



Zachary Valentine Wright, *Realizing Islam: The Tijaniyya in North Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Muslim World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 310 pages, ISBN 9781469660820, \$29.95 (paper).

Studies on eighteenth-century Islamic intellectual history tend to highlight the Wahhabi movement or “fundamentalist” movements. Few studies offer insights into less understood—though by no means less influential—scholarly currents. One such book is Zachary Valentine Wright’s *Realizing Islam: The Tijaniyya in North Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Muslim World*. Focusing on the knowledge production of the modern Tijani Sufi order—one of the largest Sufi orders in Africa today—and the vivacious intellectual life of its founder, *Realizing Islam* undermines previously held assumptions regarding theories of so-called intellectual “decline” in Islam from roughly the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Wright, a specialist of North and West African Islamic intellectual history, is also a scholar of Sufism and one of the foremost prolific authors on Tijani Sufism today. *Realizing Islam* weaves a compelling and original narrative of the intellectual vivacity of the eighteenth century and traces its dynamic scholarly network through the lens of the life and ideas of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī (d.1815), the founder of the Tijani order.

The book’s central idea is that the Tijaniyya stands as an important vehicle to better understand the intellectual currents and networks of the eighteenth-century Muslim world, with an emphasis on its experiential verification or realization (*ṭahqīq*) of knowledge. Wright defines *ṭahqīq* as the ability “to put knowledge into practice or confirm a religious truth through its performance” (2). Because so many works on the Muslim modern era tend to focus on *ijtihād* (independent reasoning), it is refreshing to read a work that takes the lesser understood *ṭahqīq* framework seriously.¹

Wright’s introduction presents the Tijaniyya as one of several *turuq Muhammadiyya* (Muhammadan Paths), one that centers its wayfaring on the Prophet himself as the ultimate shaykh and guide. Despite the order’s claims to being a culminative, “sealing” path, Wright cautions that even the “Tijaniyya’s most visible distinguishing characteristic—the waking encounter with the Prophet and the claim to Seal of Sainthood—do not result from any ideological

or practical innovation” from “orthodox” Islamic doctrine or previous Sufi paths (6). At the same time, he highlights the need to study more closely the rich features and contributions of the wide-spanning order and the novel scholarly contributions of its founder.

Realizing Islam's opening chapter is entitled “Sufism and Islamic Intellectual Developments in the Eighteenth Century.” In it, Wright lays the groundwork for the eighteenth century as a representation and “culmination of centuries of Islamic scholarly prestige in the Muslim world” (18). The chapter offers a vibrant tale highlighting the historical context and its most distinct intellectual discourses. It shows how Tijani, a North African scholar, enjoyed global connections with contemporary Arab, Kurdish, and Indian scholars in Egypt and the Hijaz. From meeting Muḥammad al-Sammān in the Hijaz (d. 1775) to Maḥmūd al-Kurḍī in Egypt (d. 1780), the account of Tijani's physical and intellectual journeying brought to the fore themes such as the development of the Moroccan Shādhiliyya, West African scholasticism, and parallel approaches to the Muhammadan Path from the Indian subcontinent. Wright makes a compelling argument that the preexisting intellectual vibrancy of that time constituted the proper environment for the reception of Ahmad Tijani and his doctrine.

Chapter 2 proves why Tijaniyya is often referred to as *ṭarīqat al-ʿulamā* (“the Path of the scholars”). Entitled “Portrait of a Scholar: An Intellectual Biography of Shaykh al-Tijani,” the chapter goes deeper into Tijani's diverse scholarly aptitude in so-called classical fields of Islam: namely, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*ʿaqīda*, *kalām*), gnosis (*maʿrifa*), and spiritual training (*tarbiya*). The narrative of the shaykh's mastery in these fields is undergirded by the broader theme of verification (*ṭahqīq*), a central aspiration throughout Tijani's intellectual biography. Chapter 3, “The Actualization of Humanity on the Muḥammadan Path,” takes on the book's central concept of *ṭahqīq* as both a means of spiritual verification and a fulfillment of human potentiality. Waxing more poetically about the higher aims of the human condition as a central concern for Tijānī, Wright focuses on visionary encounters—especially those with the Prophet Muhammad—as a means of verifying the knowledge base of the shaykh and his disciples. Here, Wright offers an original and thought-provoking argument that full human potential is affirmed and actualized by visionary experience. Striking is his observation that the rise of this universalist “humanist” approach came at the precipice of the “eclipse” of the Muslim world politically (141).

Perhaps the most classically “Sufi studies” chapter in the book is the fourth one. “The Seal of Muḥammadan Sainthood and Hidden Pole” dives into the claims of Tijānī's lofty *maqām* (spiritual station) as part of a long Sufi

tradition on the hidden hierarchies of saints but one that “asserted a new [Sufi] position altogether” (173). Using a wide array of primary sources from across the Tijani corpus, Wright shows that Tijani’s claims to unrivaled saintly authority had considerable effects on the responses of rival Sufis (and anti-Sufis) in this period.

The final chapter focuses on the political turmoil and shifting realities of the eighteenth century. Aptly titled “Abundant Blessing in an Age of Corruption,” this chapter considers Tijānī’s own view of his time as “corrupt” and sheds light on Ottoman bureaucratic abuses in Algeria and scholarly rivalry in Fez against the backdrop of larger Islamic reformist ideas, thereby highlighting the theme of eschatology within the Tijaniyya. Wright ends with the Tijānī emphasis of turning to God’s grace as a survival mechanism in response to the bleakness of the times.

Savants of intellectual history cannot afford to ignore Wright’s vigorously researched new work, *Realizing Islam*. It weaves a compelling narrative about lesser-known aspects of eighteenth-century scholarly life in North Africa and how this helped the rapid spread of the Tijaniyya in other parts of the Muslim world, particularly sub-Saharan African, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book is most successful in tying Tijani’s legacy to West African scholarly production and its centering of *ṭahqīq* as a central aspiration for Muslims at the cusp of great political turmoil and uncertainty. *Realizing Islam* bridges a disconnect between history’s earliest Muslims and later Muslim scholars like Tijānī, who, more than a millennium after the Prophet Muhammad, managed to spread an African-born “Muhammadan path” not by idealizing a glorious past or dry scriptural imitation, but on the basis of a living, realized connection to the Prophet for its wayfarers.

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Notes

1. See also El-Rouyaheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).