Opening the gate of verification: intellectual trends in the 17th century Arab-Islamic world

For much of the 20th century, it was widely assumed that early modern Arabic-Islamic civilization had been in an advanced state of ‘decadence’ or ‘sclerosis’. The ‘golden’ or ‘classical’ age of Arabic-Islamic civilization had, it was believed, come to an end in the 13th or 14th century, giving way to a ‘dark age’ of intellectual stagnation – an age of ‘imitation and complication’ – that lasted until the 19th century ‘renaissance’ (nahda).

This sad intellectual state of affairs was also thought to mirror an imagined economic and demographic decline attributed to Ottoman (mis)rule and/or shifts in international trade routes.

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The way of the Persian and Kurdish verifying scholars

In the first decade of the 17th century, the Persian Safavids managed to wrest Azerbaijan and Shirvan from the Ottomans, thus sparking off a westward exodus of Sunni Azeri and Kurdish scholars. They brought with them scholarly handbooks on ‘rational sciences’ such as logic, dialectic, grammar, seman- tics-epicure, and theology by 17th and 18th century Persianate scholars such as Jami (d.1492), Dawani (d.1501) and ‘Isam al-Din al-Farawi (d.1577). The impact of the introduction of these new works is reflected in the following passage by the Damascus scholar al-Muhibbi (d.1699), writing about a Kurd- ish scholar who settled in Damascus in the first decade of the 17th century:

‘He mostly taught the books of the Persians, and he was the first to acquaint the students of Damascus with these books, and he imparted to them the ability to read and teach them. It is from him that the gate of ta’biq in Damascus was opened. This is what we have heard our teachers say’.

The term ta’biq lexically means ‘verifi- cation’ and was often juxtaposed with ‘imitation’ (taqlid). In both cases, scholars proposed without knowing their evi- dential basis. In the present context the term meant something somewhat more specific: verifying scholarship in a particular way. Muhibbi elsewhere noted that the Persian and Kurdish scholars of his age had a distinct man- ner of conducting scholarly discussions that heeded the principles of Aristotelian dialectic (adab al-khams). A 17th century Moroccan preacher vividly described a Kurdish scholar’s teaching style:

‘His lecture on a topic reminded one of discussion and parley, for he would say, “Perhaps this and that”, and, “It seems that it is this”, and, “Do you see that this can be understood like that?” And if he was questioned on even the slightest point, he would stop until the matter was established.

Due to them logic became popular in Egypt’

At around the same time as the Safa- vids were conquering Azerbaijan and Shirvan, Morocco fell into political turmoil as the Saadian dynasty came to an end. Several scholars from the region went eastward, also bringing with them local scholarly handbooks. These included the theological and legal works of Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Sansuri (d.1490), with the glosses of later north-west African scholars such as ‘Isa al-Saltani (d.1565), Yahya al- Shawk (d.1685) and al-Hassan al-Yusi (d.1693). Sansuri and his later commen- tators shared with their Persian and Kurdish colleagues a disarrangement of ‘imitation’ and an emphasis on ‘verifi- cation’. Again, ‘verifications’ to these scholars meant something more spe- cific than simply ‘providing evidence’. In Sansuri’s theological works, for exam- ple, the emphasis on ‘verifications’ went hand in hand with the adoption of Aris- totelian modal concepts and syllogistic argument forms when expounding and defending the principles of Ash’ari the- ology that tried to strike a middle ground between what it saw as the unbridled rationalism of the Islamic Neo-Platoni- sts and the obscurantism of the traditionalists.

The impact of this eastward move- ment of north-west African Muslim- cian scholars owing to the efforts of a Kurd- ish immigrant from Gulfarz, Abu ’Ali al-Uskudari (d.1601) and Abu al-Ashraf ’Arabi (d.1651) were introduced to Syr- ian mystics.

The spread of these mystical orders strengthened support for the ‘panthe- ist’ ideas of the Andalusian mystical Ibn ‘Arabi (d.1240), which had hitherto been regarded with caution or outright hostil- ity by most Arabic-speaking religious scholars. This trend may be seen as cul- minating in the brilliant and influential works of the Medina Shattari mystic Ibrahim al-Kurani and the Damascus Naqshbandi mystic ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nabudi (d.1725), both of whom wrote several influential apologies for the unity of existence and other controver- sial mystical ideas and practices.

These three intellectual currents were independent of each other. They could be, at times, mutually reinforcing: the works of the 17th century Persian scholars Jami and Dawani, for exam- ple, were often cited by later mystical supporters of the idea of the unity of existence such as Kurani and Naboudi. However, the trends could also conflict, with mystics criticising excessive preoc- cupation with the rational sciences, and staunchly Ash’ari north-west African theologists condemning the ideas of the Medina Shattari mystics like Kura- ni. Together, however, the trends belie the idea that the intellectual climate of the 17th century Arab-Islamic world was moribund and stagnant, passively awaiting a ‘revival’ or ‘reawakening’ in the 18th or 19th century.

The dismal view of pre-19th century intellectual and cultural life was part of the political and religious outlook of modern self-styled ‘revivers’ of the Islamic world. For such thinkers, the emphasis was not on ‘verification’ but ‘Ijtihad’ – a concept which has been much misunderstood through its appropria- tion by the teachers of our teachers had few students to relate, and due to them it [logic] became popular in Egypt and they (i.e., locals) devoted themselves to studying it, whereas before that time they had only occupied them- selves with it occasionally to sharpen their wits’.

The imans of pantheism

The 17th century also witnessed the spread of originally non-Arabic mysti- cal orders in the Arabic-speaking lands. The Indian Shattari mystic Shīh Muḥammad ibn Sargis (d.1606), for example, settled in Medina towards the end of his life. He and his disciples brought with them a number of Shattari mystical works, such as Ghawth Gwalior’s al-Ja‘farīn al-khams, which introduced Indian astro-logical ideas, and Burhanpuri’s al-Tughra al-mursala, which defended the controversial pantheist idea of the ‘unity of existence’. In Medina Barwaij started a line of Shattari mystics, the most illustrious of whom were Ahmad al-Qushash (d.1660) – referred to by the previously mentioned Damascus scholar Muhibbi as ‘the leader (Imam) of those who expound the unity of exist- ence’ – and his disciple Ibrahim al- Kurani (d.1650).

Another Indian mystic who settled in the Holy Cities in the early 17th century was the Naqshbandi mystic ‘Abd al-Din al-Uthmani (d.1649). Taj al-Din al-Uskudari also introduced the term ‘verification’ peculiar to his order, such as the hagiographical collections Najib al- usani of Jami and Rashid al- hayat al-khayal of Kashif, both of which he translated from Persian into Arabic for the benefit of his Arab disciples.

The Khalwati order was also spills- over from Anatolia to Syria in this period. It spread amongst Damascus scholars owing to the efforts of a Kurd- istic of modern historians have uncritically missed their opponents as unthinking imitators. Less understandable, a host of modern historians have uncritically adopted this partisan view, and hence the very alternative to either unthinking imitation or scripturalist (Ijtihad) was lost. The concept of ‘verification’ is important in that it shows that there were such alternatives, and that ‘Ijtihad’ was by no means the sole ‘principle of movement’ in Islamic intellectual history.

There is obviously much more to say about these intellectual currents, but their very existence suggests that further research into Arabic-Islamic intellec- tual life in the early modern period will show that these centuries are ‘dark’ only because modern historians have for so long insisted on looking elsewhere.

For further reading

Saunders, J. J. 1955. ‘The Problem of Islamic Decadence’. Journal of World His- tory 7, 2. (An example of the older approach that assumed that the early modern Islamic world was `decadent’ and offered `explanations’ for this supposed fact.)

Raymond, Andre. 1980. ‘The Ottoman Conquest and the Development of the Great Arab `Ijmam’. International Journal of Turkish Studies 1. (A seminal article show- ing that the early modern period was not, as had been widely assumed, a period of economic decline and urban decay.)


El-Rouayheb, Khaled. 2006. ‘Opening the Gate of Verification: The Forgotten Arab- Islamic Florence of the Seventeenth Century’. International Journal of Middle East Studies 38. (Deals at greater length with the topic of the present article.)

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Comparative Intellectual Histories of Early Modern Asia

T his grand narrative reflects the self- presentation of 17th century West- ern colonialists and 20th century Arab- ists and Islamic modernists and revivalists, and has little to do with a dis- passionate and careful study of the early modern period itself. The idea that the period between 1500 and 1800 was one of general economic and urban decay can no longer be accepted, thanks to the pioneering research of André Raymond and Antoine Abdel Nour. A closer look at intellectual developments in the Islamic provinces of the 17th century Ott- oman Empire will also belie any notions of a stagnant and decadent culture just waiting to be ‘revived’ or ‘reformed’.