

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.

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Last 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 (alias the 16th to 18th 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 Europeanist, 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 16th to 18th 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 16th 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 reconstruct 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 his 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 resoundingly 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 pronouncements of a certain Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, a denizen of the eastern Arabian desert and the eponymous founder of Wahhabism. He claimed to know something none of his teachers had known: the meaning of the confession, ‘There is no god but God’.

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 labeled Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab an ‘innovator’, the way was open to denounce him as ‘ignorant, misguiding, misguided, devoid of learning or piety’, the purveyor of ‘scandalous and disgraceful things’. Likewise, an Egyptian 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 those who went before, and evil – all of it – lies in the innovations of those who come later.’

In short, innovators faced an uphill struggle against an easy and powerful conservative rhetoric. Not that Tajuri and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab would have described themselves as innovators; in their own view they were merely reas-

serting norms that divine revelation had established long ago.

But not all innovative thinkers were so self-effacing. For example, the 17th century Moroccan scholar Yusi, in the conclusion to one of his works, explains that the reader should not be put off by the unfamiliarity of some of the terms and distinctions he uses. The reader should understand that Yusi is not the kind of scholar who merely stitches together what his predecessors have said. In the good old days such copycat scholars were not taken seriously, but the corruption of our age has changed that. Yusi goes on to tell us that the scholars he competes with – those he regards as his peers – are the great names of earlier epochs, men like the 11th century Ghazali and the 14th century Taftazani. Even then, he emphasises, he only quotes what they say when he thinks they have it right. Yusi, then, is quite prepared to struggle uphill, though at the same time well aware of the punishing gradient.

Another example is the 18th century Yemeni scholar Ibn al-Amir. His goal was to show that even in his own time a qualified scholar could judge for himself the reliability of a tradition from the Prophet based on the standing of those who had transmitted it in the early Islamic period. He argues his position nicely: the increasingly sophisticated presentation of the relevant data in the biographical literature compiled over the centuries has made it easier, not harder, for us to make such judgements than it was for our predecessors. Yet he too recognises the gradient he faces: most scholars of the four recognised Sunni schools of legal doctrine, he tells us, have been very harsh in condemning any claim to independent judgement on the part of their colleagues.

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 noting two things that we do not find in the Islamic world.

In India, the emergence of a school of ‘New Logic’ (Navyanyaya) 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 a self-designation would have been tantamount to a badge of dishonour. 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 scholarship – the kind that accurately identifies textual minutiae and preserves them through the centuries. But the remarkable feature of Chinese philology in this period was its use of such minutiae to reach innovative and persuasive historical conclusions, in very much the same way that modern western scholarship sometimes does. This is why even present-day students of ancient Chinese texts frequently acknowledge the research and conclusions of Chinese scholars writing well before European philological methods had begun 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 Wilferd 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 intellectual 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 or not we concede its humble pretension to be nothing but a reaffirmation of the Prophet Muhammad’s monotheistic message, it represented 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 a geographically marginal one at the end of the period that concerns us: the scattered oases of Najd were hardly the Middle Eastern equivalent of the Gangetic plain or the Yangtze delta. And beyond

the frontiers of the Saudi state, the views of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab found little favour with the scholars of the day.

Nonetheless, the rise of Wahhabism was arguably an example of a wider trend, a ‘return to the sources’ that was perceptible in other regions of the 18th century Islamic world. The sources were the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet, in contradistinction to the doctrines of the four schools to which the Yemeni Ibn al-Amir had referred. Ibn al-Amir is in fact a good example of this trend. Another is his contemporary Shah Wali Allah of Delhi, who saw himself as laying a new foundation for Islamic jurisprudence, characterised by knowledge that no one before him had demonstrated so well (he mentions a distinguished 13th century scholar as having ‘failed to realise even a hundredth part of this learning’). His idea was to unite the two legal schools with which he was familiar in the eastern Islamic world, and then to test their doctrines against the traditions of the Prophet, discarding anything that went against them. This was not an entirely new ambition, but it was a grand one – and unsurprisingly it went nowhere in his time.

So the period ends with a commotion in the backlands and a sprinkling of individual thinkers elsewhere. Now add the wisdom of hindsight. Over the last two centuries, as the Islamic world has come under the relentless pressure of a global culture of western origin, the ideas of such thinkers have come to constitute the backbone of its intellectual resistance. Ultimately, the New Logic of the Hindus contributed nothing to the Hindu revivalism of our times, and Chinese philology did more to subvert the classics than to reinstate them. Nobody in Washington has the slightest interest in either of these movements, but the return to the foundations that was stirring in 18th century Islam is central to its contentious role in the world today. ◀

For further reading

- Cook, Michael. 1992. ‘On the origins of Wahhabism’. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, vol. 2, pp. 191-202.
- El-Rouayheb, Khaled. 2006. ‘Opening the Gate of Verification: The Forgotten Arab-Islamic Florescence of the 17th Century’. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 38, pp. 263-81.

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