On Islam and comparative intellectual history

Every culture has to balance innovation and conservation. Most innovations are bad because they are maladaptive, but since a few of them turn out well, absence of innovation in a culture is also maladaptive. The question is where the balance is to be struck, and in the Islamic case the answer was well toward the conservative end of the spectrum.

Michael Cook

L ast June I participated in a very unusual assignment at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden. Our task was to compare the intellectual histories of the three major non-western literate traditions in the early modern period (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries). Sheldon Pollock, a Sanskritist at Columbia, was the primary representative of the Hindu tradition. Benjamin Elman, a historian of East Asia at Princeton, performed the same role for the Chinese tradition. My corner of the field was the Islamic world. In addition, Peter Burke was there to provide the perspective of a European, and several younger scholars helped us out in a number of ways.

Here is the general issue we addressed, even if we never came very close to resolving it. All three intellectual traditions were profoundly conservative, in the sense that they were strongly inclined to locate authority and virtue in the past. Yet during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries all three were exposed to the initial stages of a development very different from any they had experienced before: the emergence of the modern world, which was eventually to end the intellectual autonomy of each of these traditions. In the meantime, did these new circumstances generate any significant convergences among the three traditions?

Against this background, the theme of attitudes to intellectual innovation naturally caught our comparative interest. In this brief space, I will attempt a quick sketch of these attitudes as they appeared in the Islamic world, followed by some bold — not to say crude — comparative observations.

The Islamic world of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries had a strongly conservative orientation toward intellectual innovation. One illustration of this conservative attitude involves a peculiar feature of early mosques in the western Islamic world: their tendency to face south rather than toward Mecca. Nobody knows why this is. But would you really want to demolish these ancient mosques and rebuild them with a Meccan orientation? This may sound like a rhetorical question, but at one point in the middle of the 18th century it threatened to become more. An irritating Libyan scholar, Tajuri, wrote to the ruler of the Moroccan city of Fez, denouncing the orientation of the local mosques and calling on him to recon- struct them.

The scholars of Fez did not appreciate Tajuri’s meddling in their city’s affairs, and one of them wrote to refute his Libyan colleague. Of various arguments, one of the most crushing was that the orientation of the mosques had been fixed in the 2nd Islamic century, a time of excellence and virtue. How then could the judgment of that epoch be challenged by that of the 10th Islamic century, so full of evil and ignorance? Who was this presumptuous Libyan to say that everyone before him — those who had fixed the orientation of the mosques and those who had accepted it without protest — had been in error?

The sense of easy victory that went with this mid-16th century letter’s roundtrip of conservative sentiment is telling. Equally indicative is an example from the mid-18th century. The Islamic world of the 1740s was riled by the startling confession, “There is no god but God”. Yusi, then, is quite prepared to struggle uphill, though at the same time well aware of the punishing gradient.

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He’s an ‘innovator’

Denunciations of the man and his views came thick and fast. A scholar living in the same region of Arabia wrote to warn his colleagues that ‘there has appeared in our land an innovator’. Once he had labelled Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab an ‘innova- tor’, the way was open to denounce him as ‘ignorant, misguided, misguided, devoid of learning or piety’, the purveyor of ‘scandalous and disgraceful things’. Likewise, an important opponent of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, writing in 1743, asked rhetorically how it could be permissible for someone in this age of ignorance to discard the views of earlier scholars and draw his own inferences from the revealed texts. ‘It is clear’, he wrote, ‘that good — all of it — lies in following the revealed texts. ’It is clear’, he wrote, ‘that good — all of it — lies in following the revealed texts. ’It is clear’, he wrote, ‘that good — all of it — lies in following the revealed texts. ’It is clear’, he wrote, ‘that good — all of it — lies in following the revealed texts. ’It is clear’, he wrote, ‘that good — all of it — lies in following the revealed texts. ’

What then of whole new movements?

A strong conservative default thus characterised the Islamic world’s view of intellectual innovation. Nonetheless, individual scholars who were sufficiently determined could override it. Moreover, these scholars were not necessarily mavericks: both Yusi and Ibn al-Amir received ample respect from posterity. What then of whole new movements? Here, comparison becomes intriguing and perhaps even rewarding. Let me start by describing what we do not find in the Islamic world.

In India, the emergence of a school of ‘New Logic’ (Nasyayya) is a striking, but by no means isolated, phenomenon in the early modern period. What interests us here is not the school’s logic but its proud affirmation of its own novelty. Within the mainstream scholarly culture of Islam at this time, such self-designation would have been tantamount to a badge of dishonesty. Not surprisingly, we have no parallel to the New Logic on the Islamic side of the fence.

Turning to China in this period, we find a new and probing brand of philological research transforming the face of scholarship. The Muslim world does indeed possess a long tradition of exact scholar- ship — the kind that accurately identifies textual mistakes and preserves them through the centuries. But the remarkable feature of Chinese philology in this period was its use of such minutiae to influence the indigenous culture. In contrast, no one cites the Muslim scholars of the early modern period in this way. The closest parallel on the Islamic side would be Wilfred Madelung’s acknowledgement of the part played by the 14th century Damascene scholar Ibn Taymiyya in recovering the original sense of the doctrine of the ‘uncreatedness’ of the Koran. But most of what Ibn Taymiyya wrote, whatever its intellectu- al brilliance, was not philology of this kind. So here, too, we draw a blank.

Wahhabism

Now for what we do find. The single most arresting movement in the Islamic world of the day was undoubtedly Wahhabism. Whether one views it as an alluring or a humbling pretension to be nothing but a reaffirmation of the Prophet Muhammad’s monothestic message, it repre- sented a clear break with the immediate past: Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab claimed, after all, to know what none of his teachers had known. Moreover, the significance of Wahhabism was not just intellectual; it was also political and military, for it provided the banner under which a new state and a new order arose in eastern Arabia. But the movement was still very much geographically marginal one at the end of the period that concerns us: the scattered oases of Najd were hardly the Mid- dle Eastern equivalent of the Gaetetic plain or the Yangtze delta. And beyond

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Comparative Intellectual Histories of Early Modern Asia

For further reading
