



Islam Nusantara: Jurnal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture, 03 (1), 2022: 1-20
E-ISSN: 2722-8975
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.v3i1.278>

Theology of Culture in Muslim Southeast Asia: Engaging Contemporary Challenges

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Article history: Received: November 20, 2021; Accepted January 01, 2022;
Published: January 31, 2022

Abstract

Theology of culture is essentially multi-disciplinary in its foundation where it should be able to appropriate discursive theology, sociology, philosophy, history, psychology etc. Theology of culture cannot be simply an exercise of appropriating the scriptural injunctions. In the history of the dissemination of Islam in this part of this world, the cultural role is instrumental in the process of Islamisation. Understanding the religious life and discourse in this region will not be completed if the realm and significance of culture is being relegated. It is imperative for Muslims in Southeast Asia to develop theology of culture as part of their intellectual and religious discourse, nourishing them with the notion of dialogue, criticality and reconstruction. In more specific term, the need to garner the interest on culture is important where student of religion could engage, like other students of culture, by giving critical religious perspectives, on a domain that affect their life and humanity as a whole. Our cultural and intellectual responses to the predicaments of our time are urgently needed, especially when the political responses always beset by more problems and confusion. To attempt an alternative approach must be recognised and made available. Herein lies the importance of a theology of culture.

Keywords:

Culture, Intellectual, Religious discourse, Southeast Asia, Theology



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Abstrak

Teologi budaya pada dasarnya multi-disiplin dalam fondasinya di mana ia harus dapat menyesuaikan teologi diskursif, sosiologi, filsafat, sejarah, psikologi, dan lain sebagainya. Teologi budaya tidak bisa sekadar latihan untuk menyesuaikan perintah-perintah kitab suci. Dalam sejarah penyebaran Islam di belahan dunia ini, peran budaya sangat penting dalam proses Islamisasi. Memahami kehidupan dan wacana keagamaan di wilayah ini tidak akan lengkap jika ranah dan signifikansi budaya terdegradasi. Sangat penting bagi umat Islam di Asia Tenggara untuk mengembangkan teologi budaya sebagai bagian dari wacana intelektual dan keagamaan mereka, menyuburkannya dengan gagasan dialogis, kekritisian dan rekonstruksi. Dalam istilah yang lebih spesifik, kebutuhan untuk menumbuhkan minat terhadap budaya menjadi penting di mana para mahasiswa yang belajar agama dapat terlibat, dengan memberikan perspektif keagamaan yang kritis, pada domain yang mempengaruhi kehidupan dan kemanusiaan mereka secara keseluruhan. Respons budaya dan intelektual kita terhadap kesulitan zaman kita sangat dibutuhkan, terutama ketika respons politik selalu dilanda lebih banyak masalah dan kebingungan. Upaya untuk menyajikan pendekatan alternatif harus dikenali dan tersedia. Di sinilah letak pentingnya sebuah teologi kebudayaan.

Kata Kunci:

Asia Tenggara, Budaya, Diskursus keagamaan, Intelektual, Teologi

Introduction

“He who can read the style of a culture can discover its ultimate concern, its religious substance.”

Paul Tillich

Culture or *kebudayaan* is one of the most popular and used words in the Malay-Indonesian world, although this concept is understood and appreciated in various ways. In history, the dissemination of Islam in this part of the world has appropriated the existing cultural traditions of the people. Students of religion cannot afford to ignore the role of culture in the dissemination and entrenchment of religion, which in the process enriches the culture, as well as intensifying the meaning of religion itself to the adherents. The meaning of culture is invariably a contested site, where various strands of thought projected their cultural paradigm as the most legitimate and authentic

one against all others. Culture gives meaning to life, it defines and demarcates our identity as a community belonging to a common ancestry, language and customary practices. We often see it as belonging to the realm of traditional custom, art, folk music and dance, and the like. It is also not uncommon when culture is understood as referring to traditional customary practices, (*adat istiadat*) or traditional practices inherited from the past (*warisan budaya*). In other words, the term *culture* is associated mainly with the aesthetic dimension of human creation and experiences. Such definition is only partly correct, as the term culture definitely encompasses more than that.

Several Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia, such as Moeslim Abdurrahman, Abdul Munir Mul Khan and Kuntowijoyo have also deliberated on the subject of culture in relation to religion, with various concerns, approaches and appeals, some relating it to development, history, politics, philosophy, civilization, multiculturalism, community empowerment, and religion. Actually it is interesting to survey various ideas on culture which have been put forward by our intellectuals and cultural figures as it could suggest the extent of which the scope, concerns, and priorities on culture are deliberated, alongside the neglect, silence and ambivalence in such deliberation. The study of culture, often historical and encyclopaedic type of survey and appreciation, while some with sociological and anthropological focus, operated in some institutes of higher learning. Hence an important question that we can ask: To what extent that we have pay serious attention in our understanding of the cultural dynamics that takes place in society; are there serious engagement on cultural issues? Have the cultural domains itself being utilised creatively as part of our discursive site or discursive medium?

Historian like Christopher Dawson would see culture as the form of society, while culture itself cannot be separated from religion. He stressed it firmly “the society without culture is a formless society – a crowd or a collection of individuals brought together by the needs of the moment - while the stronger a culture is, the more completely does it inform and transform the diverse human material of which it is composed” (Dawson, 1948). A developed culture is marked by its integral link with religion, or that the latter form the very basis of it. Dawson adds, “a culture is a spiritual community which owes its unity to common beliefs and common ways of thought far more than to any uniformity of physical type” (Dawson, 1948). and that “the relation between religion and culture is always a two-sided one. The way of life influences the approach to religion, and the religious attitude influences the way of life” (Dawson, 1948). Similarly, Johann Huizinga recognised the fact that “culture must have its ultimate aim in the metaphysical or it will cease to be culture” (Huizinga, 1936). The fundamentals of culture to him should constitute the following: (a) material and spiritual values in balance; (b) the

presence of a striving element, with a collective ideal as an aim; (c) the control over nature where the moral, spiritual and material dimension of life improves over time (Huizinga, 1936).

Such recognition and affirmation that cultural dimensions constitutes the metaphysical and spiritual elements should remind us of avoiding the simplification that culture is necessarily belonging to material and worldly affairs. As such, it is no surprise when students of religion perceive culture as beyond their concern or interest, unless they are committed to embark on what is called *dakwah kultural*, that is, embarking on missiology through cultural instruments. Such concern, although legitimate, cannot be the mainstay of defining culture within the realm of religious studies.

The centrality of culture in our life, including our religious life cannot be seen as two distinct spheres. Often we tend to see culture as belonging to the realms of the profane, secular and human creation, whereas religion as the sacred, holy and divine in origin. Such dichotomous classification is not without problems and limitations. While conceptually we can create a neat separation between the two, in reality, it is impossible, nor is it useful to do so (Abdurrahman, 2003).

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach in the form of a literature-based inquiry. The selection of this approach is grounded in the study's focus on conceptual and reflective analysis of cultural theology within Muslim societies in Southeast Asia, particularly in responding to socio-cultural challenges in the contemporary era. The data for this study are drawn from a range of relevant primary and secondary literature, including both classical and contemporary works in the fields of cultural studies, sociology of religion, theology, and the intellectual traditions of Southeast Asian Muslim scholars.

Data were collected through a systematic search and careful selection of academic texts, including books, scholarly journal articles, and curated writings by key thinkers that address the relationship between religion and culture. The collected data were analyzed using a descriptive–interpretive method that emphasizes an understanding of meaning, historical context, and the conceptual frameworks underlying ideas of cultural theology.

The analysis was conducted through critical reading in order to identify major themes, discursive dynamics, and key arguments. These materials were interpreted contextually to formulate a framework of cultural theology that is relevant to the socio-cultural realities of Muslims in Southeast Asia. Through this approach, the study seeks to present a synthesis of thought that is critical, reflective, and constructive.

Result and Discussion

The Realms and Functions of Culture

Culture in its broadest term refers to the way of life, norms and practices of the people that shares common historical experience in a particular place. Specifically, culture refers to ideals, norms and practices in the art, literature, performance (theatre and dance). As culture evolved over time, culture is also subjected to the dominant ideology of the time. In more concrete terms, with the rise of nation states, policies and planning are enacted to shape culture especially in line with progress and national/ethnic identity.

Culture generally functions in three domains. First as values, norms and worldview, that gives us a certain orientation in conducting our daily life, and the feeling of attachment to the community that we are part of it. Second, as identity marker which points us to belonging to a group of people, community or nation who share common history, ancestry, and destiny. It manifest in the realm of our custom, traditional heritage, art, language, literature, performances and the like. This is also referred to as ethnic culture that has evolved over a period of time. Third, as sources for our liberative affiliation, creativity and criticality, alongside wisdom. These cultural sources have proven as one of the effective means to resist cultural imperialism, cultural apathy and cultural fascism. Of the three functions, the first two is often emphasised, though often in a superficial populist form. Apparently, too much emphasis on maintaining and safeguarding the cultural identity implicitly manifests a kind of conservatism. Culture as a human creation, over time and space, aimed at securing and ordering lives and needs (Gasset, 1962).

It is also not uncommon that culture is understood as something created in the distant or in the recent past, which we inherited them, and there is a social expectation that we revere, cherish and preserve the culture as the heritage (*warisan*) and even fulfill the trust and responsibility (*amanah*), be it preserving (*memelihara*) it or practicing it (*melestarikan*). While such sentiment or perception of course has its purpose and relevance, it however has one neglected dimension-- culture as human creation-- which warrants us to see it as a process as well as it the task of creating it further, perfecting its contents and forms in the process. However, if culture is invariably seen as given, natural, and simply to be inherited, that very human creative dynamism will be undermined and destroyed.

Culture and Dominant Ideology

In the post-independence era, the State enacted cultural policies, with its overall impacts and effects varied. While politicians spoke enthusiastically on culture, we know what they would normally refer to. It is simply and invariably

cultural tradition that gave us a certain ethnic, linguistic and religious identity, which is part of our heritage, to be conserved and preserved. Amongst some members of the intellectual community, such a dominant idea on culture has been criticised, although the bulk of the people and those in power do not see the need to go beyond the conventional understanding. Indeed, it is not uncommon that we have the illusion that we are the inheritors of the past's cultural legacy, though in fact we have actually turned our culture into folklore artefacts, only to be preserved and exhibited. This notion of culture as the repository of heritage from the distant past meant that the dynamics of cultural creativity and self-renewal are relegated and ignored.

The interest over culture, of course, varies from one group to another. The nationalists within certain literary and cultural circles saw culture as the bastion for the political claim of indigeneity. Interestingly to some of them, they harbour the Orientalist's imagination that the indigenous culture is distinguished from the religious traditions, and even claim that the latter might be the source of cultural mutations or undermining the indigenous cultural authenticity. Amongst the Western-trained circles, the cultural tradition of the people has very little value or attraction for them as there are seen as only the repository of a backward historical past. Embracing the Western cultural modernity is deemed as the only way for the people to move forward, although this position is less intense today as compared to the earlier decades. At present, such aversion to cultural tradition comes from the fundamentalist groupings often with their puritanical fervour, that perceive culture as human creation that could undermine and make religious ideas and practices as less authentic. Their call for the separateness of "culture" and "religion" points to their assertion that religion is distinct, free from human elements, interests and interventions. To them religious identity is paramount and all that matters. Cultural elements and practices not ascribed to religious injunctions are considered as aberrant and sinful.

Interestingly too, the State which played an important role in the promotion of culture, views the latter as not only the emblematic unity for the people, but through its statutory agencies, and the tourism industry, has promoted culture as a product for tourism. This commodification of culture has reduced culture to exhibitivite and performative images, which end up with superficiality and the levelling down of cultural meaning and its significance, especially in the hands of cultural consortium whose passion of art is actually driven by commercial factor.

Culture as a contested site for power and order

In history, every ruling regime attempts to control the domain of culture as part of its vision for nation-building and even state-building. The cultural domain, especially where arts and literature are flourishing and attracting audiences and followers, there will always be the interest of the power establishment to control and monitor. Ideological strands that dominate a certain historical period invariably attempt to colour the very idea of culture of the time. In the Indonesian cultural history, the ascendancy of communists in politics saw the formation of *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* (LEKRA) in the 1950s. LEKRA members aimed to propagate the socialist realism as the cultural model for the people and nation, condemning all other cultural models as decadent and reactionary. In the case of Brunei Darussalam, since its independence in 1985, the promulgation of the state ideology of “Melayu Islam Beraja” has shaped and determined the scope and constitution of Brunei Malay culture, inasmuch as the people’s own association with it.

In Malaysia, during the era of the Islamisation policy started by Mahathir’s administration, the state machinery underwent an increasing Islamisation process, which soon spread and became entrenched in the cultural, educational and artistic realms. In recent decades, the once Malay-nationalist cultural monopoly was subjected to such Islamising trends, where the traditional Malay culture will only be given recognition if its un-Islamic elements are weeded out. In the past, such a concern was never an issue. In the context where there is still pervasiveness of ethno-politics, the claim of national culture becomes heavily contested amongst the major ethnic and cultural groups in Malaysia, primarily between Malays and non-Malays. But another realm, which seldom gets attention, is the competition of defining culture within the Malay society itself.

Chandra Muzaffar made an interesting discussion on the various competing definitions of what national culture should constitute. In the case of Malaysia, the national culture is conceptualised with the emphasis of Malay and Islam as the basis of Malaysian national culture. However, according to Chandra, there is a possibility of promoting a vision of national culture that is not an ethnic one. This subject on culture with ethnic identification is problematic when the cultural assertions and claims become embedded with supremacist racist and sectarian tones. This is again where the discourse of theology of culture cannot afford to ignore, and should be the part of its discursive concern. The problem of religious revivalism in the context of communal assertion and claims (Muzaffar, n.d.). Certainly, such contentious issues must be understood within the parameters of theology of culture.

Muslim Intellectuals' Discourse on Culture

In the realm of discourse and research, the interest in Islamic culture was actually pioneered by orientalist whose interest and concern cannot be divorced from their prejudice and colonial biases (Grunebaum and Gustave, 1995). Their encyclopedic approach of studying culture had some merits of its own, but was nevertheless beset by a certain framework that was often ahistorical and asociological. In the context of captive scholarship such study of culture persists. Over time, there are several Muslim intellectuals who have embarked on discussing culture in Muslim societies from several perspectives, ranging from descriptive historical survey (Pickthall, n.d.) to normative affirmation (Latiff, 1977), sociological studies (Tibi, 2005), as well those embarking critique and the enjoinder for reform (Djait, 2005).

Leading Indonesian Muslim intellectuals have demonstrated the general and specific interest on culture and theology of culture. Prominent Indonesian intellectuals like Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, Mohamed Natsir, Soedjatmoko, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdul Rahman Wahid. Decades earlier, scholars like Gazalba (1977), Anshari (1979), Ismail (1976), and Audah (1999) were amongst the leading figures deliberating on the relation between religion (Islam) and culture, including the polemics amongst them on cultural issues. Post-*reformasi* era, saw academics (Sarumpaet, et. al., 2013; Noerhadi, 2013), cultural critics (Sobary, 1996) and those in religious discourse take a renewed interest (Asy'arie, 1999). Amongst certain Muhammadiyah circles, there were calls for serious rethinking of Muhammadiyah's position on culture, especially when the group for a long time had taken a puritanical anti-cultural stance (Hasyim, 2000; Soeratno et.al., 2009; Riza ul-Haq, 2004).

It is in this context that several Muslim scholars and writers took pains to explain the dynamics relationship between culture and religion in the Malay-Indonesian societies, although their voice is in the minority and rarely put forth in the public. The opinion of Asy'arie is useful, as it points to the need of correcting the aversion amongst some religious circles on embracing the local cultures and arts, which are deemed as antithesis to religious command (Asy'arie, 1999).

Asy'arie reiterates his points that the traditional cultural (performative) repertoires, instead of being seen as anathema to religion, could furnish spiritual depth for our religious experience:

“Dalam hubungan ini, tradisi dan seni budaya lokal yang bernuansa keagamaan, seperti wayang, macapatan, shalawatan dan musik-musik sufi, pada dasarnya dapat menjadi tiang penyangga dan pemelihara semangat kerohanian masyarakat, kerana melalui pengalaman estetik

spiritual itu, akan dapat melahirkan religiusitas yang amat dalam, yang pada gilirannya akan dapat memberikan andil yang sangat besar untuk memecahkan masalah yang muncul dari adanya gangguan keseimbangan sosial, ekonomi, politik, budaya dalam kehidupan masyarakat, terutama dalam menghadapi arus perubahan dan transformasi sosial yang berjalan sangat cepat dan kompleks” (Asy’arie, 1999).

Asy’arie (1999) calls for the synergy of religious scholars, artists and cultural figures, through creating institutions and infrastructures. Speaking in the context of Muhammadiyah’s fraternity, such synergy could be made possible in Muhammadiyah’s centres of higher learning, especially with the opening of faculty of arts and culture. Such an initiative is vital for the organisation and its members so as to avoid “*pemiskinan kultural*.” He was envisioning a post-puritan phase where there is a dialectical process between Islam and the local culture. However he acknowledged that this is no easy challenge.

In fact Musa goes so far to claim that in a society bereft of culture and arts, the social cultural condition becomes rigid with a propensity to see the phenomena of life as simplistic black and white, ‘we’ versus ‘us’, and all could be reduced by a legalistic injunction of “halal” and “haram.” The appropriation of traditional cultural arts, in the case of Indonesia, is imperative as its aesthetic dimension posits a healing function in the midst of cultural anxieties, animosities and violence.

One notable feature that could be observed is the fact that some conservative circles in Muslim society, see the local culture as bereft of Islamic teachings, and therefore need to be abandoned or avoided. Cultural performances are deemed as immoral as it allows for mix-gender performers and audience members. It is in this social milieu where the discussion on culture is always viewed from a standpoint of a legalistic injunction that is whether it is permissible in Islam and otherwise. A case in point will be the Malaysian Islam discourse, where there are far more fiqh-based discussions on culture than sociological-philosophical deliberation. When such legalistic outlook predominates, the discourse cannot go beyond that which is prescribed, objected and enjoined. During the heightened era of *dakwah* revivalism, culture became the target among the religious activists, leading to the prohibition and censuring of several Malay cultural performances and rural rituals deemed to be in contradiction to Islamic teachings. Such phenomenon of anti-culture by religious groups has been noted throughout human history. Dawson’s critical assessment on such a position deserves our attention:

“Any religious movement which adopts a purely critical and negative attitude to culture is therefore a force of destruction and disintegration which mobilizes against it the healthiest and most constructive elements in society – elements which can by no means be dismissed as worthless from the religious point of view. On the other hand, the identification of religion with the particular cultural synthesis which has been achieved at a definite point of time and space by the action of historical forces is fatal to the universal character of religious truth” (Dawson, 1948).

It is important to note that in building up the theology of culture, there should always be a conscious effort to collate the local utterances on culture made by various groups and personalities in society. Moreover, there are discussions on culture and religion that could approximate the approach of theology of culture. There are some intellectuals who do not frame their discussion as “theology” per se, but their discursive contents could well resonate with those in the discussion of theology of culture, or has the potential to spur one. For instance, Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-attas’ lecture on Islam and its relation to Malay culture (Al-Attas, 1972) could provide the basis for a theology of culture to develop in the Malaysian case. However, in the context where there is an aversion to social sciences and social philosophy such a task becomes impossible. Herein lies the importance to revisit the task of studying culture, and by that extension what should be the focus and emphasis in theology of culture.

The Task of Studying Culture

The complexities of society warrant our intellectual and social receptiveness in dealing with cultural issues of the day. While there are many publications and forums on culture and society, the discourse on theology of culture is not much taken seriously especially in Islamic religious study, and in the Muslim public discourse. Those in the domain of religion, especially in the task of teaching and spiritual guidance, cannot remain ignorant of culture(s) that evolve and pervade in society. Student of religion must see that the discussion of culture, whether its historical, sociological or psychological facets, as well its political and socio-economic dimensions, must be part of their training and exposure, going beyond the conventional method of seeing religion and culture invariably from a standpoint of legalistic precepts. We cannot be just studying culture to understand its evolution, changes, variants and influences. We should comprehend culture as part of the repertoires to bring about

empowering the people to resist against historical amnesia, ethno-religious supremacy, relativistic and nihilistic illusions, the grip of Orientalist thinking in scholarship and culture, and the euphoric anxiety over external influences that could tarnish the authenticity of the local culture. To simply call for the Islamisation of the people's culture, as the panacea of today's predicament is often a misdiagnosed effort and understanding, since only the utopian and ahistorical frame of mind would entertain the so-called "alternative" solution.

What Culture Can Offer?

What and how culture can contribute to our religious life, namely in areas of thinking and consciousness? Foremost, the nurturing and the living as the basis to the meaning of culture must first be recognised. I think the affirmation of culture as a nourishment for our religious thought (or way of thinking), can be seen in four main ways. These are:

(a) Reflective. Discussing culture involves the deliberation and reflection on the dynamics of human society, how certain ideological trends affect culture and society. The material condition of the people inevitably affects the kind of culture they construct and embrace. Overall, speaking of literature, it demands our sociological, political and ethical lens, and this thinking approach is very much vital in the religious realm.

(b) Appreciative. Culture furnishes us with an aesthetical dimension which is part of our *fitrah* to lead a life of joy, beauty and balance. Embracing and appreciating the sense of beauty of forms and meanings, the overt and the implicit, alongside subjectivities, points to the sheer limitation of seeing the world in black and white simplification. The recognition of human imagination and creativity make us realise the human potentialities as well as its limitations.

(c) Liberative. Cultural values and thought as encapsulated in traditional corpus contained much wisdom and exemplary narratives and maxims. Throughout history, cultural forms had been appropriated as forms of resistance against tyranny, corruption, exploitation and ignorance. It is not uncommon when the political realms circumscribed critical voices and freedom that emancipative voices are to be found.

(d) Communicative-educative. Culture naturally has its nurturing dimension; it allows human communication and engagement. Collectively, culture provides a sense of common purpose, that we belong to one identity, if not a sense of solidarity as we share common struggle and predicaments.

Surely these above points are not an exhaustive list of what culture can offer to our life or specifically to religious discourse. These points suggest that working on the realms of culture may after all have something to offer to the religious discourse, especially when the latter is often defined in a water-tight category. Therefore instead of looking at simply ways to "spiritualise"

culture, why not see the contacts as mutually beneficial – especially culture having that vitality for nurturing, growing and evolving, which in turn could nourish religious life and imagination. However, this way of thinking is rather difficult to be accepted widely, as we used to think how religion shapes a culture, rather than the other way round.

As long as we think that religious discourse is self-sufficient, and can stand on its own, we are not only denying the reality but also we have shut off ourselves from these insights and perspectives. The task of theology of culture is not about conflating religion and culture as essentially the same or as mutually to be potentially undermining to each other. Its task is essentially to see the role of culture as part of our religious consciousness and practice which warrants our substantive comprehension on them.

Defining theology of culture

Theology here is best defined, in the words of YB Mangunwijaya as “*refleksi ilmiah atau-paling tidak—rasional, tentang apa yang dihayati orang beriman....teologi adalah pertanggungjawaban daya pikir, rasio, tentang yang dihayati iman*” (Mangunwijaya, 1996). Nowhere can theology be regarded as identical to religion or faith itself. So deliberating on theology should not be seen as something to obstruct, undermine or even challenge religion per se, a position that is often taken by the *anti-intellectualism* religious fundamentalists. Essentially, the aim of a theology of culture is to bring the discussion on culture to the very centre of religious discourse. The latter cannot remain divorced from culture, especially if it is often claimed that religion is after all a way of life, a holistic and comprehensive paradigm for the believers.

Those who speak of a theology of culture cannot be simply concerned with how it is compatible with the religious precepts or otherwise, but must also pose one important question, namely the dimension of cultural liberation. The latter, in other words, must be one of our focal concerns, and this could be possible if we are able to frame it from the discursive study called cultural theology. But using the term of theology we are not dealing here with the creed or dogma. We are essentially dealing with the discursive domain of religious thought, either in relation to the scriptural texts and/or the dynamics of society, be it its social changes, structures and institutions.

The importance of deliberating a theology of culture is indeed an attempt to break the impasse within religious studies, which has not been able to go beyond its instructional and evangelical (*dakwah*) imperatives. The missiological dimension of religion is of course impossible to be denied, but the very focus will not be one to accentuate the supposed distinction between

religion and culture, especially the trend of “cleansing” the culture from any irreligious or non-religious “accretions.” Foremost there is an integral dimension between religion and culture, where one could not speak of one in the absence or relegation of the other. Second, is to frame the discussion on culture and religion in a more viable framework, considering both its sociological and theological dimensions. Third, to depart from the dominance of a legalistic *fiqh* discourse on culture, which has its own priorities and limitations. Fourth, it calls on us to announce the ideals that we expect from contemporary culture, especially the role of religious tradition in contributing towards its development. Fifth, as a discursive domain, the focus will be subjecting all dimensions of culture to scrutiny and critical revaluations.

Most importantly, by virtue of being a *theology*, it must provide a central space of scriptural and doctrinal expositions on culture, society and human destiny, although its analytical framework may well come from the critical social sciences. Theoretically speaking, theology of culture is multi-disciplinary, with the primary core from discursive theology, drawing insights on cultural and religious dynamics from the disciplines of history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, literature, and language studies. Obviously this theology of culture is one that is characterised by an anthropomorphic concern, if not loaded with the human sciences. Overall, theology of culture should be reconstructionist in its stand, if not interventionist in posture. At its root it is a *local* theology.

By way of comparative study, we also need to see how other religious traditions, especially from the Christian discourse, developed their respective theoretical frameworks of theology of culture. Drawing insights from their discursive experience could provide us some signpost as to the urgencies and excesses that have emerged from our own context. Most importantly, in our case it cannot be a high-brow philosophical exercise, nor it is just simply a topic for the discussion on religion and culture. Most importantly, it must also not be stuck in the ambit of academicism, nor be colluding with populism.

Since theology of culture is not a detached intellectual exercise, the task of explication and enlightenment to the faithful congregation must be undertaken seriously. For instance, consider the puritanical position which prohibited traditional cultural performances deemed as encouraging permissiveness. To simply attribute them as a kind of doctrinal hardening could be a naïve position, as the socio-political context could also be factors that could explain the trend. While sociologists may find this phenomenon an interesting subject of study, the student of religion cannot afford to ignore this. I think it is from the framework of theology of culture that such issues can be taken up, not for simply an academic inquiry but more to make sense of the issues, pointing out aspects that we have yet not understood and erroneously

assumed. Theology of culture in other words should serve the congregation and the general public.

To reiterate: Theology of culture is necessarily multi-disciplinary in its foundation where it should have a variable of component ranging from theology, sociology, philosophy, history, psychology, etc. Theology of culture therefore cannot be simply an exercise of appropriating scriptural injunctions. It cannot simply perform the role of pontificating what Muslims can do or otherwise. The study of human culture, which in the Muslim world had been pioneered by Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century, must be restored to be given a recognition for its potential contribution and purpose. Of course we need to go beyond what Ibn Khaldun had laid out, as our contemporary conditions and challenges are far more complex than in his era.

With the establishment of Religious Studies as academic programme in institutes of higher learning, there is a need to give particular attention to students of religion on the study of culture and society, which in many cases are offered under the rubric of sociology, cultural history and training courses of *dakwah kultural*. However, theology as a discursive site is yet to be recognised as a legitimate domain of study, especially when the current proponents of discursive thinking are easily reduced as attempts by the “liberals” who are deemed as trying to undermine the traditional religious teachings. At the end of the day, this theology of culture should nourish our religious discourse, putting a discursive theology in a right place, drawing insights from various field of knowledge, with the ultimate aim to draw the universal religious message of Islam in providing us some concrete answers to current predicaments and crises. But to derive to that, it is not simply a matter of affirming the faith, but it must be an intensive discursive analysis, providing us intellectual insights that also demand our ethical commitment.

Engaging Contemporary Challenges

Contemporary society is confronted by a number of problems and challenges, ranging from political and economic to social and cultural. In many cases they are linked to each other, and therefore unwise to see these problems in isolation from one another. In this discussion, we are primarily focussing on the problems and consequences of cultural neglect. The relegation of culture from the religious domain, as insisted by the more puritanical and fundamentalist groups, meant not only a death spell for cultural development, but also cutting vital nourishment for the religious group itself. In cases where there are strong anti-cultural stances, one cannot find sources of aesthetical and ethical discernment in which cultural items could provide value. Hence, it is no surprise that among the hardliner fundamentalist groups the obvious stark

absence will be in the areas of visual arts, literature and even music in their social and cultural life. The fear that such cultural expressions will undermine religious sanctity certainly has a long socio-cultural impact. We shall surmise several contemporary challenges in relation to the cultural life of the people. These are, amongst others:

- (a) the persistence of some puritanical stances that perceive culture as a disruptive element to religious life and authenticity
- (b) the commodification or commercialisation of culture and religion which has resulted in the loss of meaning of cultural repertoires in society
- (c) the overall disempowerment in a neo-liberal setting where nihilism, individualism, and apathy pervade society, leading to cultural alienation
- (d) the persistency of a cultural romanticism which buttresses and further accentuates feudal psychology and ahistorical conceptions of culture
- (e) the denial of the role and relevance of cultural tradition in society in the midst of scientific and positivistic euphoria.
- (f) the emerging and vociferous cultural triumphalism which can instigate racist sentiments and harbour prejudice and discrimination

Students of religion, like any students of society, cannot afford to see the study of religion as “optional” or secondary. We should not see the studying of culture as only part of our effort to deploy a *dakwah* strategy, that is working through culture in order to bring forth the message of Islam. Nor we should only be focussed on the study of culture in order to determine which parts of it contradict Islamic teachings and therefore needed to be weeded out. Studying culture cannot be simply accorded to anthropologists, sociologists, and experts of cultural studies. There are students of religion, upon satisfying their religious sciences, who venture into philosophy. Of course this should be welcomed. But this may not be sufficient, especially if the brand of philosophy embraced is one that is very much other-worldly, a high brow intellectualised contemplation that has no interest in addressing the human predicament and its destiny.

It is in this regards that a theology of culture could play a role as a discursive and academic realm in which students of religion could lead and develop. If a theology of culture is discussed before the religious public, or the general public, the aim is to infuse dialogue and enlightenment via educative emphasis. There are various topics of interest that could be taken up. In our local context, these could revolve around the issues of: (a) The denial of

cultural arts as part of social and individual life due to certain puritanical stances (b) the use of religious symbols as part of marketing strategy which exacerbates consumer culture; (c) culture defined mostly in terms of aesthetics, poetics and the like, with such exclusive understandings avoiding altogether other dimensions which affect culture ; (d) in the non-Middle Eastern context, the association of Islamic culture with Arabic culture, which leads to the subsequent degrading or relegation of the local culture which is deemed as less Islamic.

This last point is interesting, where the discourse of a theology of culture can take up the issue so as to make sense and enlighten the Muslim public. Recently, the overt Islamic expressions in the public sphere are subjected to heated debates when one opinion criticises these overt expressions of Muslim lifestyle and practices as a kind of “Arabisation” of Malay-Indonesian. This phenomenon can be attributed to a number of factors. Sociologically speaking, this could be seen as the culturalisation of Islamic identity which identifies the Middle Eastern cultural and religious mode as representing a truly Islamic identity for Muslims. These are generally adopted by a well-traveled and well-exposed middle class before the trend spread to other layers in society. However, the problem is not so much embracing or adopting Middle Eastern Islamic cultures, where Muslims here look up to the Islamic heartland, but the relegation, timidity and almost denial of local cultures as representing pure Islam, or having a semblance with Islamic values. Moreover we know it very well that the adoption is often not from a departure of theological conviction, but instead is due to current trends in lifestyle, fashion, and consumption.

There are of course many issues and polemics in Muslim society that could be subjected to the study of theology of culture. This paper, without a pretension to be exhaustive, focuses primarily on the need to embark on theology of culture as an intellectual endeavour, so as to study and reflect the role of culture in our religious and social life. By way of comparison, it is also important to those who embark on a theology of culture to look at some of the critical discussions on culture in other branches of knowledge (e.g. sociology and social philosophy) and in other religious communities (such as Christian discourses). Issues pertaining to self-contradictions of culture and the danger of consumerism in culture, are amongst the main discursive themes that could be taken up in the discourse of a theology of culture.

The Danger of Consumerism on Culture

In the era of globalisation we see the entrenchment of one form of culture that enters through the market. This point is well captured by Jose Comblin, when

he noted “culture is ever more subordinated to the economy” (Comblin, 2009). He continues: “The economic power dominating the market has many ways to control culture itself. Whoever dominates the form, dominates the content. People speak of globalisation of culture; it is an extension of globalisation of the economy” (Comblin, 2009).

Of course it is naïve to equate global culture as a universal culture, superior to all other local cultures. In other words, in the discourse of theology of culture, we cannot afford to ignore one important influence that has dominated the culture and cultural life, namely the globalised consumer culture. The latter’s effect on culture is often disruptive, if not tragic. The summary made by Comblin, is worth noting again:

“All those who enter into the new culture find that traditional culture becomes something external to them; it becomes incomprehensible and loses all attraction. Converts to the new culture initially reject their past with a feeling of liberation. Entry into the new culture gives them the impression that they are freer – and more themselves. They experience the older culture as a constraint and do not perceive what is confining in the new culture. Later on they return to the old culture out of curiosity. For all other cultures henceforth objects of curiosity, objects to observe, perhaps to study. All cultures have become, at a more elevated level, objects of scientific inquiry, objects of anthropology. Little by little, all people, seduced by worldwide culture, are discovering their own culture as something alien, something that can no longer be lived” (Comblin, 2009).

In traditional society, the culture is communal in terms of its participation and accessibility. But in the modern context, culture is subjected to competitive economy, followed by the culture industry, giving access to those only with money, while the consumed items are very much dictated by the power of advertisement generated from elsewhere. Cultural invasion ensued when the foreign cultural products monopolised the local cultural domain. The problems as raised by Comblin, however, do not relate culture and religion directly, which deserves attention in any study of society. And, the theology of culture is no exception. Put simply, the discourse of a theology of culture must go beyond purely doctrinal expositions and affirmations.

Conclusion

Culture is often attributed mostly to traditional culture which purported to be inherited or handed down from the earlier generations. But one stark absence

is the deliberation on dimensions of modernity is the very culture that we are practicing and accepting, albeit within our own term and emphasis. In an environment of intellectual and cultural captivity, there is a tendency to see Western culture as a form of cultural liberation. The reverse, which is equally problematic, is the total rejection of Western culture in order to secure an authentic culture from mainstream practices and ideas.

Then if the cultural model proposed is aimed more for domination than liberation, it would not succeed for long, as it would be challenged and rejected. But surely the damage done is not easily undone. In our context, we see the fervour of cultural nationalism more apparent than the proclivity for cultural liberation. Muslim leadership must be able to confront cultural nationalism as it often gives birth to ethno-religious triumphalism, which is cancerous in our multi-ethnic and multi-religious context. Today we cannot simply pretend that it is not manifesting in our society.

Culture cannot be simply relegated or classified under preservation or conservation. Culture must also be, at its basis, nurtured and stimulated by creativity. Cultural conservatism is a form of cultural mummification, a neglect which prevents the creative growth of a culture. Conversely, cultural embeddedness in our social and religious life, such as literature and music, act to temper cultural monolingualism and extremism. But of course religion is not the only factor where we can attribute such cultural neglect. Apart from the extremist and puritanical religious orientations that are in our midst, often demonstrating an anti-cultural stance, the mainstream religious domain is mostly instructional (dogma and law), where cultural knowledge can also be very minimal or superficial. Here the underdeveloped cultural literacy is also a task that a theology of culture cannot afford to ignore.

It is hoped that a theology of culture can be the site of engagement and scrutiny on an important part of our life, be it as individual and as part of a collective – namely culture. It is imperative for Muslims in Southeast Asia to develop a theology of culture as part of their intellectual and religious discourses, nourishing them with the notion of dialogue, criticality and reconstruction. In more specific terms, the need to garner an interest in culture is important so that students of religion could engage, like other students of culture, by giving critical religious perspectives, on a domain that affects their life and humanity as a whole. Our cultural and intellectual response to the predicaments of our time is urgently needed, especially when the political responses are always beset by more problems and confusion. An alternative approach must be recognised, made available, and attempted. Herein lies the importance of a theology of culture.

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