

Introduction

Twentieth-century scholars of Islamic history took it for granted that Muslim scholarship declined after the thirteenth century. Over the past two decades, historians have broken decisively from this decline narrative, and many are excited to rediscover the last five hundred years of Muslim intellectual production, which as an object of historical inquiry still remains largely unexamined. Although the decline narrative is certainly not dead in the field of Islamic studies,¹ it is moribund, at least in its crassest forms. Scholars nonetheless disagree as to whether the legacy of the decline narrative still defines the field in subtler ways,² though it would be hard to deny that Islamic studies as a whole has grown to acknowledge the creative merits of Muslim scholarship from more recent centuries.

One stumbling block in appreciating later Muslim scholarship is the outward form that this scholarship often assumes. Here I am referring specifically to the commentarial form that came to dominate the Islamic disciplines beginning in the later Islamic middle period (1250–1500 CE), although similar stumbling blocks have been encountered in the study of premodern Arabic literature in the context of encyclopedias and other compilatory texts.³

1. See, for example, the entries “Mukhtaṣar” and “Mawsū‘a” in Brill’s *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

2. Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 3, 124–25; Thomas Bauer, “Mamluk Literature: Misunderstandings and New Approaches,” *Mamluk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 105–32.

3. For a pioneering study of an early Mamlūk encyclopedia that confronts many of these stumbling blocks, see Elias Muhanna, *The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Whereas twentieth-century scholars of Islam viewed commentary texts as a sign of intellectual stagnation in and of themselves, contemporary scholars recognize that these texts are often the repertoires of profound thought. Nevertheless, they approach them from scratch, having inherited little insight from the previous generations of researchers who dismissed these texts as derivative.

Contemporary scholars of Islam thus possess the right attitude toward the Muslim commentarial tradition, but they also recognize the Herculean task of analyzing this tradition on its own terms. Even the act of gathering works of commentary is rarely simple. One scholar, by way of example, estimates that only 5 percent of the hundreds of commentaries mentioned in his handlist of philosophical commentaries are currently available to scholars in print.⁴ Although he wrote of this problem in 2004 and limited his estimate to commentaries written in philosophy after the twelfth century, the current study of commentaries from across the disciplines of Islamic studies hardly fares much better.

The way forward is for contemporary scholars of Islam to continue their work on the fundamentals of commentary studies—that is, to survey the textual record and analyze it with reference to its own internal values and structures. This work must begin at the level of individual authors, intellectual networks, or textual genealogies before its findings can be extended to assess larger structures like entire intellectual disciplines, which may be the task of the next generation of scholars. As for assessing even larger civilizational trajectories, the horizon remains farther away still, if not forever out of grasp, and it is for this reason that claims of intellectual decline strike many contemporary scholars as especially absurd. Nevertheless, if scholarship from the last century has taught us anything, it is that the burden of proof skews suspiciously in favor of those arguing for Muslim civilizational decline, while even the most basic analysis of the commentarial tradition reveals the hollowness and cynicism inherent in this decline narrative.

In the spirit of continuing the good fight against the decline narrative, the book that follows participates in the ongoing project of Islamic

4. Robert Wisnovsky, “The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in Post-Classical (ca. 1100–1900 AD) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations,” in *Philosophy, Science and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic, and Latin Commentaries*, vol. 2, ed. Peter Adamson et al. (London: Institute of Classical Studies, University of London Press, 2004), 160.

commentary studies through an examination of the life, thought, and legacy of the Egyptian scholar Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1520). It begins at the level of theory and larger historical practices, moves to the biography of al-Anṣārī and the structures of his thought and texts, and concludes with a discussion of the lessons that can be gleaned from this particular case study and extended elsewhere. By the end of the book, I hope that readers will not only know who Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī is but also why they should care about him.

Chapter 1 situates the remainder of the book by providing the reader with a snapshot of Muslim commentarial practices during the Islamic middle period while emphasizing those phenomena that aid in contextualizing al-Anṣārī's commentaries specifically. After examining some pertinent socio-literary trends that shaped the culture of writing during the Islamic middle period, the chapter describes the basic forms of Islamic commentaries, the conventions used by Muslim commentators, and the technical terms needed to appreciate the nature of commentary writing during this period. It then turns its attention to the processes that brought commentary texts into existence while focusing on their connections to Muslim pedagogy. The chapter concludes with a brief analysis of the rhetoric of anonymity that defines commentary writing within most canonical and classical traditions throughout history.

Chapter 2 provides an extensive biography for al-Anṣārī that frames his life through four "acts" that build on all of the primary source data that I could gather. The transitions between these acts correspond with major shifts in al-Anṣārī's life and career, and thus the structure of the chapter exposes the character arc within al-Anṣārī's biography while remaining true to the historical record. In writing this chapter, my goal has been to render al-Anṣārī's life relatable to the broadest readership through a narrative structure that is familiar to all.⁵ Because *The Anonymity of a Commentator* may be the only medium in which to tell al-Anṣārī's story in full, this particular chapter is lengthier than the book's other chapters, though when making my decisions about what data to include, exclude, or relegate to the footnotes, my goal has been to maintain a quick narrative pace. At the end of the chapter, I have also included, in the form of three addenda, a timeline of

5. For a further justification of this approach, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978), 91.

al-Anṣārī's life, a bibliography of works attributed to him, and a table of the *ijāzas* (licenses) that he received from his many teachers.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine al-Anṣārī's commentaries in the disciplines of Sufism and Islamic law, respectively, as case studies to illustrate the formal mechanics and rhetorical processes that defined Muslim commentary writing. In chapter 3, I focus my analysis on the *Iḥkām al-dalāla*, al-Anṣārī's running commentary on 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī's celebrated Sufi handbook the *Risāla* (*Epistle*). Because al-Anṣārī and al-Qushayrī's lives were separated by almost five hundred years and three thousand kilometers, a comparison of the *Iḥkām* and the base text that it is built upon illuminates the various textual and institutional developments that took place in the history of the Sufi commentary. The chapter begins with a rhetorical analysis of the *Iḥkām* to show how al-Anṣārī redirects the substance and tone of al-Qushayrī's *Risāla*. It then shifts to an examination of those instances in the *Iḥkām* in which al-Anṣārī employs a legal hermeneutic and legal language to relieve tensions between his worldview and the worldviews of the Sufis who appear in al-Qushayrī's base text. Finally, the chapter considers commentaries like the *Iḥkām* in their capacity as written artifacts by examining a commentarial form known as the interwoven commentary (*sharḥ mamzūj*), which would endow commentators like al-Anṣārī with new and subtle forms of control over the received tradition.

Chapter 4 next turns its attention to al-Anṣārī's commentaries and abridgments in Islamic law to examine the formal and rhetorical conventions that defined Islamic legal writing during the later Islamic middle period. After a background discussion of al-Anṣārī's stylistics in Islamic substantive law (*furū' al-fiqh*) and the texts that he left us in this discipline, the chapter examines three generations of texts from a single textual genealogy to show how the antipodal processes of commentary (*sharḥ*) and abridgment (*ikhtisār*) affected legal change within the tradition. The chapter next extends these findings to all eight generations of a textual genealogy through the lens of a single passage from one of al-Anṣārī's commentaries. Finally, with the help of a diagram, a concluding section summarizes the lessons that can be gleaned about the operations of commentary and abridgment within Islamic legal writing in light of the previous two subsections of the chapter.

Chapter 5 shifts its focus to the intellectual tradition that came immediately after al-Anṣārī's life to assess the author's reception and posthumous influence on this tradition. Many Sunni Muslims have viewed al-Anṣārī as

the “renewer” (*mujaddid*) of the ninth Islamic century, and this chapter aims to uncover why they saw him as such. To answer this question, the chapter first examines al-Anṣārī’s most tangible legacy, namely his later descendants and his most distinguished students within the Shāfi‘ī *madhhab* who would secure for their teacher a prominence in that legal school that endures today. The remainder of the chapter then examines al-Anṣārī’s more abstract influence on Sunni thought, which took place between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It situates al-Anṣārī’s thought within larger trends of formalization in scholarly treatments of Sufism, whereby Sufism would gradually be reconceived as an area of scholarly study akin to other subfields of Islamic scholarship. These formalization trends would parallel other trends of cross-fertilization between Sufism and Islamic law that characterized the period. As this chapter illustrates, al-Anṣārī’s influence is found at the epicenter of both sets of trends, and his thought functions as an anchoring point between them.

A concluding chapter examines the nature of canonization and creativity in Muslim commentary texts in light of the preceding chapters. As the starting point for my discussion here, I take a particular passage from one of al-Anṣārī’s commentaries in Islamic substantive law that embodies many of the thematic conclusions that are reached in chapters 3, 4, and 5. Through the lens of this passage, I identify some of the idiosyncrasies at play when we attempt to apply the term “canonization”—both canonization *of* commentary and canonization *through* commentary—within the context of Islamic commentary texts. In the chapter’s second half, I reference this passage and other examples from the preceding chapters to reflect on the nature of creativity within Islamic commentary texts and the challenges that are posed in assessing it. Though the commentarial form would come to epitomize the antithesis of creativity in the minds of many modern critics, and though al-Anṣārī might have been the first to claim that commentators were merely explaining what the author of a base text had intended all along, it is only when we disregard these earlier assessments and move past the rhetoric of commentarial anonymity that we are able to glimpse the creative potential of commentaries and recognize them as anything but derivative.