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 civilisation had been in an advanced state of 'decadence' or 'sclerosis'. The 'golden' or 'classical' age of Arabic-Islamic civilisation 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 compilation' – 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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This grand narrative reflects the self-presentation of 19th century Western colonialists and 20th century Arab nationalists and Islamic modernists and revivalists, and has little to do with a dispassionate 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 Andre Raymond and Antoine Abdel Nour. A closer look at intellectual developments in the Arabic provinces of the 17th century Ottoman Empire will also belie any notions of a stagnant and decadent culture just waiting to be 'revived' or 'reformed'.

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 Shirwan 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, semantics-rhetoric, and theology by 15th and 16th century Persianate scholars such as Jami (d.1492), Dawani (d.1501) and 'Isam al-Din al-Isfara'ini (d.1537). The impact of the introduction of these new works is reflected in the following passage by the Damascene scholar al-Muhibbi (d.1699), writing about a Kurdish 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 *tahqiq* in Damascus was opened. This is what we have heard our teachers say'.

The term *tahqiq* lexically means 'verification' and was often juxtaposed with 'imitation' (*taqlid*), ie, accepting scholarly propositions without knowing their evidential basis. In the present context the term meant something somewhat more specific: verifying scholarly propositions in a particular way. Muhibbi elsewhere

noted that the Kurdish and Persian scholars of his age had a distinct manner of conducting scholarly discussions that heeded the principles of Aristotelian dialectic (*adab al-bahth*). A 17th century Moroccan pilgrim 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 Safavids were conquering Azerbaijan and Shirwan, Morocco fell into political turmoil as the Sa'dian dynasty came to an end. Several scholars from the region went eastward, also bringing with them local scholarly handbooks. These included the theological and logical works of Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Sanusi (d.1490), with the glosses of later north-west African scholars such as 'Isa al-Sugtani (d.1651), Yahya al-Shawi (d.1685) and al-Hasan al-Yusi (d.1691). Sanusi and his later commentators shared with their Persian and Kurdish colleagues a disparagement of 'imitation' and an emphasis on 'verification'. Again, 'verification' to these scholars meant something more specific than simply 'providing evidence'. In Sanusi's theological works, for example, the emphasis on 'verification' went hand in hand with the adoption of Aristotelian modal concepts and syllogistic argument forms when expounding and defending the principles of Ash'ari theology that tried to strike a middle ground between what it saw as the unbridled rationalism of the Islamic Neo-Platonists and the obscurantist fideism of the traditionalists.

The impact of this eastward movement of north-west African logician-theologians can be gauged from a statement made by the Cairo-based scholar Muhammad Murtada al-Zabidi (d.1791). Zabidi complained about his Egyptian contemporaries' enthusiasm for logic and traced this enthusiasm to scholars

of north-west African origin who settled in Cairo in the second half of the 17th century:

'Thus you see that those of them who came to Egypt in the times of the teachers of our teachers had few *hadith* 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 themselves with it occasionally to sharpen their wits'.

The imams of pantheism

The 17th century also witnessed the spread of originally non-Arabic mystical orders in the Arabic-speaking lands. The Indian Shattari mystic Sibghatallah al-Barwaji (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 Gwaliori's *al-Jawahir al-khams*, which introduced Indian astral-yogic ideas, and Burhanpuri's *al-Tuhfa al-mursala*, which defended the controversial pantheist idea of the 'unity of existence'. In Medina Barwaji started a line of Shattari mystics, the most illustrious of whom were Ahmad al-Qushashi (d.1661) – referred to by the previously mentioned Damascene scholar Muhibbi as 'the leader (Imam) of those who expound the unity of existence' – and his disciple Ibrahim al-Kurani (d. 1690).

Another Indian mystic who settled in the Holy Cities in the early 17th century was the Naqshbandi mystic Taj al-Din al-'Uthmani (d.1640). Taj al-Din also introduced works peculiar to his order, such as the hagiographical collections *Nafahat al-uns* of Jami and *Rashahat 'ayn al-hayat* of Kashifi, both of which he translated from Persian into Arabic for the benefit of his Arabic disciples.

The Khalwati order was also spilling over from Anatolia to Syria in this period. It spread amongst Damascene scholars owing to the efforts of a Kurdish immigrant from Gaziantep, Ahmad al-'Usali (d. 1639). Perhaps through this channel, the works of Turkish Khalwati mystics such as 'Aziz Mahmud al-Uskudari (d.1628) and 'Abd al-Ahad

al-Nuri (d.1651) were introduced to Syrian mystics.

The spread of these mystical orders strengthened support for the 'pantheist' ideas of the Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabi (d.1240), which had hitherto been regarded with caution or outright hostility by most Arabic-speaking religious scholars. This trend may be seen as culminating in the brilliant and influential works of the Medinan Shattari mystic Ibrahim al-Kurani and the Damascene Naqshbandi mystic 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d.1731), both of whom wrote several influential apologias for the unity of existence and other controversial mystical ideas and practices.

These three intellectual currents were independent of each other. They could at times be mutually reinforcing: the works of the 15th century Persian scholars Jami and Dawani, for example, were often cited by later mystical supporters of the idea of the unity of existence such as Kurani and Nabulusi. However, the trends could also conflict, with mystics criticising excessive preoccupation with the rational sciences, and staunchly Ash'arite north-west African theologians condemning the ideas of the Medinan Shattari mystics like Kurani. Together, however, the trends belie the idea that the intellectual climate of the 17th century Arabic-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 that has been much misunderstood through its appropriation as a battle-cry by various reformist and revivalist currents in the modern Islamic world. The word lexically means 'exertion of effort', but it was used in a much more specific and controversial sense by modern reformers and revivalists: as a license to disregard legal precedent and return to the scriptural sources of Islamic law. In many, perhaps most cases, the rationale was 'fundamentalist' rather than 'modernist', and the 'reo-

pening of the gate' of *ijtihad* has often meant a much more severe assessment of the rational sciences, mysticism and popular religion than was usual before the 19th century. The modern proponents of *ijtihad*, as one would expect from religious revolutionaries, dismissed 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 intellectual 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. 1963. 'The Problem of Islamic Decadence'. *Journal of World History* 7. (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 Towns'. *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 1. (A seminal article showing that the early modern period was not, as had been widely assumed, a period of economic decline and urban decay.)
- Peters, R. 1980. 'Idjtihad and Taqlid in 18th and 19th Century Islam'. *Die Welt des Islams* 20. (A discussion of the use of the concept of *ijtihad* by various revivalist currents in the 18th and 19th centuries.)
- El-Rouayheb, Khaled. 2006. 'Opening the Gate of Verification: The Forgotten Arab-Islamic Florescence 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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