Eleventh Annual Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in Islamic Studies

April 15, 2013 at 7:00 pm
University Club - President’s Room
Indiana Memorial Union

Rethinking the Canons of Islamic Intellectual History

Presented by:
Professor Khaled El-Rouayheb
Harvard University

Opening Remarks by:
Professor Asma Afsaruddin
Chair of NELC

Co-sponsored by College Arts and Humanities Institute, Islamic Studies Program, Department of History, and Medieval Studies Institute
Khaled El-Rouayheb is the Gardner Cowles Associate Professor of Islamic Intellectual History in 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).

His publications include the two monographs Before Homosexuality in the Arabic-Islamic World, 1500–1800 (University of Chicago Press, 2005), translated into French (2010) and Slovenian (2012), and Relational Syllogisms & the History of Arabic Logic, 900-1900 (Brill, 2010). His edition with an introduction of Kashf al-asrar ‘an ghawamid al-afkar by Afdal al-Din al-Khunaji (d.1248), published by the Iranian Institute for Philosophy (2010), was selected in 2011 as the distinguished book by the National Library and Archives of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He has published a number of articles, encyclopedia entries, and book reviews and is a co-editor (with Sabine Schmidtke) of the forthcoming Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy.

Abstract of Lecture

Modern research on Islamic intellectual history has been selective in its coverage. A number of historic figures are by now relatively well-known, and their works are available in numerous editions accessible in modern university libraries. Others, by contrast, have elicited little interest and their works are available only in rare prints or manuscripts. Selectivity is 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 more pressing in light of the fact that the “canons” of Islamic intellectual history have changed dramatically in the past century. My presentation will discuss examples of such dramatic shifts and argue that unreflective acceptance of historically contingent and shifting canons has limited our understanding of the nature and development of the Islamic intellectual tradition.
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.”

_He who is illumined at the beginning is illumined at the end._
-from the _Sufi Aphorisms_ by Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah (d. 1309) Translated by Victor Danner
We would like to offer our sincere thanks to the generous people who have already contributed to the Victor Danner Memorial fund.

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Thank you!

Asma Afsaruddin
NELC Chair & Professor