

SECCIÓN MONOGRÁFICA

INTRODUCCIÓN

The Control of Knowledge in Islamic Societies*

El control del conocimiento en las sociedades islámicas

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Even if you burn the paper, you will not burn what
The paper contains, for it is in my heart;
It will travel with me wherever my horses carry me,
It will descend when I do and will be buried in my grave.
Stop talking about burning paper and parchment and speak with
knowledge instead, so that people may know who really understands.¹

These are the famous verses with which the Cordoban Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) reacted to the burning of his books. Samir Kaddouri proposes the dates 455-6/1063-4 as those when this burning could have taken place in Seville and argues that the ruling Taifa king, al-Mu'taḍid, allowed it to happen most especially because Ibn Ḥazm had been as outspoken as usual in attacking the fiction of the false Umayyad caliph Hishām II devised by the Abbadid king to legitimize his rule. As in so

* With the exception of Michael Lecker's article, all remaining contributions were first presented in the panel "Knowledge under control. Religious and political censorship in Islamic societies" of WOCMES 2010 (Barcelona, 19-24 July), sponsored by the ARG-ERC KOHEPOCU and the *Acción Especial* FFI2010-09040-e (subprograma FILO), Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

¹ The translation by Camilla Adang reproduced here is based on the quotation found in al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, Beirut, 1981-1988, 25 vols., XVIII, p. 118. I thank C. Adang for allowing me to quote her as yet unpublished translation.

many other cases, political grievances can be detected when studying contested notions of correct belief and practice,² but religious debates about them cannot be limited to such grievances as they also reflect serious concerns on the part of Muslims as to how one knows what is right and what is wrong.³ Thus, the burning of Ibn Ḥazm's books took place against the background of the opposition of influential Maliki scholars against the Zāhiri's legal doctrines. In the case analyzed by Giuseppe Mandalà, Aghlabid control over the judges acting in their territory included the martyrdom of Ibn al-Majjānī, another example of how the emir Ibrāhīm II (r. 261/875-289/902) sought to curb Mālikī opposition. Ibn al-Majjānī was tortured by being flogged with soaked papyrus rolls, a punishment that could be read as symbolically suggesting that religious doctrines and intellectual production had to be subject to political needs.

In his verses, which specifically mention other writing media (paper and parchment), Ibn Ḥazm proclaims that the burning of his books would not destroy its contents, but he in fact limits the preservation of such contents to his own person as the vessel that contains it and that will have the grave as the final destination of both the body and the knowledge it treasures. These are verses of pride and defiance but at the same time they acknowledge that without the books as repositories – especially books as voluminous as those written by Ibn Ḥazm –, the knowledge he had produced and sought to spread became subject to the danger of disappearance and oblivion.

Disappearance and oblivion after public condemnation⁴ were obviously what a Ḥanbalī judge had in mind when he ordered the book on love written by Mughulṭāy (d. 762/1361) to be burnt in the public square in Cairo and banned it from being sold in the market, while its author – like Ibn al-Majjānī – was sent to prison. As Monica Baldatillier argues, this unusual fate for a treatise on love is to be understood partly as a reaction of the local scholarly religious establishment against Mughulṭāy's social origins – he was the son of a Mamluk –, but mostly

² See the monographic dossier *Al-Qanṭara*, XXII (2001) devoted to control of religious dissension in the Islamic world.

³ For a discussion of this point see Talmon-Heller, Daniella, *Islamic piety in medieval Syria: mosques, cemeteries and sermons under the Zangids and Ayyubids (1146-1260)*, Leiden, Brill, 2007, p. 227.

⁴ On its forms and implications see Lange, Christian and Fierro, Maribel (eds.), *Public violence in Islamic societies: Power, discipline and the construction of the public sphere (7th-19th centuries CE)*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

by taking into account some novel features introduced into the genre by its author. These were Mughulṭāy's conception and presentation of his materials on love and lovers in imitation of religious works, his insistence that those who feel passionate love (*'ishq*), remain chaste and die are martyrs, and his assertion that *'ishq* enlightens the mind of refined men and renders those who die for it holy and perfect. In the eyes of some, Mughulṭāy's religion of love subverted the religion of Islam. The book, however, did not disappear from circulation nor did it become immune to censorship with the passage of time: when published in 1997 in Lebanon, Syrian authorities again banned its sale.

The impact that both the destruction of libraries and books, and the banning of some works actually had in the preservation and transmission of knowledge in the past, and the scale of the destruction when it took place, are issues open to debate.⁵ A recent work by Thomas Werner offers an encyclopaedic and compelling overview of the history of such destruction in the Middle Ages and the reasons behind it.⁶ Islamic societies are present in the existing bibliography, but their treatment reflects the scarcity of available studies especially if compared to the situation for Christendom.⁷ Omar Ali de Unzaga is preparing a comprehensive study of book burning in Islam, starting with the destruction of Qur'ānic codices during the caliphate of 'Uthmān (r. 23/644-35/655).⁸ Once published it will facilitate the understanding of such practices in different regional and chronological contexts by putting them into a larger picture.

⁵ Baez, F., *Historia universal de la destrucción de libros*, Barcelona, Destino, 2004, 2nd ed.; Italian transl. Rome, Viella, 2007; English transl. New York, Atlas, 2008.

⁶ Werner, Thomas, *Den Irrtum liquidieren: Bücherverbrennungen im Mittelalter* [To Liquidate Error: The Burning of Books in the Middle Ages], Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007. See an illuminating discussion of its contents in Murray, Alexander, "The burning of heretical books," in Andrew P. Roach and James R. Simpson (eds.), *Heresy and the making of European culture. Medieval and Modern Perspectives*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 77-88.

⁷ A similar imbalance in Green, Jonathon and Karolidis, Nicholas J., *Encyclopedia of Censorship*, Facts on File, 2005, new edition, mostly oriented towards the modern world. For works centred in the Islamic context see Mostyn, Trevor, *Censorship in Islamic societies*, London, Saqi Books, 2002, and Asad, Talal, Brown, Wendy, Butler, Judith and Mahmood, Saba, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009 Townsend Papers in the Humanities. For a premodern context, see the pioneering work by Zoltán Szombathy, "Freedom of expression and censorship in Medieval Arabic Literature", *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, VII (2007), pp. 1-24.

⁸ Preliminary results were offered in his paper delivered at WOCMES 2010.

Christopher Melchert's paper now provides a specific perspective by focusing on the cases of the early traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*) who themselves destroyed their own books (books could be burnt, buried or thrown into a river; sometimes no physical destruction took place, only erasing or washing of the contents). The cases Melchert analyzes are closely linked to the debate about the legitimacy of the written transmission of religious knowledge. The traditionists appear to be moved into action by the fear caused by the changes brought about by the universal acceptance of writing and its impact on direct and oral transmission. This fear had to do with the increasing possibilities of misunderstanding the written word when read in the absence of trustworthy teachers who would guide the students to its correct meaning and who would ensure the control of dubious texts. Moreover, pious and renunciant attitudes such as that of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (*fl.* late 4th/10th cent.) could also lead to the destruction of books by their authors. Facing the conviction that a culture based on the written word allowed texts to more easily escape the kind of scholarly control they considered to be necessary and adequate, some members of the religious establishment opted for exerting such control to its most utmost limit, convinced that in doing so they helped eliminate the danger. For them, it was preferable to efface knowledge than imagine it being handled in a wrong way. On the other hand, Melchert underlines the rarity of cases in which books were destroyed in hadith circles for the sake of suppressing wrong ideas. In fact, although there are cases in which traditionists deleted certain hadiths in their books, we are often told of others who insisted in transmitting that with which they were known to disagree as they wanted to ensure its circulation and preservation for future generations, thus giving them the opportunity to decide whether to follow or disregard it. If they disagreed with certain transmissions, they would just not talk about them.

Editorial censorship is what Michael Lecker observes with two episodes left out by Ibn Hishām (d. *ca.* 218/833) in his epitome to Ibn Ishāq's biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, as well as with other examples of reports and sayings that he omitted for reasons that included – in Ibn Hishām's own words – the fact that they were either disgraceful to talk about or they would distress some people. Through such practices, Ibn Hishām edited the received text attuning it to contemporary conceptions of the *sīra* – or perhaps producing himself such concep-

tions and pushing towards their eventual acceptance. Whatever the case, these are illuminating instances of the continuous reconstruction of the Prophet's life according to the evolving needs of the Muslim community, and responding to the different sensibilities of those who decided to record it in writing.⁹ While Ibn Ishāq had no qualms about including certain events and features in his works (although he was allegedly flogged for disclosing the faults of certain Medinans), Ibn Hishām adapted his narrative to a changed and changing world and by doing so his work eventually and largely superseded the original on which he based himself.

Among the episodes Ibn Hishām left out there was the famous episode of the Satanic verses which resounds with the contemporary implications of the Rushdie affair. Such an episode was no cause for concern to Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) who did not see in it any threat for his understanding of the figure of the Prophet Muḥammad. But among his Islamist readers of today there are those who recoil at his relaxed attitude to the extent that his view on the matter has been omitted in recent editions of his work.¹⁰ Contemporary handling of renowned figures of the Islamic past and how their work is sometimes subjected to new or renewed attempts at censorship are a fascinating topic. Different levels appear closely intertwined, for example, in the case of Averroes. Averroes' persecution becomes a symbol of the repression of philosophical thought on the part of fanatical religious scholars, while the oblivion into which Averroes was cast before the Nahda leads modern intellectuals to censure a past considered unsatisfactory, a past that needs to be obliterated in order to bring in a new identity. And by doing so, an interpretation of that past is developed that in fact rewrites it, reducing its richness and complexity.¹¹

⁹ The number of studies dealing with this issue is growing. To give a few examples: López-Morillas, Consuelo, *Textos aljamiados sobre la vida de Mahoma: el profeta de los moriscos*, Madrid, CSIC-AECI, 1994; Rubin, Uri, *The eye of the beholder. The life of Muḥammad as viewed by the early Muslims. A textual analysis*, Princeton, NJ, The Darwin Press, 1995; Williams, Rebecca, *Muḥammad and the supernatural: Medieval Arab views*, London, Routledge, 2013.

¹⁰ Ahmed, Shahab, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Satanic verses," *Studia Islamica*, 87 (1998), pp. 67-124.

¹¹ This topic was addressed by Francesca Forte in the paper she presented at the WOCMES meeting, entitled "Averroès et la censure de l'Histoire" in which she analyzed the treatment of Averroes' figure and his thought in the writings of intellectuals such as the Moroccan M. al-Jabiri and the Egyptian Hasan Hanafi.

Averroes' life and thought provide ample food for thought regarding the complex interplay of control both from outside and from within the scholarly milieu.¹² He was shown by Marc Geoffroy in a seminal article to have changed a section of his *Kitāb al-kashf 'an manāhiġ al-adilla* under the pressure of the Almohad establishment that saw in his carefully drafted defence of the masses' anthropomorphic beliefs a threat to the figure of the founder of the Almohad movement, Ibn Tūmart, who was represented as a staunch opponent of anthropomorphism.¹³ Averroes complied under pressure, although he undoubtedly remained convinced that his former position was correct. On the other hand, in his *Faṣl al-maqāl*, Averroes reveals no qualms in advocating religious and intellectual targeted censorship: "What is obligatory for the imams of the Muslims is that they ban (*yanhū*) those of his [al-Ghazālī's] books that contain science [*'ilm*] from all but those adept in science."¹⁴ Averroes also includes in the ban demonstrative books (*kutub al-burhān*) for those not adept in them: "Yet the harm befalling people from demonstrative books is lighter, because for the most part only those with superior innate dispositions take up demonstrative books. And this sort [of people] is misled only through a lack of practical virtue, reading in a disorderly manner, and turning to them without a teacher."¹⁵

Here we once again come across the need for trustworthy teachers who would guide readers and stop them from misinterpreting what they

¹² For illuminating discussions of censorship linked to philosophical pursuits in Medieval Christendom see Putallaz, François-Xavier, "Censorship," in R. Pasnau and Christine van Dyke (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, 2 vols., vol. I, pp. 99-113; Thijssen, J.M.M.H., *Censure and heresy at the University of Paris, 1200-1400*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, and Silva, José Filipe, *Robert Kilwardby on the Human Soul. Plurality of Forms and Censorship in the Thirteenth Century*, Leiden, Brill, 2012 (I wish to thank Alexander Fidora for the first two references).

¹³ Geoffroy, Marc, "À propos de l'almohadisme d'Averroès: l'anthropomorphisme (*taġsīm*) dans la seconde version du *Kitāb al-kaṣf 'an manāhiġ al-adilla*," in P. Cressier, M. Fierro and L. Molina (eds.), *Los almohades: problemas y perspectivas*, Madrid, CSIC-Casa de Velázquez, 2005, pp. 853-94.

¹⁴ Averroes, *The book of the decisive treatise determining the connection between the law and wisdom and The epistle dedicatory = Faṣl al-maqāl fī-mā bayna al-sharī'ah wa-al-ḥikmah min al-ittiṣāl*, translation, with introduction and notes by Charles E. Butterworth, Provo, Utah, Brigham Young University Press, 2001, p. 22.

¹⁵ Averroes, *The book of the decisive treatise*, p. 22. Some limitations to this specific ban are then added.

are reading. The issue of learning only through books or compulsorily with a teacher-guide was crucial in the development of Sufism and especially in the process analyzed by Daphna Ephrat through which borders were established in order to exclude certain doctrines and practices considered to be undesirable for different reasons: doubts about their acceptability in religious terms, perceptions of frivolity or lack of sincerity, and especially the danger of antinomianism. This was a process managed by the Sufis themselves or with the help of the ruling authorities. Ephrat concludes that while control was exerted in different ways in order to police the borders between mainstream normative Sufism and what was labelled as being deviant, Muslim rulers seldom intervened to suppress dissidents and there was no institutionalization of punishing procedures.

Such institutionalization in the Islamic world is most often associated with the famous Abbasid *miḥna* with its doctrinal imposition and physical coercion that unleashed reactions with lasting effects in the shaping of religious and political authority.¹⁶ But instead of repression and persecution, Sonja Brentjes has chosen to concentrate on the ‘positive’ side of the process – that is, on the favourable and supportive evaluation of what is defined as right and proper knowledge and behaviour,¹⁷ thus illuminating the diverse ways in which Muslims have dealt with differences of opinion. One of the specific cases dealt with in her article has a caliph as a protagonist, and not just any caliph, but al-Ma’mūn (r. 198/813-218/833), famous for his patronage of knowledge and especially scientific knowledge. Her close reading of the varied sources treating a specific episode in his reign – an astronomical expedition – offers crucial insights on reports having to do with procedures of knowledge control, insights that will have to be expanded not only from the point of view of production but also of mediation and reception, but which more importantly remind us of the urgency to re-

¹⁶ The most recent study to be added to a substantial bibliography is Turner, John P., *Inquisition in Early Islam. The Competition for Political and Religious Authority in the Abbasid Empire*, London-New York, I.B. Tauris-Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

¹⁷ What is included in this monographic section is a reduced version of a longer paper in which Sonja Brentjes explored other aspects of the same process, such as the establishment of ‘norms’ that became standard for the writing of mathematical texts, and the information found in post-classical biographical literature about rewards and punishments in the lives of practitioners of the ‘rational’ and mathematical sciences.

flect on the nature of the sources we study and on the adequate ways to use and manage them.

Ibn Ḥazm's verses quoted above start with the burning of books and finish by inciting to engage in debate on which arguments need to be used so that people could assess who is on the right side and who is in the wrong. A decision has to be made either by coercion or conviction, Ibn Ḥazm seems to be concluding. In reality, what we see functioning is often a mixture of both. The studies of attempts at controlling knowledge collected here show that they seldom produce lids that hermetically close the pot, while they frequently result in covers that just try to contain the steam of what keeps boiling inside.