RETHINKING THE CANONS OF ISLAMIC INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

IN MEMORIAM

THE ELEVENTH ANNUAL VICTOR DANNER MEMORIAL LECTURE

ROGER OWEN
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

November 5, 2010 at 7 p.m.
Dogwood Room, IMU

KHALED EL-ROUAYHEB
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

April 15, 2013 at 7:00 pm
University Club, President’s Room
In Honor of a Dedicated and Beloved Scholar and Mentor,  
Professor Victor Danner

It has now become a cherished custom to publish the Victor Danner Memorial lecture delivered each year. This year we are publishing the lecture “Rethinking the Canons of Islamic Intellectual History” given by the eleventh Danner lecturer Prof. Khaled el-Rouayheb of Harvard University. The thought-provoking lecture generated quite a bit of discussion among the audience members and encouraged all to question the process of canonization in many disciplines but particularly in the field of Islamic Studies. Many lingered after the talk to enjoy the refreshments and continue their conversation with Prof. el-Rouayheb.

If you were able to physically attend the lecture, you will welcome this published version as a memento of the event and the opportunity to continue to reflect on some of the trenchant questions and intriguing comments that were made during the question-and-answer session. If you were not able to attend yourself, I hope you will appreciate the publication of the revised content of that lecture and get a sense of the intellectually stimulating evening that many of us were privileged to enjoy.

As you well know, academically important events of this sort that are such a beneficial and significant component of our students’ overall education and of the life of the department and the university are in need of continuous replenishment of the resources that sustain them. The Danner Lecture fund is greatly in need of your financial support to be able to continue into the future. As a well-wisher and friend of NELC who wishes to guarantee its prosperity and well-being in the coming years, please do consider donating generously specifically to the Danner fund and/or to the NELC IU foundation account.

On behalf of the NELC faculty and students, I thank you in advance for your help during this critical period.

Warm regards,
Asma Afsaruddin  
Chair and Professor  
NELC
Abstract

Modern research on Islamic intellectual history has been selective in its coverage. A number of historic figures are by now relatively well-known and well-researched and their works available in numerous editions easily accessible in modern university libraries. Others, by contrast, have elicited little interest and their works are available only in rare early prints or manuscripts. Selectivity is of course unavoidable, but the criterion on which it is based is often not clear: is it for example intrinsic merit, or historical impact, or contemporary relevance? Such questions become all the more pressing in light of the fact that the “canons” of Islamic intellectual history have changed quite dramatically in the past century: Some of the figures who now loom large were not nearly so prominent a century ago, whereas others who were extremely influential until the mid-nineteenth century are now largely forgotten. My paper will discuss some examples of such dramatic shifts and will argue that unreflective acceptance of historically contingent and shifting canons has seriously limited our understanding of the nature and development of the Islamic intellectual tradition.
The canons of Islamic intellectual history have changed quite significantly in the past century: some of the figures who now loom large were not nearly so prominent a century ago. Two relatively straightforward examples are the philosopher Averroes (d.1198) and the Hanbali religious thinker Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328). Both have to a large extent been rediscovered since the second half of the nineteenth century. The secondary literature on them is extensive, and their extant writings are available in modern editions easily accessible in modern university libraries. They also tend to feature prominently in modern histories of Islamic philosophy and Islamic religious thought. By contrast, other scholars who were extremely influential until the mid-nineteenth century are now almost forgotten. Examples are the North African Ash’ari theologian Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d.1490) and the Central Asian scholar Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d.1390). The historical influence of both until the nineteenth century far overshadowed that of Ibn Taymiyya and Averroes. Sanūsī’s theological and logical works were studied for centuries throughout the Arabic-speaking Sunni world and even beyond: there are pre-modern Turkish, Berber, Fulfulde, Malay,
and Javanese translations or adaptations of his works. Taftāzānī's works on philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, rhetoric and logic were a core part of the curricula of Ottoman, Iranian and Indo-Muslim colleges for half a millennium. Both have seen their influence wane in the course of the twentieth century. They have elicited little scholarly attention, and even their names are unfamiliar to many specialists in Islamic studies.

There are a number of reasons for such shifts in posthumous reputation. The renewed prominence of Ibn Taymiyya, for example, surely has something to do with the noticeable rise of Salafism in the Sunni world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Interest in Averroes has tended to be especially keen in modernist Arab circles in which he is often seen as a tragic hero whose rationalist and philosophic outlook was for long submerged by religious obscurantism. The fact that his works were translated into Latin and exerted a profound influence on the Latin philosophical tradition has also been an understandable source of pride for Arab intellectuals writing under the shadow of western political, economic and technological ascendancy. By contrast, Taftāzānī and Sanūsī have not found comparable modern advocates. Rather, their philosophically—and logically-informed brand of Ashʿari theology fell out of fashion in the modern period, giving way to a renewed interest in either the supposedly more “rationalist” outlook of the Muslim philosophers and Muʿtazili theologians or the supposedly
more “Islamic” approach of the Hanbalis. The scholastic prose of Sanūsī and Taftāzānī also fails to appeal to many modern readers: it is compressed, analytic, densely argumentative, and presupposes familiarity with a range of instrumental sciences such as logic, rhetoric and jurisprudence. Furthermore, the fact that they adopted the typical scholastic literary forms of compressed handbook, commentary and gloss for their writings has also not endeared them to modern observers who—mistakenly as it were—often assume that such literary forms are inherently unoriginal or pedantic. A final obstacle is that the works of Sanūsī and Taftāzānī are often not available in reliable and easily accessible editions. The best editions of their major works are more than a century old. The few editions that have appeared in recent years are often unreliable and betray the editors’ lack of familiarity with the thought and technical terminology of the authors: punctuation and paragraphing is often arbitrary and confusing; explicatory footnotes are often unhelpful and irrelevant.¹ The editions produced in Istanbul and Cairo in the late nineteenth century are far superior, despite lacking the paraphernalia of modern editions. Typesetters and proofreaders of that time clearly had an intimate knowledge of these texts, a knowledge that is now lamentably scarce. But these older editions are rare and difficult to use for

modern readers, lacking as they do punctuation, paragraphing and explanatory footnotes.

A lot of attention has been given in recent decades to the question of “orientalism” and the ways in which western scholarship has constructed a distorted image of Islamic history. The examples I have mentioned point to a current of influence that flows in the opposite direction: the ways in which western scholarship on Islamic intellectual history mirrors contemporary trends in the Islamic world, and inherits the partisan historical narratives of such contemporary trends. Further examples are easy to adduce: European scholars in the nineteenth century gave some attention to figures such as Ījī (d.1355), Jurjānī (d.1413) and Sanūsī (d.1490)—these were after all the figures who were being studied in Ottoman, Egyptian and North African colleges at that time. But such interest waned in the twentieth century, in step with the waning influence of such figures in the Islamic world. At the same time, western scholarly interest in Ibn Taymiyya has increased dramatically in the course of the twentieth century, in step with his increased resonance in modern Sunni Islam. To take two more examples: The idea that ijtihād is the “principle of movement in

Islam”, and that the Islamic intellectual tradition stagnated in later centuries due to ijtihād being proscribed or curtailed, is not simply an orientalist construction, as is often believed, but seems rather to have been taken over by western scholars from self-styled Muslim reformers such as Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d.1905), Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d.1932), and Muḥammad Iqbāl (d.1938). The predominance of “the school of Isfahan” in western accounts of later Islamic philosophy reflects quite closely the dominant narrative in Iranian madrasas since the nineteenth century.

There are various ways in which this “east-to-west” influence works: western scholars often spend part of their student years in Islamic countries and sometimes develop strong connections with local intellectuals. Furthermore, the bulk of printed editions with which western scholars tend to work are published in the Islamic world. What gets published there is, understandably, a reflection of contemporary trends and interests. Such editions make their way to university libraries in the west and are then used by researchers and students. Few western scholars and graduate students have the inclination to read obscure, technical and demanding scholastic works in manuscripts or rare early prints, at least not without a clear idea of why they should do so.

It is of course an illusion to think that we can give equal attention to each and every author whose works have come down to us. Selectivity is inevitable in any coverage of Islamic intellectual history,
and this selectivity arguably cannot but reflect modern concerns and tastes. To quote the Italian author Italo Svevo, writing approximately a century ago:

The past is always new; as life proceeds it changes, because parts of it that may have once seemed to have sunk into oblivion rise to the surface and others vanish without a trace because they have come to have such slight importance. The present conducts the past in the way a conductor conducts an orchestra. It wants these particular sounds, or those—and no others. That explains why the past may at times seem very long and at times very short … The only part of it that is highlighted is the part that has been summoned up to illumine, and to distract us from, the present.  

There is surely some truth to this. Nevertheless, I would want to argue that as academic historians we should not simply succumb to the unreflective, present-centered selectivity that Svevo so eloquently evokes. I shall offer two reasons, the first more philosophical, and the second more historical.

Philosophically, one might object to the idea that we in the present stand with the past in full view and then pick and choose various parts of it that we happen to find congenial or interesting. This radically voluntarist model—which seems to derive from Nietzsche—is surely

one-sided. It ignores the fact that the direction of influence goes the other way too: that the past influences and forms the present, and that it is impossible for us to free ourselves at will from that influence and face the past as a conductor faces his or her orchestra. This is a point that has been stressed in our time by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Alasdair MacIntyre. Both philosophers have emphasized that our present perspective is grounded in our history, by a tradition in which we stand whether we know it or not—‘arafta am lam taʿrifi, to adapt a well-known expression from the mystical poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ.⁴

I shall not pursue this point, however, partly because I am not a professional philosopher, and partly because this discussion takes place at a very high level of generality and it is not so easy to derive from it concrete prescriptive or methodological conclusions regarding historical practice. Neither Gadamer nor MacIntyre seem particularly troubled by highly selective canons or offer a straightforward critique of them.

The second, more historical reason, on which I shall spend most of the time remaining, is that unreflective acceptance of contemporary canons of Islamic intellectual history can lead our historical interpretations and narratives astray. I shall give a number of examples of this:

One example is from the field of Qur’anic exegesis: Modern studies of the historical development of Qur’anic exegesis often give a prominent place to the Tafsīr of the fourteenth-century Damascene scholar Ibn Kathīr (d.1373). In the recently published (and generally very helpful) Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an Ibn Kathīr and his mentor Ibn Taymiyya feature prominently, and they have more entries in the index to that volume than any other pre-modern Qur’an exegete save al-Ṭabarī (d.923).\(^5\) An influential survey of the historical development of Qur’anic exegesis is entitled “Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr”.\(^6\) There is nevertheless good reason to believe that Ibn Kathīr’s exegesis was of marginal importance until it was printed by the Salafi reformer Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā in the early twentieth century. There are conspicuously few references to it in the biographical literature of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and in the many athbāt (i.e. collection of certificates and lines of transmission for teaching individual works) that were written in this period.\(^7\) It is clear that until the modern period

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7 See for example the list of Qur’an commentaries studied in late-sixteenth century Ottoman imperial colleges in Shahab Ahmed and Nenad Filipovic, “The Sultan’s Syllabus,” Studia Islamica 98/99 (2004): 183-218. See also the list of Commentaries given by the prominent Azhari scholar Muḥammad al-Amīr al-Sunbāwī (d.1817) in his Thabat, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥusayn (Beirut: Dar al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyyah, 2009), 259-269. One is also struck by the absence of references to Ibn Kathīr’s commentary in the voluminous Gloss by the Azhari scholar Sulaymān al-Jamal (d.1790) on Tafsīr al-Jalālayn; see his al-Futūḥat al-ilāḥiyah bi-tawḍīḥ tafsīr al-Jalālayn li-l-daqā‘iq al-Khaffiyah (Cairo: Al-
other fourteenth-century exegeses by, for example, al-Bayḍāwī (d.1316), al-Ḥusayn al-Ṭībī (d.1343), Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī (d.1344), and al-Samīn al-Ḥalabī (d.1355), were far more influential in mainstream Sunni circles than that of Ibn Kathīr. Such exegeses may be less influential today in the Sunni Islamic world—Fazlur Rahman characteristically castigated them for burying the message of the Quran under the debris of grammar and rhetoric. Be that as it may, any presentation of the historical development of Qurʾanic exegesis that anachronistically back-projects the importance of Ibn Kathīr’s exegesis is misleading. So are statements—made in recent authoritative overviews of the genre of tafsīr—that Ibn Kathīr marks a turning point in the evolution of the genre of tafsīr, or that Islamic exegetes in later centuries preferred to keep a distance to grammatical analysis and to rely on exegesis via traditional reports—the so-called tafsīr bi-l-maʾthūr. Indeed the grammatically- and rhetorically-oriented exegeses that were so influential in later centuries resist the common but all too neat division into tafsīr bi-l-raʾy and tafsīr bi-l-maʾthūr. And I would add that this division is itself of questionable historical value. It has all too often simply


been adopted by modern scholars as a neutral and straightforward division, without due attention to its polemical use by traditionalists such as Ibn Taymiyya, al-Dhahabī (d.1348), Ibn Kathīr and al-Suyūṭī (d.1505). It is not clear whether there was ever any exegete who admitted that his exegesis was a tafsīr bi-l-raʾy. The sixteenth-century Ottoman scholar Ṭashköprüzāde (d.1561), for example, did not consider even the exegesis of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210) to be tafsīr bi-l-raʾy.10

Another example is from the field of Islamic theology (kalām). At least since Gardet and Anawati’s learned Introduction à la théologie musulmane,11 a widespread assumption amongst western specialists has been that the discipline of kalām is basically a defensive or apologetic discipline. In medieval Europe, theology was the queen of the sciences and pursued for its own sake as a way of deepening the believer’s understanding of the “mysteries” of the Christian faith. By contrast, in the Islamic world—or so it is often claimed—kalām was never as highly regarded as the discipline of Islamic law (fiqh) and had legitimacy only insofar as it might be helpful to defend a creed that was already known via revelation against the arguments of heretics and unbelievers. This supposed purpose of kalām has even been enshrined in the widely used translation “dialectical

theology.” As a description of attitudes in contemporary Sunni Islam, such a generalization may not be too far from the mark. But as a historical statement, it is far from adequate. In the much-maligned period from 1250 to 1850, the prevalent attitude was very different. When one looks at the works of Taftāzānī and Sanūsī one encounters the view that kalām is the most important of the religious sciences; that kalām—by contrast to Islamic law—demands demonstrative certainty, not mere dialectical preponderance; and that religious faith based on knowledge of the rational proofs of kalām is inherently superior to religious faith by imitation of elders and peers (taqlīd). Sanūsī was even inclined to the radical view that a nominal Muslim who unreflectively accepts the articles of faith and has no knowledge of their rational proofs is not a Muslim in the eyes of God and will be damned on the Day of Judgment. And to repeat, Sanūsī was by no means a marginal or maverick figure: His works were studied throughout Islamic Africa (and even beyond) for centuries and still dominated the teaching of theology at the Azhar when Muḥammad ʿAbduh was a student. In other words, it turns out that the view that kalām is of marginal importance; that its purpose is purely apologetic; that it is essentially dialectical; etc. is based on a highly selective reading of Islamic intellectual history that unwittingly elides traditions and figures that until around 1900 were still of central importance.

12 Sanūsī, Sharḥ Umm al-Barāḥīn, ed. Muḥammad Ṣādiq Darwīsh (Damascus: Dār al-Bayrūṭī, 2009), 27-35
Yet another example comes from the later history of Sufi thought. An influential narrative has it that later Sufism largely accepted the idea of waḥdat al-wujūd propounded by Ibn ʿArabī (d.1240) until the appearance of Aḥmad Sirhindī (d.1624) who criticized this idea and proposed waḥdat al-shuhūd as an alternative view. This narrative has been refined in a number of ways by recent research: Friedmann and ter Haar have both emphasized that Sirhindī’s attitude to Ibn ʿArabī was in no way purely negative, and that he repeatedly expressed admiration for the Andalusian mystic.\(^\text{13}\) William Chittick and James Morris have both protested against the tendency to impute the theory of waḥdat al-wujūd to Ibn ʿArabī—he himself never used the formula—and to see it as encapsulating his world-view.\(^\text{14}\) This tendency, they argue, really only appears with later commentators on Ibn ʿArabī’s Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam. Especially Chittick has called for greater focus on Ibn ʿArabī’s al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya as opposed to the more systematic, philosophically influenced expositions of the Fuṣūṣ commentators. These qualifications of the “Ibn ʿArabī versus

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Sirhindī” narrative are important. But I would like to supplement them by drawing attention to a later Sufi tradition that to some extent has remained strangely absent from these discussions. There is considerable evidence that substantial portions of the North African and Egyptian Shādhilī traditions in later centuries consciously kept a distance to the more controversial ideas expressed in the Fuṣūṣ and its commentaries, even while defending Ibn ʿArabī himself as a saint and sometimes quoting extensively from his other works such as the Futūḥāt. Sufi figures such as ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī (d.1565), Muḥammad b. Abī l-Ḥasan al-Bakrī (d.1586), and Mullā ‘Alī al-Qāriʾ (d.1604), expressed respect for Ibn ʿArabī while explaining away or even explicitly rejecting the formula of waḥdat al-wujūd and other controversial ideas of the Fuṣūṣ commentators (such as the faith of Pharaoh or the eventual passing away of hell-fire). Al-Bakrī, writing a few years before Sirhindī was born, even explicitly stated: “the unity is experiential, not existential” (al-waḥdatu shuhūdiyyatun la wujūdiyyatun).

Despite the valuable pioneering research of Paul Nwyia, John Renard and Victor Danner, the Shādhilī tradition that was so powerful a presence in the Arabic-speaking countries throughout later centuries has not received sufficient scholarly

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15 Taʾbīd al-minnah fi taʿyīd al-sunnah (MS: Princeton University Library, Yahuda 253), fol. 106b-111b, at fol. 110b.
attention, nor has this tradition satisfactorily been brought to bear on the somewhat Indo-centric “Ibn ʿArabī versus Sirhindī” narrative.

My last example comes from the field of philosophy. Until the middle of the twentieth century, it was widely believed among western scholars that the tradition of Islamic philosophy came to an end with Averroes in the twelfth century. Thanks mainly to the pioneering efforts of Henri Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, we now know that this was by no means the case and that important philosophical thinking continued well beyond the twelfth century. Both Corbin and Nasr drew attention to the so-called “school of Isfahan” in the seventeenth century and especially to the figure of ʿṢadrā (d.1635). Regrettably, the subsequent tendency has been simply to amend the older canon of Islamic philosophy to include the later Iranian Shiʿi synthesis of Neoplatonic philosophy and mysticism. This has had a number of unfortunate consequences: For example, the period between the twelfth and the seventeenth century remains severely understudied. It is clear that Mullā ʿṢadrā drew on, and presumed that his readers were familiar with, the works of among others Taftāzānī, Jurjānī, Dawānī (d.1502), ʿṢadr al-Dīn Dashtakī (d.1498) and Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dashtakī (d.1542). But the tendency to simply “jump” from Avicenna and Suhrawardī (d.1191) to Mullā ʿṢadrā has not allowed us to explore the ways in which Mullā ʿṢadrā’s writings relate to his immediate intellectual tradition. Especially Dawānī
seems to have prefigured important aspects of Mullā Ṣadrā’s philosophy, for example drawing on Avicennan and Illuminationist philosophy to construct a philosophical defense of the monistic ontology of Ibn ʿArabī. Another unfortunate tendency has been the almost exclusive focus on Mullā Ṣadrā and his teacher Mīr Dāmād (d.1631). Even in Iran, the predominance of these two figures was, and to some extent remains, fiercely contested. For example Āqā Ḫusayn Khwānsārī (d.1687), the most prominent philosopher at the court of the Safavid Shah Sulaymān I (r. 1666-1694), was critical of both figures.\textsuperscript{17} The prevalent narrative of later Islamic philosophy also tends to elide the fact that a great deal of philosophical activity took place in the Mughal and Ottoman Empires in the early modern period. The Mughal and Ottoman philosophical literature is only just beginning to receive scholarly attention, but even preliminary investigations reveal that the concerns of these philosophers were not necessarily aligned with those of their Safavid and Qajar colleagues. Ottoman and Mughal philosophers seem to have been much more concerned with logic and natural philosophy than with the question of ṣālat al-māhiyya versus ṣālat al-wujūd.\textsuperscript{18} Even

\textsuperscript{17} See his Ḩāshiya ‘alā Ilāhiyyāt al-Shifā’ (Qom, 1378/1999) and his Ḩāshiya ‘alā Shurūḥ al-Ishārāt (Qom, 1378/1999).

\textsuperscript{18} Sajjad Rizvi notes this in his “Mīr Dāmād in India: Islamic Philosophical Traditions and the Problem of Creation,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 131(2011), 18-19. The same is true of Ottoman scholarly circles. A widely glossed handbook in Ottoman colleges was the Gloss by Muṣliḥ al-Dīn Lārī (d.1579) on the section on natural philosophy in the commentary of Qāḍī Mīr Maybudī (d.1504) on Abharī’s Hidāyat al-ḥikma. See the super-glosses of Mehmed Kefevī
the name of Mullā Ṣadrā seems to have been unknown to Ottoman philosophers writing toward the end of the eighteenth century such as Ismāʿīl Gelenbevi (d.1791). Mughal scholars were aware of at least some of the works of Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā, but it is interesting to note that they were particularly interested in Mullā Ṣadrā’s commentary on the section on natural philosophy from Abhari’s Hidāyat al-ḥikma and in Mīr Dāmād’s al-Ufuq al-mubīn that deals inter alia with issues in logic.¹⁹ Neither work has received much attention from modern scholars.

In recent years, the argument has been made that in Islamic civilization philosophy was never adopted into the curricula of the madrasas, and that especially the tradition of natural philosophy consequently petered out in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁰ By contrast, in Western Europe philosophy and especially natural philosophy continued to be studied in universities. This difference in turn is supposed to help explain why there was never a scientific revolution in the Islamic world. To

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¹⁹ For example, the edition of Mullā Ṣadrā’s Sharḥ Hidāyat al-ḥikma lithographed in Lucknow in 1308/1890-1 (by Maṭba‘a’ al-‘Ulūm) with the glosses of ʿAbd al-Ḥayy Lakhnawī (d.1886) only includes the section on physics. This appears to have been the only work by Mullā Ṣadrā published in India.

be fair, one cannot fault historians of western science for putting forward this contrast, since they must rely on what specialists of Islamic philosophy have written, and we in turn sometimes give the impression that all that remained of Islamic philosophy in later times was the synthesis of Neoplatonism, mysticism and Shi‘ism that is sometimes referred to as ‘irfān. The fact is that there was a keen interest in natural philosophy in Islamic lands in the early modern period, and that the discipline formed a regular part of the curricula of Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal madrasas. Thousands of manuscript folios on natural philosophy from this period remain unedited and unstudied.

To conclude: I have tried to bring out some of the ways in which our sense of the historical development of fields such as Qur’anic exegesis, kalām, Sufism, and Islamic philosophy has been distorted by a largely unreflective acceptance of historically contingent canons of thinkers and traditions. My point is related to, and in part inspired by, two contemporary approaches to western intellectual history. Historians of political thought such as Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock have emphasized the importance of going beyond canons of “great thinkers” and instead situating texts and arguments in their intellectual context, in the process unearthing authors and works that may be largely forgotten now but had a formative influence in their time and on the more “canonical” people we are studying.²¹ Historians of print-culture in eighteenth century 21 Quentin Skinner, Vision of Politics: Volume One: Regarding
France (Robert Darnton, Roger Chartier) have also delivered a powerful critique of the complacent acceptance of canons of great thinkers. Such historians have shown that what was actually read in pre-revolutionary France bears little resemblance to the post facto constructed canon of great philosophes: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau.22 A study of Mullā Ṣadrā, for example, that is informed of such approaches to intellectual history would not be satisfied with simply comparing his ideas to those of Avicenna, Suhrāwardī and Ibn ʿArabī. It would rather seek to locate his ideas in relation to prominent fifteenth- and sixteenth-century figures such as Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī, Ṣadr al-Dīn Dashtakī, Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dashtakī, Mīrzā Jān Bāghnawī (d.1586), and Fakhr al-Dīn Sammākī (d.1576) whom we know were being studied in Iranian madrasas in Mullā Ṣadrā’s time.

The approach that I am advocating would involve working extensively with primary biographical and bibliographic sources, and with manuscripts and old rare prints and lithographs. This is not only difficult; it also goes against a widespread view in present-day Islamic studies that such historically oriented work on manuscripts and rare prints amounts to engaging in a woefully outdated “philology.”

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is in my view a most unfortunate attitude. Specialists in European history can perhaps afford to feel that “philology” is passé—after all, they can rely on the monumental efforts of nineteenth—and early twentieth century philological scholarship and the plethora of excellent editions that this scholarship has generated. We in the field of Arabic and Islamic studies can hardly afford to adopt this attitude when we know so little about literary, religious, theological, philosophical and scientific currents in the post-Mongol period. There is surely no alternative to careful, historically sensitive work with manuscripts and rare prints if the aim is to recover large parts of Islamic intellectual and literary history, thus helping to rethink and question received historical narratives and canons. Resting content with researching the few authors who—for one reason or other—have already escaped the obscurity that envelops this later period risks leading to a position that, to borrow a term from development studies, can be called “the development of underdevelopment”—clusters of research develop around a few figures (such as Ibn Taymiyya or Ibn Khaldūn or Mullā Ṣadrā or Aḥmad Sirhindī) whereas the surrounding intellectual context and the larger historical contours remain distressingly obscure.


Khaled El-Rouayheb is the Gardner Cowles Associate Professor of Islamic Intellectual History at the Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations at Harvard University. His research interests include the intellectual and cultural history of the Arabic-Islamic world in the early-modern period (1500-1800), the history of Arabic logic, Islamic theology, and philosophy. He holds a BA in Philosophy from the University of Copenhagen (Denmark), a MA in Middle Eastern History from the American University of Beirut (Lebanon), and a PhD (2003) in Oriental Studies from the University of Cambridge (United Kingdom). He has been a Junior Research Fellow of the British Academy (2003–2006), a Junior Mellon Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (2008–2009), and a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (2011–12).

Professor Victor Danner was born on October 22, 1926, in Irapuato, Guanajuato, Mexico to Arthur James and Maria Lopez Danner. As a young man, he served his country during WWII. After the war he attended Georgetown University where he received his B.A. magna cum laude in 1957. Later that year he traveled to Morocco to become an instructor and eventually Director of the American Language Center, sponsored by the US Information Service. While there he took advantage of the opportunity not only to get acquainted with the country but also to perfect his knowledge of classical Arabic texts.

In 1964, Professor Danner returned to the US for his doctoral studies and graduated from Harvard in 1970. He came to IU in 1967 and was a professor of Arabic and Religious Studies at Indiana University until his death in 1990. He served as Chairman of the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures Department for five years, and was an enthusiastic supporter of the Middle Eastern Studies Program.

He was an internationally renowned scholar in the fields of Islamic mysticism, comparative religion, and classical Arabic literature. In 1976, he was invited to speak at the international World Festival of Islam in London. Professor Danner was also active in a number of professional organizations, including the Washington D.C.-based Foundation for Traditional Studies, for which he served as Secretary-Treasurer. He wrote *Ibn 'Ata 'Allah's Sufi Aphorisms* (1973); *Ibn 'Ata 'Allah: The Book of Wisdom*, (1978); and *The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction* (1988), in addition to over twenty-five articles and reviews. One of his students, Lauri King Irani, captured his essence: “As a teacher, Victor Danner had few equals. He taught Arabic, classical Arabic literature, Islam, Sufism, the Qur’an, comparative religion, comparative mysticism, and Eastern religions. His dignified bearing, elegant gestures, and verbal eloquence transformed his lectures into performances which had the power to captivate and inspire his students, whether he was discussing Arabic grammar or Islamic theology. His concern for and encouragement of his students, coupled with his understated sense of humor, earned him a well-deserved reputation as a caring and committed educator who taught not only when behind the classroom lectern, but also by example.”