



Islamic intellectual history in the seventeenth century

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BOOK REVIEW

Review of **Islamic intellectual history in the seventeenth century**, by Khaled el-Rouayheb, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, xvi+399 pp., £67 (hardback), ISBN: 9781107042964.

This book is a groundbreaking study on post-classical Islamic philosophy which I expect to have a lasting impact on the field. Whereas others have used an author or a book as a focus to break into the vast subject of post-classical Islamic philosophy, El-Rouayheb limits himself to a time period and a region. He sets up his base camp in the seventeenth century, an interesting choice as this is right before what *A History of Muslim Philosophy* calls ‘The Dark Age.’¹ He further limits himself to the Islamic part of the Mediterranean; North Africa, the Levant, and Anatolia. This too is an interesting choice, as most attention has so far gone to Safavid Iran and the Persianate world defined by Shahab Ahmed as the ‘Balkans-to-Bengal Complex.’² The book’s ambition is therefore to break through old narratives and introduce a new vista onto the post-classical period. In this, El-Rouayheb succeeds. He suggests that additionally this book should be seen as a charge against Eurocentric views of intellectual history, showing that just as there are interesting thinkers active in seventeenth-century Europe, so we can also find interesting thinkers in the Islamic world. My impression is that on this count, El-Rouayheb is less convincing and would have benefited from a methodology informed by comparative philosophy. As it is, the book only summarily goes into this thorny question in the introduction and conclusion. This is easily forgiven though, considering the vast amount of historical facts and central tenets he introduces for the very first time for a scholarly audience. Asking more would be unfair. In fact, asking less would be a more reasonable request. El-Rouayheb covers three different topics, each rich enough to merit an individual book. That he chose to include them all in one volume without apparent loss of command of the material, painstakingly teased out of hundreds of primary sources (including 40 from manuscripts), speaks to his erudition and tenacity.

The first topic El-Rouayheb goes into is the hitherto unstudied resurgence of intellectual activity in the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century. He points out that this has gone unnoticed in modern scholarship because of a selective reading of sources focussing on Istanbul. Kurdish regions were meanwhile blossoming and provided a link for Ottoman intellectuals to interesting books from the Safavid Empire. El-Rouayheb then sets out to show what has come from this resurgence, focussing on the discipline of *ādāb al-baḥṭh*. The title of this section, ‘A Discourse on Method,’ is a clear nod towards René Descartes, setting high expectations. It turns out to be a rather dry discussion of dialectics and logic and as such it was for me personally the least interesting part of this book. The issue of interest and importance manifests itself best in the last section, in which El-Rouayheb discusses Müneccimbāṣī’s (d. 1702) treatise on reading privately as an integral part to study as opposed to hearing a lecture. No doubt is El-Rouayheb right to give prominence to this text, but its effect was felt on the large group of students, not on the most brilliant senior intellectuals. Clearly, the brightest minds of the Islamic world had been conducting their research through private reading for centuries, simply because they dealt with topics that only very few understood. The importance of Müneccimbāṣī’s treatise then lies in bringing this method to a larger audience, not per se in stimulating intellectual activity of the highest caliber. Meanwhile, Descartes’ method provided

a solution to the problem of Pappus which gave birth to analytical geometry. As such, the comparison with Descartes falls a bit flat.

The second topic of El-Rouayheb's book excited me most, describing events in North Africa. He starts off demonstrating how the study of logic at the highest level included dozens of people. Their biggest achievement was the influence they wielded on students in Cairo. He then dedicates a chapter to Sanūsī, who did not live in the seventeenth century (he died in 1490) but whose influence was still felt at that time. Scholarly attention for Sanūsī was long overdue and with El-Rouayheb this intellectual is in good hands. El-Rouayheb concentrates on the most defining aspect of Sanūsī: his conviction that everybody should at least know a bit of rational theology. El-Rouayheb provides a very pleasant, thorough read on the debate on whether unquestioning imitation (*taqlīd*) is a virtue or a vice and the place Sanūsī occupies in this. Given the huge influence Sanūsī had, this discussion is an effective attack on the stereotype of Islam as promoting a slavish, anti-intellectual attitude. The influence of Sanūsī is demonstrated by El-Rouayheb's discussion of al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī (d. 1691). Yūsī found himself amidst people who put the Sanūsī-doctrine to its logical extreme: anybody who does not know the fine points of theology is an unbeliever. Yūsī did not agree with this and renegotiated the amount of theological knowledge is required. Another debate with which Yūsī engaged is a discussion over what exactly the negation refers to in the profession of faith 'There is no god but God.' Many different positions were defended, and in one court-staged debate tensions apparently ran so high that one debater demanded the execution of the other, upon which the other fainted. El-Rouayheb's detailed analysis of both discussions attest to the engagement and advanced level of intellectual discourse in the seventeenth-century Maghreb.

The third topic deals with the influence of Ibn 'Arabī in the Levant. El-Rouayheb shows that this influence is more varied than previously believed. His discussion begins with the sixteenth century, showing that there was a general trend of accepting Ibn 'Arabī while refusing the *waḥdat al-wujūd* doctrine introduced by the early commentators; the idea that 'God is identical with absolute existence and that the phenomenal world is nothing but a phantasm or mirage that does not strictly speaking exist at all' (p. 315). This sets the stage for a new turn in the seventeenth century, with Kūrānī (d. 1690) and Nābulusī (d. 1731) as prominent supporters of Ibn 'Arabī's thought. To show how subversive their ideas were, here is El-Rouayheb's list of issues on which they opposed established Ash'arī theology:

They attacked the value of the discipline of *kalām*; upheld the validity of the religious beliefs of the 'imitator' (*muqallid*); rejected the figurative reinterpretation of apparent anthropomorphisms in the Quran and hadith; challenged the mainstream Ash'arī view of the nature of God's eternal Speech; rejected occasionalism and the mainstream Ash'arī view of the creation of human voluntary acts; and emphasized that God acts in accordance with what is objectively good and wise. (pp. 306–307)

On top of that, El-Rouayheb convincingly shows that this opposition did not result in an esoteric, pantheistic world view, but in fact aligns closely with Ḥanbalī thought. Remarkably, the surge of Salafism in the modern era may therefore in part be due to the efforts of monist mystics in the centuries before. El-Rouayheb concludes this part with a solid analysis of the discussion on *waḥdat al-wujūd*. First El-Rouayheb discusses Taftāzānī's (d. 1390) criticism on this doctrine, as a representative of the camp against this idea. Then he discusses Kūrānī's and Nābulusī's defense of it. Because of the clarity, this analysis is a good starting point for interested newcomers, and because of the new material it offers, it should also interest more advanced scholars.

For each part of the book, El-Rouayheb divides his attention roughly evenly between historical facts and philosophical analysis. In the end, though, he needs to cover so much

ground, and his results are so provocative, that we are left with more questions than answers. This is, of course, a very happy result and I suspect many scholars will continue on the path that El-Rouayheb has pointed out. It does mean that the book is more geared towards scholars of this specific time frame and of these specific issues rather than a broader audience. This is especially true of the third part. One of the great merits of this book is the inclusion of the names and death dates of more than 400 intellectuals, the vast majority who have never before appeared in print, in Latin alphabet and Gregorian calendar date. There is therefore also an encyclopedic use to this book. In this regard a major drawback is that El-Rouayheb does not include Hijrī calendar dates and also has the habit of giving the name of the same person in different ways. For example, on p. 160 he refers to Iḳfānī but clearly means to refer to Ibn al-Aḳfānī (cf. p. 143). This is especially problematic for people who he is basically introducing for the first time. On p. 215 the first three lines of the page all begin with the name of the same person but first we read al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī, then we read Ḥasan al-Yūsī, and then we read Yūsī. On p. 206 we read both ‘Īsā al-Suḡtānī and simply Suḡtānī. And should we say ‘Abdullāh al-‘Ayyāshī (p. 35) or Abū Sālim al-‘Ayyāshī (p. 205)? Sometimes this person is simply referred to as ‘Ayyāshī (e.g. p. 162), but on p. 151 his father is referred to as such and he himself as Abū Sālim ‘Abdullāh. The next scholar who is going to work on these persons will have the hard job of establishing a uniform, agreed upon name.

Lastly I would like to point out what unifies all three topics, which is the emphasis on *taḥqīq*, translated by El-Rouayheb as verification. I think it is clear from his book that this term held a tremendous power for any Islamic intellectual in and around the seventeenth century, seeing it as the ultimate goal and each claiming it for themselves. It is not given central stage by El-Rouayheb and so what exactly was meant by the term remains vague. A concentrated study on it will be most welcome, for which El-Rouayheb’s book is a great springboard.

In short, then, El-Rouayheb’s book is a highly provocative study. He has successfully busted open a sorely understudied period of Islamic intellectual history. By this I mean that I do not expect this book to be the final say on the seventeenth century, but rather a source from which will hopefully follow many more studies. For anyone interested in post-classical Islamic intellectual history this book is a mandatory read.

Notes

1. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vii.
2. Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. This term is itself an antithesis to Hodgson’s ‘Nile to Oxus’ term, cf. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, Volume 1: The Classical Age of Islam*, 60–62.

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