

## The sciences of Islam, between repetition and innovation:

### What is commenting in Islam?

Concluding conference of the 200 Project:

“Historical contextualization of 200 authors of the Arab and Islamic heritage”

IDEO, Cairo, January 14-16, 2016

The Mellon Sawyer Seminar,<sup>1</sup> held at the University of California, Berkeley, from October 12-14, 2012, addressed the issue of the literary genre of commentary in post-classical Islam (6th-13th century A.H./12nd-19th century A.D.). The organizers wanted to restore honor to the genre of commentary, often ignored by specialists in the various Islamic sciences under the pretext that it would, by nature, lack innovation. As El Shamsy<sup>2</sup> put it, while modernity was obsessed with the question of originality, postmodernism is preoccupied with hermeneutic circles and language games. He concludes that the present reassessment of the genre of commentary and of scholastic scholarship is not surprising.

Commentary is of paramount importance in the post-classical Islamic sciences. One can even say, as did Saleh,<sup>3</sup> that, in the 8th/14th century, commentary became the main mode of intellectual activity as a natural result of the professionalization of knowledge. It forces thinkers to confront the works of others; to follow their arguments, and to respond to them. Here we use “commentary” in the broader sense: *tafsīr*, *ṣarḥ*, *ḥāshiya*, *ta'līq*, but also *taḥqīq*, *taqrīr*, *tahrīr* etc. Saleh concludes<sup>4</sup> by suggesting that the system of the Ottoman *madrassa* epitomizes this mode of transmission of knowledge.

In the case of philosophical texts, Wisnovsky<sup>5</sup> identified seven functions of commentary: 1) reasoned collation of manuscripts; 2) identification of authors and of cited works; 3) paraphrase or definition of puzzling terms; 4) provision of additional evidence for some propositions; 5) remodeling or replacement of the evidence given in the *matn*; 6) harmonization of the author's theories with other theories he stated himself in other works, or with theories of others; and 7) refutation of the theories of the *matn* and at times their replacement by a new theory. More generally, commentary, though one tool among many, plays a role in transmitting and developing the Islamic sciences while at the same time maintaining a strong link with an often idealized past.<sup>6</sup>

The proceedings of the seminar, partially published in issue 41/3-4 (2013) of the journal *Oriens*, show that the extent of the corpus of post-classical commentaries in Islam requires further research before one is able to arrive at meaningful conclusions. Eleven of the thirteen published contributions each address a specific text and its corresponding tradition of commentaries, and those being from various fields: Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, philosophy, medicine, Sufism, and poetry. Our conference intends to contribute to this research by continuing the investigation begun at the 2012 Mellon Sawyer Seminar. We expect to add new fields and provide convincing examples which clarify issues and refine our understanding of the challenges faced

1 Ahmed, Asad Q. & Larkin, Margaret (Ed.) (2013). The *ḥāshiya* and Islamic intellectual history [Papers of the Mellon Sawyer Seminar, University of California, Berkeley, October 12–14, 2012]. *Oriens* 41/3-4. 213–545.

2 El Shamsy, Ahmed (2013). The *ḥāshiya* in Islamic law: A sketch of the Shāfi'ī literature. *Oriens* 41/3-4. 302.

3 Saleh, Walid A. (2013). The gloss as intellectual history: The *ḥāshiyahs* on *al-Kashshāf*. *Oriens* 41/3-4. 249.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 250.

5 Wisnovsky, Robert (2013). Avicennism and exegetical practice in the early commentaries on the *Ishārāt*. *Oriens* 41/3-4. 354-357.

6 Ingalls, Matthew B. (2013). Reading the Sufis as scripture through the *sharḥ mamzūj*: Reflections on a late-medieval Sufi commentary. *Oriens* 41/3-4. 473.

by the transmission and interpretation of the Islamic sciences. We also seek to understand if there are historical constants in this matter.

One issue deserves more attention: the analysis of commentaries that seem to transmit scribal errors or miscomprehension of texts. A good example of this is the case of Ibn al-Nafīs' *Mūjāz*. As studied by Fancy,<sup>7</sup> the physiological theory presented by Ibn al-Nafīs in his *Mūjāz* (a compendium of Avicenna's *Canon*) contradicts certain points of his own theory, as expressed in his commentaries of the same *Canon*. What is more puzzling is that some of Ibn al-Nafīs' commentators seem not to have noticed these contradictions.

Other questions we would like to address are: Do other areas reflect the same seven functions of the commentary that Wisnovsky identified in philosophy? Can variations in these functions be observed according to the field or era? Which processes govern the canonization of one commentary over another? Do commentaries on these "canonical" commentaries serve functions which differ from the functions of the commentaries on basic works? Do self-commentaries follow fundamentally different criteria? Can we pinpoint particular features in the thought of an author in his own practice of commentary and the function which he intends his commentaries to play?

These research questions are based on the results of the Mellon Sawyer Seminar, they do not cover all the aspects of the commentary relations between texts. We hope your contributions will enrich this fascinating research field.

Keynote speakers : Stefan Reichmut (Ruhr University, Bochum), Walid A. Saleh (University of Toronto) and Nadjet Zouggar (RESMED, Paris).

The proceedings of this symposium will be published in *MIDEO*, the journal of the Institute, after acceptance by the peer committee.

### Practical informations:

To register, please send an email at the following address: [secretariat@ideo-cairo.org](mailto:secretariat@ideo-cairo.org). Registration is free of fees.

If you wish to deliver a paper, please send your abstract (300–500 words, in English, French or Arabic) and a CV to the same address, [secretariat@ideo-cairo.org](mailto:secretariat@ideo-cairo.org). Deadline for application: September 30, 2015. We will select between six and ten papers.

The conference will take place at IDEO on January, 14, 15 and 16, 2016.

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*The ideas expressed do not reflect the views of the European Union.*

<sup>7</sup> Fancy, Nahyan (2013). Medical commentaries: A preliminary examination of Ibn al-Nafīs's *shurūh*, the *Mūjāz* and subsequent commentaries on the *Mūjāz*. *Oriens* 41/3-4. 525–545.