CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

Dominant narratives of Islamic intellectual history have tended to be unkind to the seventeenth century in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. Three independent narratives of "decline" – an Ottomanist, an Arabist, and an Islamist – have converged on deprecating the period as either a sad epilogue to an earlier Ottoman florescence or a dark backdrop to the later Arab "renaissance" and Islamic "revival." Until recently, Ottomanists typically located the heyday of Ottoman cultural and intellectual achievement in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. After the death of Süleymān the Magnificent in 1566, the Empire was supposed to have entered a period of long decline that affected both its political-military fortunes and its cultural-intellectual output.[1] Scholars of Arabic literature and thought were inclined to view the seventeenth century as yet another bleak chapter of cultural, intellectual, and societal "decadence" (*inḥiṭāṭ*) that began with the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and came to an end only with the "Arab awakening" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[2] Historians who study self-styled Islamic

[1] For classic statements of this view, see Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1973), 179–185, and S. J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, Vol. 1: Empire of the Gazis: The Rise and Decline of the Ottoman Empire, 1280–1808* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 169ff.

[2] A classic statement of this view is R. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 442ff. For more recent reiterations, see G. El-Shayyal, "Some Aspects of Intellectual and Social Life in Eighteenth-Century Egypt," in P. M. Holt (ed.), *Political and Social Change in Modern Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 117–132, and P. M. Holt, "The Later Ottoman Empire in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent," in P. M. Holt, A. K. Lambton, and B. Lewis (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), I, 374–393.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

"reformist" and "revivalist" movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have often portrayed the immediately preceding centuries as marked by unthinking scholarly "imitation" (*taqlīd*), crude Sufi pantheism, and "syncretic" and idolatrous popular religious practices.[3]

To be sure, such assessments are no longer accepted unquestioningly in academic circles. But their influence is still felt in the woefully underdeveloped state of research into the intellectual history of the seventeenth century in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. The tide is turning, though, and recent years have seen a number of valuable monographs, doctoral dissertations, and editions of scholarly works.[4] The present book is intended as a contribution to the ongoing reassessment of the period. Its focus is on a number of hitherto unnoticed intellectual trends among the scholarly elite – the *ulema* – in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa in the seventeenth century. Though the *ulema* are mentioned in almost any history of the period, our knowledge of their intellectual preoccupations is still much more meager than our knowledge of their institutional contexts and their potential political role as intermediaries between rulers and ruled.[5] This gap in our knowledge has tended to be reinforced by a number of factors. Most scholarly writings by seventeenth-century Ottoman *ulema* are in Arabic (not Turkish) and tend to be dense and technical – neither characteristic endearing them to Ottomanists. Modern historians have also tended to assume that the interests of the Ottoman *ulema* were by the seventeenth century quite narrow (largely confined to Islamic law, Quran exegesis, and grammar), and that their writings overwhelmingly consisted of unoriginal and pedantic commentaries

[3] This view forms an important part of the rhetoric of Muslim self-styled reformers such as Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), and Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938). Two influential expositions of it are to be found in Abū l-Ḥasan Nadwī's *Mādhā khasira al-ʿālam bi-inḥiṭāṭ al-muslimīn*, first printed in 1950 and going through numerous reprints, and Aḥmad Amīn's *Zuʿamāʾ al-iṣlāḥ fī l-ʿaṣr al-ḥadīth*, first printed in 1948 and also frequently reprinted. A more sophisticated expression of the view is to be found in Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (1st ed., 1966; 2nd ed., 2002; Chicago: University of Chicago Press,), 196–211.

[4] See, for example, the articles, monographs, or dissertations by Ralf Elger, Dina LeGall, Stefan Reichmuth, Derin Terzioglu, and Barbara von Schlegell listed in the bibliography; see also the editions of the works of Nābulusī, Yūsī, and Kūrānī by Samer Akkach, Bakri Aladdin, Oman Fathurahman, and Hamid Hammani.

[5] For a good sense of recent scholarship on the Ottoman and North African *ulema*, see M. Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Postclassical Age (1600–1800)* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1988); D. Klein, *Die osmanischen Ulema des 17. Jahrhunderts: eine geschlossene Gesellschaft?* (Berlin: Klaus Schwartz, 2007); J. Hathaway, *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule, 1516–1800* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2008), 114–137, 262–266.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

and glosses on earlier works –assumptions that have not exactly invited closer study.[6] Furthermore, intellectual history has itself been under something of a cloud in recent years. The tendency of historians of ideas to focus on the intellectual elite and to situate ideas in the context of other ideas (as opposed to social and political realities) is sometimes seen as unfashionable.[7] Many historians now prefer to explore new avenues of research untainted by suspicions of elitism and old fashion, for example, popular culture and mentalities. Some of this new research is impressive and very welcome.[8] Less welcome, I think, is an unintended consequence of this shift in academic focus. "High" intellectual life in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa largely remains unexplored territory. Resting satisfied with this state of affairs and simply shifting research to other topics risks reinforcing the impression that on one side of the Mediterranean in the seventeenth century one encounters Galileo, Kepler, Bacon, Newton, Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, Locke, and Leibniz, whereas on the other side one encounters popular chroniclers, Sufi diarists, popularizers of medical or occult knowledge, and the like. Studies of popular chroniclers, Sufi diarists, and popularizers of medical or occult knowledge are of course most welcome, but the present book is written with the assumption that there is still a legitimate place for the study of the ideas, issues, and controversies that preoccupied the "academics" of the period.

[6] For a clear expression of this view, see Ali Uğur, *The Ottoman Ulema in the Mid-17th Century: An Analysis of the Veḳā'i' ül-fużalā of Meḥmed Şeyḥī Efendī* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1986), lxxii–lxxiii. The intellectual preoccupations of the post-sixteenth century Ottoman *ulema* are still routinely depicted as having been narrow and dogmatic by comparison to their Safavid and Mughal colleagues; see, e.g., F. Robinson, "Ottomans-Safavids-Mughals: Shared Knowledge and Connective Systems," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 8(1997): 151–184, esp. 155ff. and 172; S. F. Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 196.

[7] See the editors' introduction to D. M. McMahon & S. Moyn (eds.), *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4–5. See also the thoughtful discussion by D. M. McMahon in his contribution to that volume: "The Return of the History of Ideas?" 13–31, esp. 15–21.

[8] See, e.g., L. Berger, *Gesellschaft und Individuum in Damaskus, 1550–1791* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2007); J. Grehan, *Everyday Life & Consumer Culture in 18th-Century Damascus* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007); N. Hanna, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003); C. Kafadar, "Self and Others: The Diary of a Dervish in Seventeenth Century Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature," *Studia Islamica* (1989): 121–150; D. Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of three chapters. The first part deals with the influx into the Ottoman Empire of scholars from the Kurdish and Azeri areas, in part due to the conquest of these areas by the Shiite Safavids under Shah ʿAbbās I (r. 1588–1629). This westward movement seems to have had a profound impact on Ottoman scholarly culture. Contemporary observers spoke of the "opening of the gate of verification," the introduction of new works and teaching techniques, and the reinvigoration of the study of the rational and philosophical sciences. Two consequences are explored in some detail: the first is the explosion of interest in the science of dialectics (*ādāb al-baḥth*) among Ottoman scholars from the seventeenth century; the second is the closely related rise of conscious reflection on the proper manner of perusing scholarly books (*ādāb al-muṭālaʿa*).

Part II deals with the eastward movement of scholars and works from the Maghreb, connected both to the turmoil in Morocco that followed the collapse of the Saʿdid dynasty in 1603 and to the institution of the Hajj which brought North African scholars eastward, some settling in Egypt or the Hejaz. Again, this development had significant consequences. It led to the spread of the influence of the fifteenth-century North African scholar Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 1490), whose works came to dominate the teaching of theology and logic in the Azhar college in Cairo from the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth. One of the hallmarks of this tradition is that it insisted on the inadequacy of "imitation" (*taqlīd*) as a basis for assent to the Islamic creed and instead stressed the necessity for the "verification" (*taḥqīq*) of the creed through demonstrative argument. This in turn led to the writing of creedal works explicitly aimed at nonscholars, conveying the amount of rational theology (*kalām*) that every believer should know. Another characteristic of this tradition was an enthusiasm for logic (*manṭiq*) and an extensive use of logical concepts and argument forms in the field of rational theology – leading one eighteenth-century observer to complain of the predominance in Cairo in his time of what he called "theologian-logicians" (*al-mutakallimīn al-manāṭiqa*).

Part III deals with the spread of Sufi orders from India and Azerbaijan into the Arabic-speaking areas of the Near East in the seventeenth century. This development led to the strengthening of the influence of the idea of "the unity of existence" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) associated with the followers of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) – an idea that until then had enjoyed little support from members of the *ulema* class in Syria, Hejaz, and Egypt. This led to the weakening of the hold of Ashʿarī and Māturīdī theology in these areas and

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

to the reassertion of more "traditionalist," near-Ḥanbalī positions on a range of core theological issues. Paradoxical as it may sound, seventeenth-century supporters of mystical monism seem to have played an important role in rehabilitating the ideas of the Ḥanbalī thinker Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), for centuries an object of suspicion or neglect on the part of Ashʿarī and Māturīdī theologians.

Some of the better-known scholars of the seventeenth century, such as Aḥmed Müneccimbāşī (d. 1702), al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī (d. 1691), Ibrāhīm Kūrānī (d. 1690), and ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641–1731), feature prominently in the pages that follow. But my aim has been to discuss them as representatives of larger intellectual trends within the *ulema* class in their time, not as heroic figures who somehow managed to stand out in an otherwise bleak century. After all, even older studies that perpetuated the image of seventeenth-century intellectual stagnation or decline were sometimes prepared to admit that there were "exceptions."[9] More recent scholarly literature has not succeeded in properly laying this idea to rest; indeed it has often succumbed to the temptation to underline the importance of an individual figure by portraying his background and opponents in dark colors.[10] The list of "exceptions" has simply become too long for the idea to be taken seriously: Aḥmad al-Maqqarī, al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī, Yaḥyā al-Shāwī, and Muḥammad al-Rūdānī in the Maghreb; Ibrāhīm Kūrānī and his student Muḥammad Barzinjī in Medina; ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Baghdādī in Cairo; Khayr al-Dīn al-Ramlī in Palestine; Qāsim al-Khānī in Aleppo; ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī in Damascus; Aḥmed Müneccimbāşī, Ḳara Ḫalīl Tīrevī, and Meḥmed Sāçaḳlīzāde in Ottoman Turkey; Muṣṭafā Mōstārī in Bosnia; and Aḥmad Ḥusaynābādī and his son Ḥaydar Ḥusaynābādī in the Kurdish

[9] For example, in H. A. R. Gibb and H. Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī is conceded to have been an "exception" in an age of "compilation and imitation" (Vol. 1, part II, 164). In J. Spencer Trimingham's *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (first published in 1971; 2nd ed. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Nābulusī is said to have been "among the few original writers within the Arab sphere" (70) and "one of the few Arab Sufis of the age who possessed any insight" (95).

[10] For example, Muḥammad al-Ḥajjī has portrayed Muhammad al-Rūdānī as a lone genius in a civilization that had passed its prime and descended into "ignorance" and "resignation"; see the introduction to his edition of Rūdānī's *Ṣilat al-khalaf bi-mawṣūl al-salaf* (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1988), 13. Similarly, Ibrāhīm Kūrānī has recently been portrayed as a "revivalist" in an age marked by "extremist" Sufism and "trivialized ulema discourse" that "could no longer go any further"; see B. Nafi, "Taṣawwuf and Reform in Pre-Modern Islamic Culture: In Search of Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī," *Die Welt des Islams* 42(2002): 307–355.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

regions.[11] It is high time to stop expanding the list of purported "exceptions" and to embark instead on an overall reappraisal of the period. What follows is an attempt to contribute toward this task. The three developments that I discuss are of course not exhaustive of the intellectual concerns of seventeenth-century *ulema* in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. Nevertheless, they should hopefully be sufficient to belie received views of the seventeenth century as intellectually barren or stagnant, passively awaiting "revival" and "reform," and encourage further research on a rich intellectual tradition that has been overlooked for too long.

Each of the three parts of the book opens with a chapter that traces scholarly lineages and the diffusion of works based on contemporary biographical and bibliographical sources. In each case, this is followed by chapters that discuss the contents of illustrative works belonging to the intellectual trends in question: on dialectic, on the proper manner of reading, on rational theology, and on mystical metaphysics. Some of these works are dense and technical, and the chapters that discuss their contents will to some extent have to engage with this density and technicality – this is simply unavoidable in any serious probing of the intellectual life of the *ulema*. Members of this group underwent years of arduous training in a range of scholarly disciplines, and their concerns were often abstruse and highbrow – not less so than those of present-day academics in the humanities and non-applied sciences. To recover these concerns means not glossing over the contents of their works or treating them simply as epiphenomena of social context or political structures. It is all very well to complain that intellectual historians treat ideas as if they were divorced from institutional, social, and economic realities.[12] But such worries seem

[11] Most of these figures will be discussed to some extent in the chapters that follow. Those who will not be discussed are the literary scholar ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Baghdādī, the jurist Khayr al-Dīn al-Ramlī, and the logician Muṣṭafā Mōstārī. For the first of these figures, see M.G. Carter, "al-Baghdādī, ʿAbd al-Qādir b. ʿUmar," in J. E. Lowry and D. Stewart (eds.), *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1350–1850* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2009), 69–77. For the second figure, see H. Gerber, "Rigidity versus Openness in Late Classical Islamic Law: The Case of the Seventeenth-Century Palestinian Muftī Khayr al-Dīn al-Ramlī," *Islamic Law & Society* 5 (1998): 165–195. For the third figure, see A. Ljubovic, *The Works in Logic by Bosniac Authors in Arabic* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 36–48.

[12] The complaint is made by David Gutelius in his valuable "Sufi Networks and the Social Context of Scholarship in Morocco and the Northern Sahara, 1660–1830," in S. Reese (ed.), *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 15–38, at 15. I have learned a good deal from Gutelius' work and I see our approaches as complementary rather than opposed. I agree that attention to social and

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

misplaced when we know much more about the institutional, social, and economic realities than about the ideas. It is hardly controversial to point out that the study of the institutional, social, and economic history of the Ottoman Empire is significantly more developed than the study of its intellectual history. The more pressing danger, as I see it, is the tendency to think that the study of social, political, and institutional context somehow makes the close study of scholarly works superfluous – that intellectual history can simply be read off social and institutional history.[13]

Two aspects of the present book may occasion some surprise or concern. One is that there will be next to no discussion of Islamic law or jurisprudence.[14] Surely, one might object, those two fields were a major concern of the ulema class. The response to this is twofold: First, as already mentioned, I do not pretend that this book is an exhaustive survey of the intellectual history of the period. Second, it is precisely one of the points of the book that the question of "stagnation" and "decline" in Islamic intellectual history has unhelpfully tended to be associated with the development (or lack of development) of Islamic law and specifically with the question of *ijtihād* – whether "the gate of *ijtihād*" was closed or remained open (or at least slightly ajar). This focus has, or so I would suggest, tended to elide the centrality of the ideal of "verification" (*taḥqīq*) for premodern Islamic scholarly culture.[15] To put it bluntly, *ijtihād* – the derivation of legal rulings directly from the acknowledged sources of Islamic law without being bound by legal precedent – was of little or no import for logicians, dialecticians, mathematicians, astronomers,

economic context can enrich our understanding of Islamic intellectual history. I merely argue that close attention to the contents of scholarly works is also legitimate, and that there has been a tendency not to do so when it comes to Ottoman and North African intellectual history in the early-modern period.

[13] For two studies of early modern Islamic scholars that focus on political and social context while largely avoiding any in-depth engagement with the contents of scholarly works, see J. Berque, *Al-Yousi: Problèmes de la culture marocaine au XVIIème siècle* (Paris: Mouton, 1958) and P. Gran, *The Islamic Roots of Capitalism, Egypt 1760–1840* (1st ed., 1979; 2nd ed., 1998 Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press). Both studies are unreliable when it comes to the intellectual context within which their central characters (al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī and Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭār respectively) operated.

[14] For an important study showing the dynamism of Islamic legal thinking in this period, see Haim Gerber, *Islamic Law & Culture, 1600–1840* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1999).

[15] This point has also been made, from a somewhat different perspective, by William Chittick in his *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

grammarians, theologians, philosophers, and mystics. Even if one were to assume, for the sake of argument, that the "gate of *ijtihād*" was in fact closed, this would tell us nothing about the dynamism or stagnation of nonlegal fields of Islamic scholarship.

The present book also eschews the use of terms such as "enlightenment" and "humanism." The study of Islamic and Ottoman intellectual life in the early modern period has been stimulated by the works of Reinhardt Schultze and Stefan Reichmuth – scholars who have contributed toward the rising interest in this period within the field of Islamic Studies.[16] Nevertheless, their deployment of Western historical concepts such as "enlightenment" and "humanism" to characterize Islamic intellectual traditions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries must, I think, be rejected. To apply with even a minimum of plausibility to the Islamic early modern period, the meanings of such terms have to be stretched to such an extent that they arguably become devoid of historical content and become free-floating "ideas" not associated with any particular region or period. Any emphasis on the need for critical reflection on received views or any rhetoric of praise for novelty and individual "illumination" is equated with "enlightenment"; any concern with letter-writing, collating manuscripts, and polymathy is equated with "humanism"; any fideist rejection of rationalist or mystical speculation is equated with "pietism," and so on. Furthermore, the whole enterprise of attempting to capture a "zeitgeist" seems highly questionable, especially at a time when European historians are stressing the heterogeneity of intellectual and cultural pursuits in the early modern period and hence rethinking the usefulness of terms such as "the enlightenment" and "the scientific revolution."[17] Even apart from this point, the broad characterizations involved in speaking of an early modern Islamic "enlightenment" or "humanism" must surely be premature given just how little the period has been studied. In light of all this, it seems better to leave aside stimulating but overhasty attempts at capturing the age by a few "isms" imported from Western European historiography, and to start afresh by focusing on a number of intellectual

[16] R. Schultze, "Das islamischen achtzehnte jahrhundert" *Die Welt des Islams* 30(1990): 140–159; R. Schultze, "Was ist die islamischen Aufklärung?"*Die Welt des Islams* 36(1996): 276–325; S. Reichmuth, *The World of Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1732–1791): Life, Networks and Writings* (Oxford: Bibb Memorial Trust, 2009).

[17] See, e.g., S. Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Volume One: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon 1737–1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–10.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

currents and works, and describing these as far as possible in a language that would have been recognizable to the scholars whose outlook we as historians seek to understand. Once reasonably grounded narratives of the intellectual history of the period have been established, it may be fruitful to go further and ask comparative and "global" questions.[18] But to let research in the fledgling field of Ottoman and North African intellectual history be guided from the outset by the desire to relate it to the much more advanced field of European intellectual history is sure to lead to lopsided emphases and tendentious readings of the sources.[19] Instead of genuinely developing our sketchy knowledge of the intellectual history of the period, we would be stuck in a situation that development theorists once referred to as "the development of underdevelopment."

Having said this, preliminary methodological discussions and polemics will not take us far. At the end of the day, a historical approach is vindicated if it yields accounts of the past that are deemed instructive and

[18] For "global intellectual history," which has generated some excitement in recent years, see S. Moyn and A. Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[19] For example, in an otherwise informative and stimulating monograph on ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, Samer Akkach interprets Nābulusī's rejection of the idea of the soul as an immaterial substance as an "anti-Cartesian" position even though Islamic theologians routinely – at least since Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* in the eleventh century – rejected the idea of the soul as an immaterial substance (associating it with heresies such as the denial of bodily resurrection and belief in the transmigration of souls). There is no reason to think that Nābulusī had ever heard of Descartes. Akkach also attributes to Nābulusī a concern with safeguarding the "relative autonomy of natural processes" and "the predictability inherent in the consistency and uniformity of natural laws," invoking a treatise by Nābulusī that defends the appropriateness of attributing effects to worldly causes in everyday speech (even though strictly speaking only God is believed to have causal powers). But the purpose of Nābulusī's treatise was explicitly to defend saint and grave veneration against purist attacks. He wished to establish that it is not idolatrous in everyday situations to say, "Visiting the shrine of so-and-so conferred such-and-such a benefit." As will become clear in Chapters 8 and 9 of the present study, Nābulusī was an occasionalist and panentheist and he would not have agreed that "natural processes" are "autonomous" in any interesting sense of that word, and there is no reason to think that the issue of the "consistency and uniformity of natural laws" was at stake in the controversies in which he was involved. These concerns are simply read into the text by Akkach in his eagerness to draw parallels between Ottoman and Western European intellectual concerns; see S. Akkach, *ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī: Islam and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 86–88, 99. For a similar critique of Akkach's reading, see J. Stearns, "All Beneficial Knowledge is Revealed: The Rational Sciences in the Maghrib in the Age of al-Yūsī (d.1102/1691)," *Islamic Law and Society* 21 (2014): 49-80, at 66–72, 79–80.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04296-4 - Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb
Khaled El-Rouayheb
Excerpt
More information

worthwhile. To put it more proverbially, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." The chapters that follow are themselves my main argument for taking the intellectual preoccupations of seventeenth-century Ottoman and North African *ulema* seriously, on their own terms.[20]

[20] My project is very much in the spirit of Benjamin Elman's call for studying early modern Chinese scientists and scholars "on their own terms rather than speculate about why they did not accomplish what the Europeans did"; see his *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), xxvi.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org