

A Thoughtful and Attentive Analysis of Tradition of Reform in Premodern Islam

JANIS ESOTS

The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, UK (jesots@iis.ac.uk)

Ahmad S. Dallal. *Islam without Europe: Tradition of Reform in Eighteenth Century Islamic Thought*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018, pp. 421. \$34.95.

Ahmad S. Dallal's book is an informative and easily readable study of the thought of six leading twelfth/eighteenth century Muslim scholars. The author treats these scholars as the representatives of distinct intellectual trends of Islamic thought in the premodern period, while asserting that they belonged to the same thought-world and focused on the value of the present and the study of the ḥadīth. The monograph is a valuable contribution to the subject that is likely to cater to the needs of graduate students.

Key words: Islam; reform; eighteenth century; *ḥadīth*; *ijtihād*; regional; universal; Sufism

Ahmad S. Dallal's¹ book is an informative and easily readable study of the thought of six leading twelfth/eighteenth century Muslim scholars: Muḥammad Ibn Ismā'īl al-Amīr al-Ṣan'ānī (1688–1769), Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (1703–62), Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–87), 'Uthmān Ibn Fūdī (1754–1817), Muḥammad Ibn 'Alī al-Shawkānī (1759–1834), and Muḥammad Bin 'Alī al-Sanūsī (1787–1859). Although the author treats each scholar as the representative of a distinct intellectual trend of Islamic thought in the premodern period, he asserts that they belonged to the same thought-world and focused on the value of the present and the study of the *ḥadīth*. Dallal argues that this common thought-world of the eighteenth-century scholars has not hitherto been appreciated by western Islamologists and modern scholars in general. His monograph should be considered an attempt to rectify the situation.

The monograph consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction, "Reimagining the Eighteenth Century," begins with a critique of the still widely circulating opinion, according to which the twelfth/eighteenth century was a period of stagnation and decadence. In particular, the author questions Albert Hourani's² opinion that Islamic reform was motivated solely or prevalently by a necessity to respond to the European challenge. He also rejects the well-established view on the Wahhabi movement as the most representative trend of Muslim intellectual history in this period. Instead, Dallal argues, the eighteenth century was an era of reform, a period of great intellectual vitality marked by a systematic attempt "to scrutinize the epistemological foundations of inherited knowledge and to reformulate the traditional Islamic disciplines of learning" (18). This scrutiny, which focused particularly on two branches of religious learning, *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *uṣūl al-ḥadīth* (foundations of Islamic jurisprudence and traditions), was carried out within regional scholarly networks in different parts of the Islamic world. The six aforementioned scholars allegedly played the most important roles in this process.

The first chapter, "The Boundaries of Faith," reappraises the legacy of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb and Wahhabism, with its emphasis on *takfīr* (accusation of non-belief). The six thinkers are considered in the aspect of their attitude to Wahhabism—which, the author claims, was not the central development of the eighteenth century but is still wrongly perceived as such by most Islamologists. The author makes a focused attempt to rectify the prejudice by examining such

questions as whether Wahhabism may be considered as the first impulse of Islamic revival, how ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī (1050–1143/1641–1731), a leading Sufi authority in Levant, rejected *taḳfīr* as a valid tool of governance of the elite and the masses and promoted the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī (in particular the principle of *waḥdat al-wujūd*), whether and why Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl al-Amīr al-Ṣan‘ānī praised Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in his poems, what was Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī’s indirect response to the Wahhabi agenda, how ‘Uthmān Ibn Fūdī distinguished between political and social tolerance, and in what consisted Muḥammad Ibn ‘Alī al-Shawkānī’s preemptive engagement with Wahhabism. He concludes that Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s approach was rather an exception than a rule: to Dallal, apart from Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, all other major thinkers of the century formulated meaningful codes of social behavior and religious practice “without condemning Muslims and falling into the trap of *taḳfīr*” (55).

The second chapter, “*Ijtihād* and the Regional Origins of Universal Vision,” focuses on the demonstration of a single thesis: to make it simple, “everything was regional in the eighteenth century.” The thesis is true—but one wonders whether it was a feature peculiar only to this century: in fact, before the emergence of modern means of transport and mass communication, everything was regional everywhere. The author first examines the regional networks of learning and their role in *tamadhbhub* (adherence to a particular school of law predominant in the given region). In particular, he questions the as yet prevailing view, according to which the regional networks of the transmission and study of *ḥadīth* converge to a small group of teachers in Mecca and Medina (in the eighteenth century, the best known of these scholars were Muḥammad Ibn Sulaymān al-Kurdī and Muḥammad Ḥayā al-Sindī). Dallal argues that during this period, there emerged intellectual traditions that were explicitly regional in their character. He then discusses *ijtihād* as a tool of intellectual empowerment, as it was exemplified by the leading scholars, in relation to the scrutiny of common sense, concluding that both scholarly erudition and common sense have redeeming effects.

The third chapter deals with Sufism and the transformation it underwent during the eighteenth century. The author treats it as closely connected with the claims to intermediary religious and intellectual authority, distinguishing in Sufism two general tendencies, elitist and populist. He argues that, in the given period, Sufi authority was rationalized on legalistic grounds—a process that resulted in the emergence of the so-called neo-Sufism. That said, certain key Sufi figures, such as ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī, continued to emphasize the esoteric and spiritual dimensions of Sufism and the superiority of a mystical knowledge over a formal and legalistic one. (One wishes the author would state with more clarity what exactly was al-Nābulī’s contribution to the contemporary Sufi tradition.) Dallal then turns to Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī and Muḥammad Bin ‘Alī al-Sanūsī, and their attempts to reconcile the mystical and the legal knowledge. Having subsequently examined al-Ṣan‘ānī and al-Shawkānī’s criticism of Sufism, the author concludes that their criticism of Sufi practices stemmed from the rejection of the agency of intermediaries between God and man.

The fourth chapter, “Genealogies of Dissent and the Politics of Knowledge,” focuses on the paradigms for political action, shaped by the leading thinkers of the age. The author elaborates on al-Shawkānī’s multifaceted relationship with the state during his rise to power, and then his fall into disgrace, in Zaydī Yemen, arguing that his carefully considered strategy resulted in the carving of a new intellectual identity of a religious scholar, free from the bonds of partisanship and *tamadhbhub*. In particular, Dallal convincingly demonstrates how al-Shawkānī managed to reconcile and synthesize Sunni and Zaydī approaches to *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *uṣūl al-ḥadīth*. He then investigates how the prototype of the ideal intellectual emerges in the writings of al-Ṣan‘ānī and al-Shawkānī, before turning to the eternal problems, “the intellectual and the state” and “the intellectual and the masses.” The author claims that al-Shawkānī, who rejected blind imitation (*taqlīd*) and partisanship

in legal matters, refusing to identify himself as either Zaydi or Sunni, is an excellent epitome of the hybrid identity of an eighteenth-century religious Muslim scholarship.

Chapter 5, “Humanizing the Sacred,” discusses the distinctive features of cultural identities that existed in the eighteenth century, placing them in the context of their regional traditions. The author shows that the prominent thinkers of the time shared the concern about sectarianism and blind imitation as the cause of contemporary socioreligious ills, and the belief that the remedy against them should be sought in an in-depth study of *ḥadīth*. Dallal then provides a comparative outline of the development of regional trends in *ḥadīth* scholarship, focusing on the Yemeni and Indian traditions. Along with the contribution of al-Ṣanʿānī, he examines the legacy of his predecessors, such as Muḥammad Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Wazīr (775–840/1376–1437), the first major Zaydi scholar who attempted a thorough study of *ḥadīth*. The case of al-Ṣanʿānī proves, according to the author, that the eighteenth-century Muslim religious scholars not only expanded but also redefined *ḥadīth* scholarship, in certain aspects surpassing their predecessors. Dallal then turns to India, where, previous to Walī Allāh, the most important expert on *ḥadīth* was ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq al-Dihlawī (d. 1052/1642). However, it was Walī Allāh who, unlike his fellow-Ḥanafī predecessors, completely dismissed the spirit of partisanship in his research: thus, he wrote a two-volume Arabic commentary on Mālik Ibn Anas’s (d. 179/796) *al-Muwattaʿ* and also translated the work into Persian. His commentary of *al-Muwattaʿ* became the cornerstone of Walī Allāh’s new theory of *ḥadīth*, which rests on a redefinition of the concept of the soundness (*siḥḥa*). Dallal justly argues that Walī Allāh’s research on *ḥadīth* inspired him to propose his theory of the supra-school of “the upright path” (*al-jādida al-qawīma*).

The book ends with a forty-page conclusion, “The Limits of the Sacred,” almost entirely devoted to a single thinker, al-Shawkānī. Dallal examines in detail his views on *ijtihād*, mainly in relation to political authority, his contribution to shaping *uṣūl* as a universal interpretive genre of religious learning, his opinion on the sources of *sharīʿa* (al-Shawkānī recognizes only the Quran and the Sunna), and the reasons behind his dismissal of *ijmāʿ* and *qiyās*, before concluding with a short analysis of the concepts of *barāʿa* (innocence) and *fiṭra* (innate nature) as possible subsidiary sources of religious law. The conclusion proper (which summarizes the discussion) is less than two pages long.

There is no doubt that Dallal’s work is a useful and informative contribution to several subfields of Islamic studies, such as Islam in the premodern and early modern period, Islamic reformism/reformist Islam, Islamic religious law, and *ḥadīth*. However, it also merits some critical remarks. Thus, I believe the first part of the title (“Islam without Europe”) is ill-chosen: it is difficult to define the thing by the characteristics it does not possess, or through the absence of relation to the things to which it is not related (say, “Churchill not a Chinese,” or “the library without a rhinoceros”). It would have been better to drop it. Furthermore, as already mentioned, the book has some minor structural issues (thus, the conclusion, focusing on one particular thinker out of six discussed, should better be called “chapter 6”). In terms of the content, one remains puzzled why the author completely ignores Iran and the major Twelver Shiʿi thinkers of the time (such as, for example, Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbahānī (1118–1206/1706–1791)).

That said, the monograph is a valuable contribution that is likely to cater to the needs of graduate students doing research on the subject for a significant period.

Janis Esots is Research Associate at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (London, UK) and Associate Professor at the Department of Asian Studies, University of Latvia. His research focuses on Ismaili thought and the so-called “philosophical school of Isfahan” (Mulla Sadra, Mir Damad, and Rajab ʿAli Tabrizi). He is the managing editor of *Encyclopedia Islamica* (<https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-islamica>) and the editor of the Islamic Philosophy Yearbook *Isbraq* (<http://eng.iph.ras.ru/ishraq.htm>).

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- ¹ Ahmad S. Dallal began his academic career as a researcher of the history of Arabo-Islamic Science: his PhD dissertation (1990) is devoted to the (only) astronomical work of Ṣadr al-Sharīʿa al-Thānī (d. 747/1347) *Kitāb taʿdīl hayʾat al-aflāk*, later becoming a well-known expert on the intellectual history of modern and pre-modern Islam. His previous works include *Islam, Science and the Challenge of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010) and *The Political Theology of ISIS: Prophets, Messiahs, and the 'Extinction of the Grayzone'* (Washington DC-Beirut: Tadween Publishing, 2017).
- ² Albert Hourani (1915-1993) was a British historian of Lebanese pedigree. His early works were devoted to the region of Levant. In his later works, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1789–1939* (1962) and in particular *A History of the Arab Peoples* (1991), he outlined the trends of history and thought common to the entire Arab world.