The Islamic Occult between Early Modern Science and Modern Colonialism; or, American Missionaries and Officials Weaponize Arabic Occult-Scientific Texts

Matthew Melvin-Koushki
University of South Carolina

The Arabic collection *Spiritualistic Books* (*Kutub al-rūḥiyyāt*)—comprising 18 occult-scientific treatises, all in the guise of cheap, early twentieth-century Cairene printings and lithographs—is deceptively déclassé. Its thousand-plus pages cover astrology, lettrism (kabbalah), jinn magic, medicine, talismanry, amuletry and geomancy, and feature renowned Muslim scholars, mystics and philosophers of the preceding millennium, as well as ancient prophets like Hermes. As such, this collection, for all its cheapness, is no mere record of "popular belief," but representative of the state of the occult art in early modern, and modern, Egypt. Indeed, many of its treatises continue to be sold in Cairo's bookstores today. Yet its provenance neatly encapsulates Euro-American colonialist discourse of the last century and to the present, predicated on the essential irrationality and superstitiousness of the "Moslem natives."

Now preserved as part of the David E. Pingree subset of the Hay Collection at Brown University, *Spiritualistic Books* is an unusually performative object. It informed the missionary zeal of its American Calvinist compiler and owner, Samuel M. Zwemer (1867-1962); then the nakedly colonialist policy of its inheritor, Harold W. Glidden (1910-1990), U.S. State Department functionary; and finally Pingree's (1933-2005) omnivorous, exacting research into the mathematical sciences of the Orient and Occident alike. Above all, however, it is a window onto actual early modern and modern Egyptian and Islamic cosmological theory and technological practice—subjects long neglected by modern Euro-American historians, due not least to the fraught reception, suppression or redeployment of this and a myriad other such objects during the heyday of colonialism.[1]

Zwemer, Protestant Reformed "Apostle to Islam,"[2] appears to have ordered the compilation of this occultist collection during his tenure in Egypt from 1913 to 1929, as his bookplate and name on the endpapers and first page indicate. Although a prolific writer and speaker and widely traveled, he was singleminded in his lifelong mission: virtually all his many published works seek to prove the depravity of Semitic-yet-pagan Islam as a demonic inversion of Christian trinitarian monotheism and call militantly for the extinguishing of Islamic darkness by

* My thanks to Nicholas Harris for his comments on this draft.

[1] On this general theme see Daniel A. Stolz, *The Lighthouse and the Observatory: Islam, Science, and Empire in Late Ottoman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[2] J. Christy Wilson, *Apostle to Islam: A Biography of Samuel M. Zwemer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1952).

Christian light. His Arabic, acquired for the sole purpose of converting its Muslim speakers, seems to have been fairly fluent; but his knowledge of Islamic history, especially intellectual history, was rudimentary at best, and his Protestant hostility to "magic" in particular, whether Islamic or Catholic, was visceral. In his biography of Ramon Llull (d. ca. 1316), for example, the medieval Christian Arabist and would-be missionary, Zwemer is at pains to exonerate his hero and model of any taint of magic, alchemy and kabbalah with which Llull's name had since become closely associated, celebrating him as a proto-Protestant (here read: witchhunter) instead.[3]

To this end, Zwemer paints a picture of Islamdom as a global cancer to be extirpated, only able to birth societies of fear and loathing. In a book devoted to the subject, published in 1920 (around the time he compiled the collection under discussion), he also makes an anthropological argument as to the inherently *animistic* and *shamanic* nature of Islam—hence Muslims' perennial obsession with the occult.[4] As he declares:

> Wherever Mohammedanism went it introduced old or adopted new superstitions … The religion of the common people from Tangier to Teheran is mixed with hundreds of superstitions many of which have lost their original significance but still bind mind and heart with constant fear of demons, with witchcraft and sorcery and the call to creature-worship.[5]
>
> [T]hese many superstitions can now no longer be styled anti-Mohammedan, although they conflict in many respects with the original doctrines of Islam.[6]
>
> In no monotheistic religion are magic and sorcery so firmly entrenched as they are in Islam; for in the case of this religion they are based on the teaching of the Koran and the practice of the Prophet.[7]

The American missionary's condemnation of, yet fascination with, Islamic occultism is testified to by the very title he had embossed in gold on his bound collection of cheap Cairene treatises: *Kutub al-rūḥiyyāt*, or *Spiritualistic Books*. This is an odd title, or at least one that I, as a historian of the same, had not come across before. It appears to reference the early twentieth-century Arabic neologism *rūḥiyya* as translation for "spiritualism," a trend then booming in the salons of Europe and the United States, and centered on the séance.[8] We may safely assume that Zwemer saw such secular practices as no less demonic than Islamic ones, and so here drew

[3] Samuel M. Zwemer, *Raymund Lull: First Missionary to the Moslems* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1902).
[4] Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Influence of Animism on Islam: An Account of Popular Superstitions* (New York: Macmillan, 1920).
[5] Ibid., vii.
[6] Ibid., 6.
[7] Ibid., 163.
[8] Cf. Kutluğhan Soyubol, "In Search of Perfection: Neo-spiritualism, Islamic Mysticism, and Secularism in Turkey," *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 1 (2021): 70-94.

a polemical equivalence. Here he was perhaps also drawing on current political discourse among Turkish nationalists, who would succeed in creating the Republic of Turkey from the corpse of the Ottoman Empire a few years later: some likewise insisted on the essentially Central Asian animistic and shamanic nature of Turkish Islam, and to equally anti-Islamic, though secularizing, ends.[9]

Nor was Zwemer's thesis of Islam as a timelessly sorcerous culture of fear and loathing an aberration, but well within the contemporary theological—and anthropological—mainstream: similar arguments were routinely made by leading anthropologists through the mid-twentieth century. Astonishingly, some Islamicists continue to recycle them even now.[10]

It is only in this context that Harold Glidden's subsequent acquisition of Zwemer's collection of "Moslem spiritualist superstitions" makes sense. Both men had a Princeton connection: Zwemer finished his missionary career as a professor at the Princeton Theological Seminary, retiring in 1937; Glidden completed his Ph.D. in the Near Eastern Studies Department at Princeton in the same year. We may speculate that Glidden's interest in this collection was spurred by the personal connection between the two men, whether during their overlapping residence or thereafter. As that may be, the latter's subsequent career in the U.S. State Department was marked by the same virulent anti-Islamic animus. In an infamous article of 1972, Glidden asserted the same fear-and-loathing thesis, arguing that "Arab" (i.e., Islamic) society is eternally and solely built on the principle of revenge.[11] Edward Said accordingly enshrined him as exemplar of the worst excesses of Orientalism.[12]

≈

So much for its miltantly colonialist provenance: what can *Spiritualistic Books* tell us about the performance of Islamic occultism in its own right?

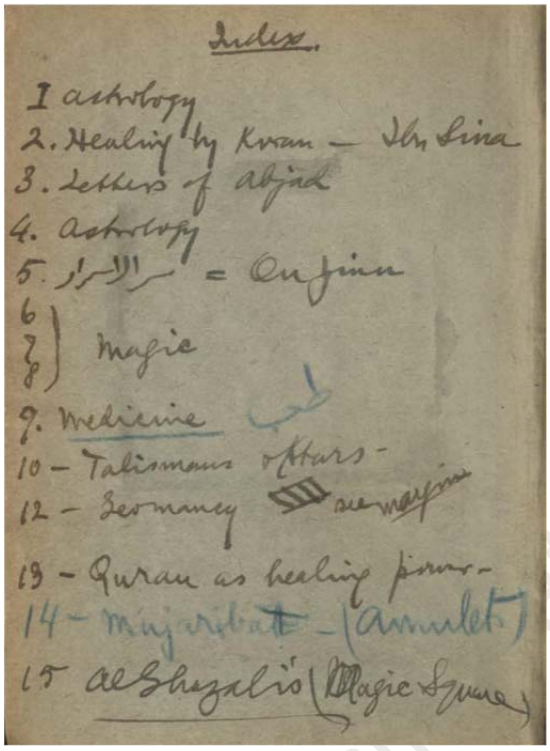
An unusual amount, it would seem. Despite the hostile intentions of its compiler, this collection faithfully testifies to the healthy market in occultist tracts in Cairo during the 1910s. As noted, it constructs an unbroken intellectual continuum from Hermes to the eighteenth century, with a focus on North African authors, pseudepigraphal or otherwise. Zwemer clearly had little knowledge of or interest in the texts he collected—his table of contents, for example, is not particularly illuminating or accurate:

[9] Cf. Thierry Zarcone and Angela Hobart, eds., *Shamanism and Islam: Sufism, Healing Rituals and Spirits in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

[10] Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Magic in Islam between Religion and Science," *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 14, no. 2 (2019): 255-87.

[11] Harold W. Glidden, "The Arab World," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 128, no. 8 (1972): 984-88.

[12] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 48-49.



And yet the fact that the American missionary did make it, hence its survival as a rare snapshot, makes this collection of special interest to the historian of early modern and modern Islamic occultism and book culture on multiple fronts.

Space does not permit a full account of each treatise, most of which I have not seen before, given my specialization is the early modern Persianate world rather than North Africa. That this collection nevertheless seems curiously familiar and thoroughly cohesive is testament to an early modern Arabo-Persianate scholarly continuity, spanning Afro-Eurasia, that has yet to be mapped by intellectual historians.[13] Here its inclusion of the classic symbol of Persian empire on the titlepage of the first treatise and a few other places is suggestive:

[13] As Sonja Brentjes argues (*Teaching and Learning the Sciences in Islamicate Societies (800-1700)* [Turnhout: Brepols, 2018]), there was a certain divergence in Arabic and Persian scholarship in the mathematical and natural sciences during the early modern period, but also significant continuities. I would suggest that the same dynamic defines early modern scholarship on the occult sciences too.

An annotated table of contents therefore follows. I will identify authors and dates where possible, then briefly discuss those features that confirm the collection to be specifically early modern in its scholarly tenor, to provide a basis for further research.

1) Ps.-Abū Maʿshar Balkhī, *Horoscopic Intuitions as to Men and Women* (*al-Ṭawāliʿ al-ḥadsiyya li-l-rijāl wa-l-nisāʾ*)

   This short astrological manual on discerning the character of potential spouses and partners on the basis of their Ascendant sign cannot be attributed to Abū Maʿshar (Albumasar, d. 886) himself, father of conjunction astrology in Islamdom and Christendom. Its inclusion of a section, albeit rudimentary, on geomancy suggests it as a production of the thirteenth century at the earliest, subsequent to the work of Muḥammad al-Zanātī—one of whose foundational geomantic manuals features in this collection (see below).

2) Ps.-Ibn Sīnā, *Healing Illnesses: On Lettrism and Numerology* (*Shifāʾ al-asqām fī ʿulūm al-ḥurūf wa-l-arqām*)

   Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037), that second Aristotle and second Galen, was a rather harsh critic of the occult sciences, particularly astrology and alchemy, and is obviously not the author of this manual of lettrist medicine. That a popular corpus of Avicennan occultist works—including this text—nevertheless exists and was very widely diffused is testament to the indispensability of Avicennan physics and metaphysics to Islamic occult-scientific theory and practice from the twelfth century onward.[14] The focus of this treatise on applied lettrism suggests a fifteenth-century composition date at the earliest.[15]

3) Hermes, *For the Benefit of All Creation: On the Alphabetical Letters* (*Nafʿ al-bariyya ʿalā l-ḥurūf al-abjadiyya*)

   The pre-Islamic prophet of science *par excellence*, Hermes's appearance in this collection as an authority on lettrism (as here) and geomancy and astrology (as below) is unusual, and perhaps reflects a specifically Egyptian sensibility. In the Persianate works on these subjects with which I am familiar, lettrism is most associated with the Shiʿi Imams ʿAlī and Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, and geomancy with the prophet Daniel.[16]

[14] Michael-Sebastian Noble, *Philosophising the Occult: Avicennan Psychology and 'The Hidden Secret' of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

[15] Noah Gardiner, "Esotericism in a Manuscript Culture: Aḥmad al-Būnī and His Readers through the Mamlūk Period" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2014).

[16] Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Persianate Geomancy from Ṭūsī to the Millennium: A Preliminary Survey," in *Occult Sciences in Pre-modern Islamic Cultures*, ed Nader El-Bizri and Eva Orthmann (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2018), 151-99.

4) Muḥammad al-Tūnisī al-Maghribī (fl. 15th. c.?), *Secret of Secrets: On Summoning Jinn and Banishing House Sprites* (*Sirr al-asrār fī istiḥḍār al-jinn wa-ṣarf al-ʿummār*)

   This Tunisian-Moroccan author and his treatise on jinn magic are unknown to the bio-bibliographical sources I consulted, though there are hints that it is a fifteenth-century production. A similarly titled work is attributed to Ibn Sīnā in modern printings.

5) Anonymous, *The Divine Secret: On the Sciences of the Spiritual Man* (*al-Sirr al-rabbānī fī ʿulūm al-rūḥānī*)

   The eclectic nature of this anonymous work, briefly covering astrology, elemental natures, geomancy, talismanry, amuletry and other sciences, suggests it as a semi-scholarly production of the early modern era, or perhaps even modern: the titular phrase "sciences of the spiritual man" is unattested in the early modern sources I am familiar with.

6) Aḥmad al-Jazā'irī Ibn Ḥamdūn (16th c.?), *The Divine Effluxion: On Lettrism* (*al-Fayḍ al-rabbānī fī ʿilm al-ḥurūf*)

   This Algerian author and his lettrist treatise are also unknown to the biobibliographical sources I consulted. Here again, however, his focus on practical lettrism suggests a provenance of the sixteenth century or later.

7) Dūmān [Ṭumṭum] al-Hindī, *Gift of the Divine Giver: On Summoning House Sprites and Subjugating the Kings of the Jinn* (*Hibat al-mannān fī istiḥḍār al-ʿummār wa-taskhīr mulūk al-jinn*)

   For medieval Arabic and Persian scholars, Ṭumṭum the Indian—presumably the personage meant by "Dūmān"—is a legendary authority on magic sometimes associated with Hermes.[17] His pseudepigraphical invocation here as an authority on jinn subjugation likewise suggests an early modern provenance.

8) Ps.-Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Book of Divine Secrets: On the Benefits of Medicine and Spiritual Portals* (*Kitāb al-Asrār al-ilāhiyya fī fawā'id al-ṭibb wa-l-abwāb al-rūḥāniyya*)

   Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), the Andalusian Supreme Master (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), is one of the most seminal thinkers in Islamic history generally, and the primary source for lettrist theory of the early modern period specifically. Given his famous oath not to divulge the technological applications of this science, we may assume this work to be pseudepigraphal as well. Yet it is a window onto his vast, early modern reception across

[17] Jean-Charles Coulon, "La magie islamique et le *corpus bunianum* au Moyen Âge" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Paris IV – Sorbonne, 2013), 229-230.

Afro-Eurasia as preeminent theoretician of the concept of sacral power (*walāya*) and its occult outworkings, including medically.

9) Anonymous, *Book of Tested Domestic Operations: On Proven Medicine* (*Kitāb Mujarrabāt al-buyūt fī l-ṭibb al-mathbūt*)

This work on medical magic is attributed to an anonymous ancient authority, seemingly Āṣaf b. Barakhyā, vizier of Solomon.

10) ʿAbd Allāh al-Maghāwirī (fl. 13th c.?), *Resplendent Stars: On Subjugating the Kings of the Jinn at a Moment's Notice* (*al-Kawākib al-lammāʿa fī taskhīr mulūk al-jinn fī l-waqt wa-l-sāʿa*)

This Sevillian sufi master, resident in a massive cave outside Cairo, was famed for his mastery of jinn magic, and was reputedly an influence on Ibn al-ʿArabī himself. His treatise on the same science included here substantiates the historical record.[18]

11) Muḥammad al-Rahawī (?), *The Strung Pearl: On Talismanry and Astrology* (*al-Luʾluʾ al-manẓūm fī l-ṭalāsim wa-l-nujūm*)

This author and his occultist treatise are unknown to the biobibliographical sources I consulted.

12) Ibn Ḥamdūn, *al-Fayḍ al-rabbānī*

Another copy of work 6 above.

13) Saʿdān al-Zanjī al-Jazāʾirlī al-Maghribī (?), *Book of the Divine Secret: On the Sciences of the Spiritual Man* (*Kitāb al-Sirr al-rabbānī fī ʿulūm al-rūḥānī*)

The author of this eclectic treatise—a black Ottoman Algerian-Moroccan scholar—is likewise unknown to the biobibliographical sources I consulted.

[18] See e.g. Evliyā Chelebī, *al-Riḥla iā Miṣr wa-l-Sūdān wa-l-Ḥabasha*, trans. Ḥusayn Mujīb Miṣrī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Āfāq al-ʿArabiyya, 2006), 2: 142:

> Below all these [ascetics'] caves [outside of Cairo] was that of Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh al-Maghāwirī [lit., "Mr. Caves"], a huge cave famed for its massive pillar, as big as a mountain; whoever entered upon it was overcome by confusion and astonishment at its extent, like ten thousand head of sheep. At the cave's back stands the grave of ʿAbd Allāh al-Maghāwirī, a powerful [saint] with control over the jinn. Every year, [for example], he would embark on the pilgrimage, and would see the miseries the Community of Muḥammad suffered on the journey from the heat. He therefore commanded one of his jinn companions to pierce a way through the mountains and grottoes that lay between Cairo and Mecca so as to provide relief to God's servants from the intense heat. The jinn did so, beginning with the cave of ʿAbd Allāh al-Maghāwirī himself.

14) Hermes, *Book of the Decisive Secret: On Geomancy, Astrology and Horoscopes* (*Kitāb al-Sirr al-qāṭiʿ fī ʿilm al-raml wa-l-tanjīm wa-l-ṭawāliʿ*)

See the entry on treatise 3 above.

15) Muḥammad al-Zanātī (fl. before 1230), *Book of Judgment: On the Principles of Geomancy* (*Kitāb al-Faṣl fī uṣūl ʿilm al-raml*)

More commonly titled *Book of Judgments* (*Kitāb al-Fuṣūl*), this foundational geomantic manual by al-Zanātī, a Moroccan Berber scholar, is one of the earliest and most influential in the history of Arabic geomancy, and became canonical by the early modern period. His geomantic treatises were a primary basis for early modern Latinate and Persianate geomantic traditions alike, although the former was rudimentary and truncated, and the latter more sophisticated.[19]

16) Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. Asʿad al-Yamanī al-Yāfiʿī al-Shāfiʿī (d. 1367), *Book of the Strung Pearl: On the Occult Properties of the Mighty Quran* (*Kitāb al-Durr al-naẓīm fī khawāṣṣ al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*)

This fourteenth-century work by a Yemeni scholar on quranic lettrist magic became a much-cited classic in early modern Persianate imperial circles in particular, and has remained widely popular to the present, as its multiple modern printings attest.

17) Aḥmad al-Dayrabī (d. 1738), *Victory of the Glorious King in Solicitude of His Servants* (*Fatḥ al-malik al-majīd* [*al-muʾallaf li-nafʿ al-ʿabīd*])

This popular practical treatise on quranic lettrist magic was copied and printed many times, even in Iran and India, and indeed is still in print. Its Egyptian author was a professor at al-Azhar in Cairo in the early eighteenth century; as such, his synthesizing approach to the subject is very much early modern.

18) Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī al-Ḥasanī (d. 1486), *Book of Tested Operations* (*Kitāb al-Mujarrabāt*)

This short work by a prominent fifteenth-century Moroccan theologian on practical occltist procedures is usually paired with al-Dayrabī's on the same discipline in printings, as it is here.

19) Aḥmad al-Damanhūrī (d. 1778), *Book of the Continual Effluxion: On the Three-by-Three Magic Square of the Imam al-Ghazālī,* [*Which Work He*] *Titled: The Pearly Necklace: On*

[19] Melvin-Koushki, "Persianate Geomancy," 161.

the Benefits of the Three-by-Three Magic Square (*Kitāb al-Fayḍ al-mutawālī fī muthallath al-Imām al-Ghazālī, al-musammā bi-ʿIqd al-farāʾid fī-mā li-l-muthallath min al-fawāʾid*)

Despite Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's (Algazel, d. 1111) status as preeminent bastion of Sunni Ashʿari theology, comparable to Aquinus for the Latins, he too acquired an occult reputation in the early modern period, together with Ibn Sīnā—a reliable index of the changing of the era. In particular, his prescription of a 3 x 3 magic square for easing childbirth became a ubiquitous examplar of effective lettrist practice in later lettrist works. Here al-Damanhūrī—the prolific eighteenth-century Ottoman Egyptian polymath and rector of al-Azhar—consolidates that reputation in his commentary treatise on the same.

≈

The last author in Zwemer's collection, Aḥmad al-Damanhūrī, provides a key to understanding the whole in terms radically different from those its compiler used.[20] Far from being a tissue of popular superstition, its cheap lithographed and printed treatises testify to the continuation of an elite scholarly culture spanning from at least the eighteenth century to the early twentieth, and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific—one perhaps less disturbed by colonialist and missionary agendas than historians have been led to believe. That culture, moreover, was often both perennialist and occultist in ways immediately comparable to early modern Latin Christendom, as this collection shows.[21]

Damanhūrī himself was among the leading Sunni authorities of his generation, yet ascribed to the occult sciences the highest philosophical, religious and social importance. Contemporary biographical dictionaries confirm his judgment: between 12-15 percent of Ottoman Egyptian scholars of the eighteenth century were famed as occultists, roughly the same percentage as were famed in fields such as law or literature.[22] This percentage would seem to hold true in Islamdom and Christendom alike during the early modern period.

The print-lithograph collection *Spiritualistic Books* was made in a spirit of triumphalist hostility by Samuel Zwemer, missionary in Cairo, then acquired by an equally triumphantly hostile Harold Glidden, both of whom imagined it as proof of the demonic, spiritualistic depravity of the "Moslem natives." And yet it enshrines a very different ethos: it constructs a perennial philosophy, from Hermes to the present, promoting the classic greats Abū Maʿshar, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn al-ʿArabī and even al-Ghazālī as occult scientists, while propagating new occult sciences like lettrism and geomancy—a quintessentially early modern move. But the very existence and survival of this cheap but performatively fraught collection suggests that this move is also a modern one.

[20] Jane H. Murphy, "Aḥmad al-Damanhūrī (1689–1778) and the Utility of Expertise in Early Modern Egypt," *Osiris* 25 (2010): 85-103.
[21] Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "World as (Arabic) Text
[22] Murphy, "Aḥmad al-Damanhūrī," 90.