he summarized the emergence of the human imagination of the globe with the history of its domination.

World history was the working-out of the earth as a bearer of cultures and ecstasies; its political character was a triumphant one-sidedness of expansive European nations; its logical style is the indifferent view of all things in terms of homogeneous space, homogeneous time and homogeneous value; its operative mode is compaction; its economic result is the establishment of the world system; its energetic basis is the still copiously available fossil fuels; its primary aesthetic gestures are the hysterical expression of emotion and the cult of explosion; its psychosocial result is the coercion to become cognizant of distant misery; its vital chance is the possibility to compare the sources of happiness and the strategies of risk management interculturally; its moral crux is the transition of the ethos of conquest to the ethos of letting oneself be tamed by the conquered; its civilizatory tendency ex-

presses itself in a dense complex of reliefs, assurances and guarantees of comfort; its anthropological challenge is the mass production of 'last human beings'; its philosophical consequence is the opportunity to see the one world rise in countless brains.⁴

So in this book he tries to trace this development. Beginning with the Greeks who see the earth's light tainted by darkness, to the modern age where the logic of exploration transforms the image of the earth into a unified globe.

The world-navigators, cartographers, conquistadors, world traders, even the Christian missionaries and their following of aid workers who exported goodwill and tourists who spent money on experiences at remote locations - they all behaved as if they had understood that, after the destruction of heaven, it was the earth itself that had to take over its function as the last vault. The physically real earth, as an irregularly layered, chaotically folded storm-eroded body, now had to be circumnavigated and quantified. Thus the new image of the earth, the terrestrial globe, rose to become the central icon of the modern world-picture.⁵

But this poses a particular problem for cultural identity.

Since they circumnavigated the planet, however, the wandering star that carries flora, fauna and culture, an abyss has opened up above them; when they look up they peer through it into a fathomless outside. A second abyss opens up in the foreign cultures that, after the ethnological enlightenment, demonstrate to everyone that practically everything can be different elsewhere. What we took to be the eternal order of things is no more than a local context of immanence that carries us - leave it, and you will see that there are quite differently built rafts of order floating on the chaos. The two abysses, the cosmological and the ethnological confront the observers with the fortuity of their existence and thusness. Together, they make it clear that the immunological catastrophe of the Modern Age is not the 'loss of the center', but rather the loss of the periphery.⁶

We lose the protective sphere of the heavens which traditionally immunized a culture and maintained its identity. And this is quite important, that we realize that our culture is one among

⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*. trans. Wieland Hobain. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2014, 14

⁵ Ibid, 21

⁶ Ibid, 29

others floating on a limitless chaos. A culture is faced with the crisis that its place is not guaranteed by a stable God in the heavens. This is repetition of Nietzsche's idea of the death of God, but now from a global cultural perspective.

And what happens to the human being in this crisis? He alludes to this in the second volume of *Spheres* entitled *Globes*. Here he considers the problem that informs his whole examination of history; in the face of this erosion of culture through globalization, how to maintain something of the Human. Human beings *immunize* themselves from various threats of injury and death. Yet there must be some sort of inner augmentation as well.

These vertical tensions show that humans in the "age of the world picture" cannot be helped through integration into a spatial vessel, no matter how well-insulated. Thus all holistic arguments are condemned to helplessness because humans do not simply wish to be preserved in a wholeness container a metaphysical *continens* ringlet also to encounter in living inner experience the countercentric Great Other that makes them possible through intimate augmentation. Certainly, the life of societies in the expanded reality spaces of the imperial age cannot survive without effective immunizations and fortified borders; as far as the microspheric integrity of humans is concerned, however, it can only be achieved through harboring in sociopolitical and cosmic large-scale containers. Intimate psychogenic augmentation continues to be more important than shielding the soul field from the outside. Only this augmentation can ensure that the stay in a large-scale world does not end in bitter soullessness or bland surfing.⁷

The mechanisms of this "intimate psychogenic augmentation" is something which he seems to struggle with. Near the end of the work he writes:

Weakening or dissolving the links between places and selves can allow us to see the two extreme positions that reveal the structure of the social field with almost experimental clarity: a self without a place and a place without a self.⁸

⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres II*, trans Weiland Hobain. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2014, 402

⁸ Ibid, 953

With the loss of the cultural and religious anchoring, the subject becomes individualized to such an extent that it become engaged merely in self-immunization though developing associations with other individuals. This is developed in the final volume of *Spheres* entitled *Foam*.

But in this reading from Heidegger to Sloterdijk, the vast trajectory seems to be mapped out. And like Benjamin's angel of history, history's forward momentum cannot be redirected. But what if this momentum of history is not absolute? What if there are minor orientations towards the heavens and the earth that persist. They persist because they are embedded in various kinds of syncretism and eclecticism which are unnoticed from a global perspective? Perhaps we need not look at the whole. Perhaps this would be too blinding. But Sloterdijk overlooks this because he believes he can chart the global history of the sacred, the history of the death of God.

There are essentially two ways to maintain the connection between humans and God in the classical metaphysical interpretation of space: either humans must ascend into the open from their central dungeon on an intelligible ladder connecting them to the world of the living, or God must descend to them – presumably using the same ladder, whether through signs and wonders or by assuming a bodily form. (G, 402)

In his essay "You Must Change Your Life" he denies that religion is making a comeback. A religion or tradition is no different than a secular construction of immunization. This equivocation leads him to develop a philosophy of anthropotechnics. It is a philosophy where in the future (what is called the Anthropocene) we will construct our own spheres to live within.

This denial of culture and religion is rationalized through the momentum of universalism and secularism. And the evolution of this universalism seems to be based to a degree on this history of external atrocity. But what if the idea of "God" is present both as a motivation for reason itself and also the order to which reason is directed? You can see here that the very impetus behind

reason must be anchored to some sacred aspect of the earth in the form of the *qibla* toward the *kaaba*, in the form of sacred landmarks, and the constructed pillars, obelisks, chedis and temples.

So we can suggest perhaps that Sloterdijk is moving too quickly. One significant oversight is that in his history of globe formation and map-making, he jumps from the Greeks to the Modern age, and he ignores the thinkers who actually pioneered map-making. These cultures are treated as merely the minor victims of global conquest. We are even given a clue to his blindness:

On his first voyage to India in 1497, after looting an Arab merchant vessel with over two hundred pilgrims to Mecca on board, including women and children, Vasco da Gama had it burned and sunk for no particular reason - the prelude to a 'world history' of external atrocities.⁹

That is, the globe formation and its imprint on the imagination which Sloterdijk considers from the European perspective is limited. It is always an outward movement, accompanied by its "external atrocities" and it ignores a much deeper knowledge of the globe which is constructed from a particular culture and place. What the global imagination of conquest overlooks is the cultural diversity of place and territory. And the power of local cultures to construct the globe from its various positions.

Ferdinand Magellan reached the end of his world when he misunderstood the structure of local Visayan authority in what is now the Philippines. In his campaign to assert control over the Visayan region he believed he could enlist one local ruler over the others, not realizing that *datus* possessed a different structure of authority than European kings. William Henry Scott writes:

Magellan met three chiefs called "*rajah*"—Awi of Butuan, Kolambu of Limasawa, and Humabon of Cebu—a title Spaniards always translated as *king*, though Magellan learned too late that they had neither kingdoms nor power over other *datus*.¹⁰

⁹ Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 110-111

¹⁰ William Henry Scott. *Barangay: Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 128

This miscalculation led to Magellan's defeat by Lapulapu. He didn't realize that the datu did not control territory but merely trade. Scott writes:

These datu were part of what social anthropologists call a chiefdom—a loose federation of chiefs bound by loose ties of personal allegiance to a senior among them. The head of such a chiefdom exercised authority over his supporting chiefs, but not over their subjects or territory, and his primacy stemmed from his control of local or foreign trade, and the ability to redistribute luxury goods desired by the others.¹¹

Scott points out that while some datu were autocratic, others were not. And this political structure provided a much freer society where political order is much more liminal and localized.¹² But the logic of global conquest depends upon the belief and imposition of a single order, or a global political order of the type writers like Francis Fukayama promote.

Of course we are the descendants of this misunderstanding. Sloterdijk's idea of a global imagination is based upon this logic of conquest and the imposition of order, not only on territory but also on the imagination itself. And today, the architects of this global order understand the control of the imagination well. Any resistance to global universalism is vilified as authoritarianism, fascism, nationalism, racism or religious fundamentalism.

¹¹ Scott, *Barangay: Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society*, 129

¹² *Ibid*, 129. Scott writes:

A datu's authority arose from his lineage, but his power depended upon his wealth, the number of his slaves and subjects, and his reputation for physical prowess. Some were therefore autocratic and oppressive: a courageous, frightening datu was called *pamalpagan* from *palpag*, split and flattened bamboo. Others were not, those whose subjects were followers rather than vassals — “very free and unrestricted,” as Juan Martinez said.

So let us consider instead a localized mechanism of globe formation and global imagination. One that still maintains religious and cultural orientations while understanding one's place in the overarching unity of the globe.

Calculated Deviations

Long before Vasco da Gama and Magellan were convincing himself that the world was round by pillaging it, Al-Bīrūnī calculated its circumference. This was based on religious needs coupled with a rigorous use of reason.

Earlier al-Kwarizmi wrote the “Zij al-Sindh” in 830 CE. This marked the development of astronomy for the purpose of religion. Astrology was being discarded as the heavens were seen to be orderly and accessible to human reason and calculation. The earth and heavens were considered to be ordered by God, and so the use of reason was in many ways, a kind of responsibility. To see the outward cosmos is also to find the cosmos within. Johnathan Lyons writes in his book *The House of Wisdom*.

A number of verses in the Koran refer to the order inherent in God's universe and to man's capacity to recognize and exploit this order for his own need, such as keeping time: “He [God] it is who appointed the sun a splendor and the moon a light and measured for her stage, that you might know the number of the years, and the reckoning [of time] ... He details the revelations for people who have knowledge” (10:6). Elsewhere, the Holy Book advocates the use of elements of God's creation for orientation amid the featureless deserts and navigation across the vast oceans: “He has appointed the night for stillness, and the sun and the moon for reckoning ... And He it is Who has set for you the stars that you may guide your course by them amid the darkness of the land and the sea.” (6:97-98)¹³

The determination of the *qibla* involved the use of trigonometry which evolved into the problem of spherical astronomy. Al-Bīrūnī wrote “The Determination of the Coordinate of Locations and

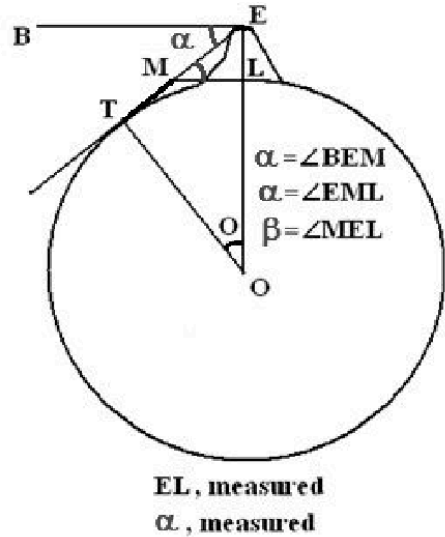
¹³ Johnathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009, 81-82

for Correctly Ascertaining the Distances Between Places”, has the goal to find the *qibla* at Ghazni. In this way he pioneered map-making.

But this is quite different than the insight of Sloterdijk. For Al-Bīrūnī, the map does not “absorb the land,” and the image of the globe does not “make real extension disappear.” Here, the motions of the heaven and the places to be navigated on earth are sacred. The sacred places and markers of the earth are coordinated with the sacred order of the cosmos. The map brings these two planes together and gives place to the human observer between. The map coordinates our sacred activities on the earth.

I don’t want to diminish what Sloterdijk is trying to do. I think it is very important. But what I am trying to present here was originally presented at a conference for a predominantly Muslim audience. For them *this* history is central. And now in presenting this essay for a wider audience, it represents perhaps a counter-current within global history, a tradition which is overlooked from a Western perspective. One in which reason and religion are closely interwoven. Where the global is projected out from the local, and the local is shaped by the imagination of the global. These aberrations point to a possibility which Sloterdijk seems to be hoping for but whose persistence around the globe he overlooks. Outside of the West, redemption is practiced over and over through many traditions. It persists because of strange syncretism which do not obey the rushing rivers of global history. The globe is recreated again and again but from minor positions.

Around the year 1020 CE while at Nanda in modern Pakistan, Al-Bīrūnī made his most famous calculation, the circumference of the earth.



$$EL = EM \sin \alpha$$

$$LM = EM \sin \beta$$

$$LM \cdot \sin \alpha = EL \cdot \sin \beta$$

$$LM = EL \cdot (\sin \beta / \sin \alpha)$$

EM from
Pythagoras's theorem

MT = LM, because tangent to
the circle from point M

$$ET = MT + EM = LM + EM$$

$$\sin O = \sin (180^\circ - 90^\circ - \beta)$$

$$OT \cdot \sin O = ET \cdot \sin \beta$$

$$OT = ET \cdot (\sin \beta / \sin O) = ET \cdot \tan \beta$$

Calculation of circumference of the Globe¹⁴

His calculation was made through leveling. He measured the height of a mountain by leveling from ground level, and then, from the top of the mountain, he calculated the deviation of the horizon from the right triangle. We might say that he saw the globe by calculating a deviation in his local experience, a calculated consideration of difference.

What is interesting are the gaps and deviations in al Biruni. He develops his idea of spherical geometry based upon the calculation of the *qibla*, and yet he maintains an independence of reason and religion. His debates with Ibn Sina and al-Sijzi demonstrate this as well.¹⁵

¹⁴ Amelia Carolina Sparavigna. "Al-Biruni and the Mathematical Geography." (2014). *Semantic Scholar*, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Al-Biruni-and-the-Mathematical-Geography-Sparavigna/69d52a1b557b595e44c195b02b532a14ca8096e1>, accessed 26 August 2020.

¹⁵ Al-Bīrūnī was also confronted with a heliocentric model of the world proposed by al-Sijzi. Jim al-Khalili, describes this in his book *Pathfinders: The Golden Age of Arabic Science*.

Al-Biruni was well aware of this work and even collaborated with al-Sijzi, and so, rather than dismiss it out of hand in favour of geocentrism, he was initially neutral on the matter. He famously stated that all astronomical data could be explained just as well by supposing that the earth turns daily on its axis and revolves annually around the sun as by assuming that it was stationary. So, while al-Biruni had philosophical issues with heliocentrism, he was still brilliant

Notice that he also performed the same thing for history. In his *Chronology of the Ancient Nations*, in 1000 CE, he was concerned with coordinating the calendars and the measurement of time between various cultures and historical periods. He introduces his project as follows:

A learned man once asked me regarding the eras used by different nations, and regarding the difference of their roots, i.e. the epochs where they begin, and of their branches, i.e. the months and years, on which they are based; further regarding the causes which led to such difference, and the famous festivals and commemoration-days for certain times and events, and regarding whatever else one nation practices differently from another... The best and nearest way leading to that, regarding which I have been asked for information, is the knowledge of the history and tradition of former nations and generation, because the greatest part of it consists of matters, which have come down from them, and of remains of their customs and institutes. And this object cannot be obtained by way of ratiocination with philosophical notions, or of inductions based upon the observations of our sense, but solely by adopting the information of those who have a written tradition, and of the members of the different religions, of the adherents of the different doctrines and religious sect, by whom the institutes in question are used, and by making their opinions a basis, on which afterwards to build up a system; besides, we must compare their traditions and opinions among themselves, when we try to establish our system.¹⁶

He sees his task as one of clarifying error and recognizes that there are “lies mixed with all historical records and traditions.”

And those lies do not all on the face of it appear to be impossibilities, so that they might be easily distinguished and eliminated. However, that which is within the limits of possibility, has been treated as true, as long as other evidence did not prove it to be false... The matter standing thus, it is our duty to proceed from what is near to the more distant, from what is known to that which is less known, to gather the traditions from those who have reported them, to correct them as much as possible, and to leave the rest as it is, in order to make

enough to appreciate, like Ibn al-Haytham, that one can only accept a scientific theory based on empirical evidence. And since the data could not discriminate between heliocentrism and geocentrism, he was in no position to decide. (Jim al-Khalili, *Pathfinders: The Golden Age of Arabic Science*. New York: Penguin Books, 2010., 183)

¹⁶ Abū Rayḥān Al-Bīrūnī. *The Chronology of Ancient Nations: An English Version of the Arabic Text of the Athar-ul-Bakiya of Albiruni, or “Vestiges of the Past.”* trans. Edward Sachau. London: William H. Allen and Co., 1879. retrieved from: http://www.astrologiamedieval.com/tabelas/Al-Biruni_The_Chronology_of_Ancient_Nations.pdf, accessed 25 August 2020p. 2 p. 5

our work help him, who seeks truth and loves wisdom, in making independent researches on other subject, and guide him to find out that which was denied to us, whilst we were working at this subject, by the will of God, and with his help.¹⁷

Here there is a coordination, or navigation between the history of the cultures of the earth and the movement of the heavens which can be rationally calculated.¹⁸ This is the earliest mapping of cultural history based upon astronomical observation and calculation. S. Frederick Starr claims that Al-Bīrūnī created history as a rigorous discipline. It is rigorous yet, the various cultural mythologies are left respectfully intact.

Al-Bīrūnī's work shows both a centrifugal force and a centripetal force connected to knowledge and wisdom. We work outward from what we know to what we do not know. And our working outward is a process which places ourselves. We calculate the *qibla* towards the *kaaba*, so we know the proper orientation towards the sacred. We know other religions and cultures so we can understand our own. We are not merely trapped within a sphere seeking to expand our knowledge in an act of immunization.

If we use this as a model for the global then we can see the possibility that culture is not eroded through a shared imagination of the global, but the various cultural imaginations can coexist from various perspectives. Cultural identity is not undermined by chaos and the loss of periphery.

¹⁷ Al-Bīrūnī, *Chronology*, p. 4 p. 5

¹⁸ Consider for example the observation of S. Frederick Starr who writes:

Once he had rejected the pretensions to chronological accuracy of all religions and national mythologies, on what possible basis could Biruni ground historical event? On this core point he was absolutely clear: history must be based on reason, which in this case means the truths of astronomy. Without a rational system of counting time, chronology cannot exist, and without chronology there can be no rational understanding of the past. (Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerline*. Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013., 278)

On the Neighbor

Certainly we readers of journal articles form a global community. We identify ourselves and each other as scholars even though we inhabit various traditions, and religions. I assume we are all still fairly rooted in some place on the globe even as we consider our intellects to be cosmopolitan. We still live in on a globe where there are many cultural and religious identities in dialogue and sometimes in strife. Strife is very real and so to bring this essay to completion, I will consider the role of strife.

Like Sloterdijk, Carl Schmitt was also interested in the history of the earth and the way it shapes our ideas and values. His version of the history of the globe is based more upon the strife between *land* and *sea*. Land and sea are natural properties of the earth.¹⁹ And yet these fundamental properties shape the development of human history. As we saw with de Gama and Magellan, the development of land and sea warfare has shaped our ideas of law and property, of culture, religion, politics and even our visions of the future. Schmitt deals with this in detail in his famous work *The*

¹⁹ In Schmitt's "Dialogue on New Space," a historian debates with a scientist the significance of the ancient elements of Earth, Water and Air, for contemporary global politics. Altman, the historian who represents Schmitt's view argues that the opposition of Sea and Land is important for the understanding of human history and the stakes involved.

When a world-historical opposition approaches its climax, then on both sides all material forces, all forces of soul, and all intellectual forces are brought to bear in the conflict to the greatest extreme. Then the battle extends across the whole environment of the participating powers. At this point, the elementary opposition between land and sea is itself brought into the confrontation. The war then appears as the war of the land against the sea and the war of the sea against the land, in other words: as a war of the elements against one another. You need only open your eyes and look at our own contemporary world situation. We live today under the pressure of a global tension, of an opposition of East and West. Manifestly, this contemporary opposition between East and West is simultaneously an opposition between land and sea.

Schmitt believed that by insisting on the perpetuation of the tension between land and sea he was following a Christian political theology. That is, he believed he was acting as a *katechon* as described by St. Paul. A *katechon* would be one who delays the apocalypse. I interpret this to mean that he saw the apocalypse was a final revelation preceded by struggle, and by maintaining a balance of powers, he was delaying the end and continuing the development of history.

Nomos of the Earth. *Nomos* would be the Greek word for law, but it also means appropriation, distribution, and production. It also has an additional meaning as the power of naming. That is all of our laws are based upon power. And power is related to the appropriation of the earth and the struggle between land and sea. Land and sea then have a deeper meaning, they represent the strife between place and displacement, between communalism and democracy, between tradition and liberalism. Between the local and the global.

Unlike Sloterdijk, Schmitt insists on maintaining the tension between land and sea. He holds back from the extremes of sphere formation which Sloterdijk entertains. For Schmitt, this convergence toward a unity, where all struggle between cultures and religions would cease, would also mean that all cultures and religions disappear. This would also be the disappearance of the human, since the human is defined as one who strives and struggles. Speaking against this universalism and against the complete global domination of the earth, Schmitt writes:

A widespread, purely technical manner of current thinking knows no other possibility, because, for it, the world has become so small that it can be overseen and managed easily. Given the effectiveness of modern technology, the complete unity of the world appears to be a foregone conclusion. But no matter how effective modern technical means may be, they can destroy completely neither the nature of man nor the power of land and sea without simultaneously destroying themselves.²⁰

This is quite different than Sloterdijk's reading of sphere creation. There, human beings merely survive through a creative process of self-immunization. But for Schmitt, they determine their self-meaning through struggle.

But where in the world does this leave us? Perhaps like Rilke's Malte we too can resolve to stick with what can be determined, to the local. In the spinning chaos of the globe and the

²⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth: in the International Law of the Jus publicum Europaeum*. trans. G. L. Ulmen. New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2006, 344-345

rushing of time, it is better to focus on the minor things. And yet the spinning chaos of the globe has infiltrated many aspects of the local and has distorted our vision and directing our reflections away from our particular place.

It seems as though we cannot *completely* follow either Schmitt nor Sloterdijk. We cannot follow Schmitt because he is not very neighborly. He is intolerant of any kind of pluralism. He recognizes the importance of tensions between traditions of land and sea, yet they will always continue to be worked out through hostility. Our various metaphysical and religious world-views will always be an existential threat to one another.

We cannot follow Sloterdijk completely because we recognize the human beings need to be rooted in some cultural or religious tradition. Culture formation is not as simple as sphere formation. From this rootedness they need to reach for something beyond themselves. Sloterdijk's idea of sphere formation always works outward and is tainted by the history of conquest.

We however need to consider counter-movements which reach back, and genuine religious transcendence which reaches beyond. Seyyed Hossein Nasr drew from Sufism and al-Biruni's tradition to develop the idea of *Scientia Sacra* or sacred science. This has a similar intention yet becomes problematic based upon his tendency towards perennial philosophy. It is not a matter of connecting all traditions within a single ontology, but of giving each a space to project their own ontologies.

And we have not quite answered why culture and tradition is still important. Doesn't the insistence on culture invite the dangers of fascism and reactionary politics? Isn't it better to progress to a universal appreciation of the rights and security of the human being? Culture and tradition are important because cultural and religious constructs emerge based upon our connection to

the earth or a connection to place. And while they are imaginary constructs – what Walter Lippmann would call “fictions” or what Benedict Anderson would call "imagined communities" – they possess their own rigor and development.²¹ Much of this development involves the process of absorbing other cultures or distinguishing themselves from other cultures. It is these conflicts and tensions which make thinking something more than so many rafts on a sea of chaos, and make them into something meaningful which gives direction and purpose to human life.

A second problem today is that the alternative to traditionalism is also becoming dangerous. While fundamentalist religion has always been used to enlist proxy armies to fight in wars of conquest, today, in this information age, liberalism has also been weaponized. Liberalism has become a mechanism of conquest. But for liberalism to be meaningful it must take root in each tradition and it must proceed through a balanced and local struggle with the more traditional elements. Only in this way can history proceed in a way that preserves something human, or in other words, preserves the authentic striving for ideals. What passes itself for human rights is merely the integration of the human into a system of control. And this ultimately is aimed at the vanishing point of the human being.

Investigating globe formation in local cultures provides a model which resists the dangers of a unified overarching global imagination. It provides a model against which to measure the dangers which accompany the erosion of culture, tradition and religion in the information age. It is not a mere fragmentation of the globe, but an idea of globe-formation and individual formation which is projected from many points of origin, from many mountain peaks. It is a model of the globe not based upon conquest but on tangents.

²¹ In fact, Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" has been enlisted by globalists to discredit smaller nation states who attempt to maintain their sovereignty.

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