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## Storytelling, Preaching, and Power in Mamluk Cairo\*

### I

As with many other Islamic institutions, the origins of the *qāṣṣ* (storyteller) and the *wā'iz* (preacher) are obscure.<sup>1</sup> However, from an early point in the Islamic period, storytellers and popular preachers became the principal channel of instruction for the common people, those not engaged in a rigorous course of study of the religious sciences under the supervision of one or more scholars.<sup>2</sup> By the sixth/twelfth century, the Hanbali jurist and theologian Ibn al-Jawzī, whose famous treatise on the storytellers, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣāṣ wa-al-Mudhakkirīn* ("The Book of Storytellers and Those Who Remind [People of God's Blessings]"), sought to rein in their excesses and set proper bounds for the material which they related, acknowledged their important role in the transmission of religious knowledge to the common people (*al-'awāmm*). Drawing on the ethical injunction related in the Quran in surah 3, verse 104 and elsewhere, he remarked that God had sent prophets "to draw people to the good and warn them against evil," and after them the ulama who are distinguished by their learning (*'ilm*). "Moreover," he said, "the storytellers and the preachers were also given a place in this order [*amr*] so as to exhort [*khiṭāb*] the common people. As a result, the common people benefit from them

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<sup>1</sup>Much of the earlier secondary material dwelt upon this issue; see now Khalil 'Athamina, "Al-Qasas: Its Emergence, Religious Origin and Its Socio-Political Impact on Early Muslim Society," *Studia Islamica* 76 (1992): 53-74.

<sup>2</sup>Preaching of course took place on a variety of different levels. At one end of the spectrum, the activity included delivery of a formal sermon (*khuṭbah*) at noon on Fridays. Beyond that, however, there was considerable scope for less formal exhortation. The Muslim masses might attend formal Friday services, but might also hear sermons or edifying stories read in other venues as well. In these settings, the individual delivering the sermon or reciting the tale was usually referred to as a *wā'iz* (preacher) or *qāṣṣ* (storyteller). The medieval sources use the terms *wā'iz* and *qāṣṣ* more or less interchangeably to refer to individuals engaged in the delivery of exhortations and the transmission of religious knowledge to the common people. See, for example, Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣāṣ wa-al-Mudhakkirīn*, ed. Merlin Swartz (Beirut, 1986), 11 (Eng. trans., 97-98).



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in a way that they do not from a great scholar.<sup>3</sup> At another point, he was more precise. "The preacher brings to God a great number of people, while a jurist [*faqīh*] or a traditionist [*muḥaddith*] or a Quran reader [*qārī'*] cannot bring [to God] a hundredth of that number, because [the preacher's] exhortations are addressed to both the common people and the elite [*lil-'āmm wa-al-khāṣṣ*], but especially the common people, who only rarely meet a jurist, so they discuss things with [the preacher]. The preacher is like the trainer of animals, who educates them, reforms them and refines them."<sup>4</sup>

Despite their important role, popular preachers and storytellers were subjected to vigorous and sustained criticism throughout the Middle Period. One of their most persistent critics was Ibn al-Jawzī himself. His attack on the lies preached by storytellers to their credulous listeners pulled no punches. What earned the disapprobation of Ibn al-Jawzī and others was not preaching per se, nor reciting to gullible crowds stories about the Hebrew prophets or other topics of sacred history, projects which are an integral feature of Islam as experienced in most times and places; rather, it was certain practices, and excesses, of those who engaged in these activities. The attack came from various quarters. Interestingly, in light of the later history of storytelling and popular preaching, many of the earliest critics were mystics. But traditionists and jurists such as the late Mamluk scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505) were also sharply critical of certain features of the storytellers' craft, and it was their objections which formed the central themes of the polemic against storytellers and preachers. Many of those who denounced the storytellers or their excesses were themselves prominent transmitters of Prophetic traditions, or adherents of a stridently traditionalist religious viewpoint, such as Ibn al-Jawzī, the Maliki jurist Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 737/1336), and the irrepressible Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymīyah (d. 727/1328). Since much of what the preachers and storytellers recited took the form of hadiths, the concerns of their critics focused on the untrustworthy character of the material they transmitted. Ibn al-Jawzī worried that false hadiths (*mawḍū'āt*) formed the stock-in-trade of many storytellers, and that the common people to whom they related them transmitted the unsound traditions to others, thereby compounding the damage.<sup>5</sup> In Ibn al-Ḥājj's opinion, the fundamental error of the *quṣṣās* was that they transmitted "weak sayings and stories" (*al-aqwāl wa-al-ḥikāyāt al-da'īfah*).<sup>6</sup> Ignorance was no excuse, but al-Suyūfī was especially critical of storytellers and preachers who transmitted hadith which

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 20-21 (Eng. trans., 107).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 230 (Eng. trans., 144).

<sup>5</sup>Abū al-Faraj 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū'āt*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad 'Uthmān, 2nd ed. (Cairo, 1983), 1:29, 32.

<sup>6</sup>Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal al-Shar' al-Sharīf* (Cairo, 1929; reprint, Beirut, 1981), 2:14.



they knew, or had reason to suspect, were false.<sup>7</sup> And the scope for error was enormous: some credited “heretics” (*zanādiqah*) with falsely attributing to the Prophet more than 12,000 traditions.<sup>8</sup>

A more biting and formal criticism, and one that was repeated over the centuries, was that storytelling itself was in some way an “innovation” (*bid‘ah*), and therefore suspect and dangerous. This concern is implicit already in certain traditions about the origins of the practice, such as those which depict the pseudo-legendary Tamīm al-Dārī as pestering the caliph ‘Umar to condone a novel practice.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes the scholars’ anxieties focused on particular practices associated with the *quṣṣās*, such as their singing verses of the Quran “beyond the proper bounds” (*al-qirā‘ah bi-alḥān al-khārijah ‘an al-ḥadd al-mā’ lūf*), or their transmission of heretical innovations in the form of what they claimed were hadith.<sup>10</sup> But others saw the practice generally as an illicit innovation. Thus, for example, al-Suyūfī pointedly began his treatise against the “lies of the *quṣṣās*” by citing a hadith in which the Prophet condemned innovations, while rigorous Maliki critics such as Ibn al-Hājj saw the practice of storytelling itself as novel and a threat to the Islamic social order.<sup>11</sup>

The polemical discourse over preachers and storytellers is dominated by their critics, but these transmitters of religious lore and knowledge to the common people were not without their defenders. One treatise written to justify them is *al-Bā‘ith ‘alā al-Khalāṣ min Sū’ al-Zann bi-al-Khawāṣṣ* (“The Enciter to Liberation from the Low Opinion of the Elites”—i.e., the elite scholars who scorned popular preachers and storytellers), a work which exists in a single anonymous manuscript in the British Library.<sup>12</sup> This treatise contains a point-by-point response to a critical tract (now apparently lost) penned by Zayn al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-‘Irāqī (d. 806/1404), a Shafī‘i jurist and traditionist who lived most of his life in Egypt.

<sup>7</sup>Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *Taḥdhīr al-Khawāṣṣ min Akādhīb al-Quṣṣās*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ṣabbāgh (Beirut, 1972), 67f.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 162. Other estimates, dutifully recorded by al-Suyūfī, also circulated. Cf. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 1:38, where he gives the figure of 14,000.

<sup>9</sup>Al-Suyūfī, *Taḥdhīr al-Khawāṣṣ*, 171-72; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, 22 (Eng. trans., 108).

<sup>10</sup>Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, 118 (Eng. trans., 203); Zayn al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī, as quoted in “Al-Bā‘ith ‘alā al-Khalāṣ min Sū’ al-Zann bi-al-Khawāṣṣ,” British Library MS Or. 4275, fol. 2v. On the innovation of chanting the Quran, see Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Ṭurṭushī, *Kitāb al-Hawādith wa-al-Bida’*, ed. A. M. Turki (Beirut, 1990), 183-93, and Maribel Fierro, “The Treatises Against Innovations (*kutub al-bid‘a*),” *Der Islam* 69 (1992): 211-13.

<sup>11</sup>Al-Suyūfī, *Taḥdhīr al-Khawāṣṣ*, 3; Ibn al-Hājj, *Madkhal*, 2:144f.

<sup>12</sup>British Library MS Or. 4275; see Charles Rieu, *Supplement to the Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1894), 155 (no. 239). This treatise has not, to my knowledge, been the subject of close scholarly scrutiny. Louis Massignon mentioned it briefly in his *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1954), 254-55, as did Merlin Swartz in the introduction to his edition of Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, 59n.



Al-‘Irāqī cut a prominent figure among the ulama of late eighth/fourteenth-century Cairo.<sup>13</sup> As a youth, he studied the variant Quran readings, jurisprudence and its methodology, but above all hadith; his father was careful to ensure that his son received *ijāzahs* (licenses) attesting that he had studied hadith with and received permission to transmit traditions from the leading authorities of the day. His academic record reads like that of a model late medieval religious scholar. He travelled widely and frequently, for instance, to study with the ulama of Syria and the Hijaz, his efforts made more efficacious by the fact that he had a prodigious memory, and was able to memorize up to four hundred lines of text per day. He held a number of teaching posts in the leading academic institutions of Cairo, and served as both judge and Friday preacher in Medina. His interlocutor, by contrast, was apparently one of the leading mystics in Cairo at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth century. For reasons which I have given elsewhere, the author of the anonymous treatise rebutting al-‘Irāqī’s criticisms was almost certainly ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Wafā’ (d. 807/1404), the son of the founder of the Wafā’ī order of Sufis. ‘Alī was one of the most popular and influential mystics and preachers in Egypt at the turn of the ninth/fifteenth century.<sup>14</sup> The dispute between these two men, as well as the broader polemical tradition represented by individuals such as Ibn al-Jawzī and Mamluk-era scholars such as Ibn Taymīyah, Ibn al-Ḥājj, and al-Suyūṭī, should help us to understand the social and political context in which both popular preaching and scholarly condemnations of it took place.

## II

Preaching, of course, was nothing new in Mamluk Cairo. Returning to his home in eastern Iran after performing the pilgrimage in the year 486/1093, a preacher named Ardashīr ibn Maṣṣūr al-‘Abbādī stopped in Baghdad, and began to deliver sermons in the great Nizāmīyah madrasah in that city. The sessions, which Abū

<sup>13</sup>Biographical information is taken from Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Inbā’ al-Ghumr bi-Abnā’ al-‘Umr* (Hyderabad, 1967-76), 5:170-76; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi wa-al-Mustawfī ba’d al-Wāfi*, ed. Muḥammad M. Amīn (Cairo, 1984- ), 7:245-50; Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-Lāmi’ li-Ahl al-Qarn al-Tāsi’* (Cairo, 1934), 4:171-78; Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab fī Akhbār Man Dhahab* (Cairo, 1931-32), 7:55-56.

<sup>14</sup>On ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Wafā’, see Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā’ al-Ghumr*, 5:253-56; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-Lāmi’*, 6:21-22; ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha’rānī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Cairo, 1965), 2:20-60; Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, 7:70-72. For the argument regarding the authorship of British Library MS Or. 4275, see my forthcoming work *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority*.



Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī attended, were extremely popular. According to Ibn al-Jawzī, the number of attendees grew with each meeting, until the congregation filled the courtyard, the building's upper rooms, and its roof. Judging by their relative numbers, women apparently were even more strongly drawn to the shaykh than were men. Eventually, according to the historian, the number of attendees reached 30,000. Al-‘Abbādī apparently commanded his audience through a profound dramatic sense, since his sermons were punctuated by long and effective silences: "this man," reported Ibn al-Jawzī, "was more silent than not." His power over his audience soon grew obvious. In response to his preaching, attendees would shout aloud; some abandoned their worldly occupations in order to take up the shaykh's call to piety and pious action. Young men shaved their heads and began to spend their days in mosques, or roamed through the city's streets spilling jugs of wine and smashing musical instruments.<sup>15</sup>

Al-‘Abbādī drove his audience, or at least some members of it, to live a more pious life, or to implement, sometimes violently, the injunctions of the sharī‘ah. Other preachers were able to manipulate their audiences to more explicitly political ends. For example, a preacher named Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Shīrāzī (d. 439/1047-48) came to Baghdad and there "spoke to the people in the language of exhortation [*lisān al-wa‘z*]." Attracted by his reputation for asceticism—"seduced" (*iftatana*), said the biographer al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī—uncounted numbers attended his preaching sessions (although after acquiring a certain degree of wealth, he abandoned his rags in favor of more splendid garments). With his following intact, he turned his attention to holy war (*ghazw*), to the frontier skirmishes which were intensifying in the early fifth/eleventh century. A large group of his followers assembling outside the city, they banged drums and set off to the north, toward the frontier. Some apparently lost their zeal, for they abandoned their march around the northern Mesopotamian city of Mosul, but Abū ‘Abd Allāh himself carried on, ultimately reaching Azerbaijan.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever their purposes, preachers like al-‘Abbādī and al-Shīrāzī potentially exerted a considerable degree of power over their audiences. Ibn al-Jawzī recognized this, and understood that the root of the preachers' power lay in their exposure to and following among the common people. To complicate matters further, however, it should be remembered that power in preaching and storytelling circles flowed in both directions. Preaching was not a simple, didactic affair, in which one individual, whatever his standing and reputation, delivered his message to a passive audience. Of course, the reaction of a congregation to a sermon delivered or a

<sup>15</sup> Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Muntaẓam fī Tārīkh al-Mulūk wa-al-Umam* (Hyderabad, 1359 AH; reprint, Beirut, 1966), 9:75-76.

<sup>16</sup> Abū Bakr Aḥmad al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād* (Beirut, 1966), 1:359-60.



story recited some five, six, or seven centuries ago is the most fleeting aspect of the problem, at least from the standpoint of the texts on which the historian must rely, and consequently the most difficult facet of the social context of preaching to reconstruct. But our understanding of the phenomenon would be incomplete if we did not assume that those who listened to preachers and storytellers had minds of their own, and somehow collectively expressed their own expectations of what they should be hearing.<sup>17</sup> From a broader perspective, the common people were capable of influencing the consensus of the Muslim community as to what was and was not legitimately Islamic.<sup>18</sup> They were capable, too, of expressing quite vociferously their opinion of one preacher or storyteller or another, as al-Suyūṭī discovered to his chagrin. His treatise *Taḥdhīr al-Khawāṣṣ* in fact was occasioned by an altercation between himself and a storyteller who recited false hadith. After al-Suyūṭī had condemned the man, the *qāṣṣ* reacted angrily, and spurred on his audience (the “common people” [*al-‘awāmm*], al-Suyūṭī calls them) until they cursed and threatened to stone the scholar.<sup>19</sup> Even ‘Alī ibn Wafā’, the great defender of the popular storytellers, worried that individuals who preached correctly—i.e., ordering that which was good, and warning against evil behavior—risked destruction at the hands of the “rabble” (*ra‘ā’*).<sup>20</sup> A Hanbali scholar and preacher named Shihāb al-Dīn ibn ‘Alī al-Shīshīnī (fl. late ninth/fifteenth century) “concerned himself with reading to the common people from works of exegesis and hadith,” and “was in much demand among them for that.” Later, however, after he had expressed in writing his approval of the sultan’s efforts to raise an extraordinary tax, the people turned against him, and “despised him for this and loosed their tongues in both verse and prose,” and even tried to kill him and burn down his house.<sup>21</sup> There exists no fury, it seems, like that of a congregation scorned.

Consequently the fundamental issue surrounding preachers and storytellers was one of control: who was to control their activities, their words and their message, and how was such control to be exercised? This was already an issue at an early date, since it forms the subject of several important reports about the origin of the practice of storytelling—for example, the hadith asserting that “only three kinds of persons narrate stories: one who commands [*amīr*], someone specially

<sup>17</sup>Peter Heath makes a similar point regarding public performances of epic narratives such as the *Sīrat ‘Antar* in *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat ‘Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City, 1996), 41. See also Boaz Shoshan, “On Popular Literature in Medieval Cairo,” *Poetics Today* 14 (1993): 349-65, esp. 351.

<sup>18</sup>Jonathan P. Berkey, “Tradition, Innovation, and the Social Construction of Knowledge in the Medieval Islamic Near East,” *Past & Present* 146 (1995): 38-65.

<sup>19</sup>Al-Suyūṭī, *Taḥdhīr al-Khawāṣṣ*, 4.

<sup>20</sup>‘Alī Bā‘ith ‘alā al-Khalāṣ,“ fols. 11r-12v.

<sup>21</sup>Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-Lāmi’*, 2:9-11.



commissioned for that purpose [*ma'mūr*], or a hypocrite [*murā'ī*],” as well as the various stories about early storytellers, such as Tamīm al-Dārī seeking the permission of the caliph to practice their art.<sup>22</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, commenting on the hadith, defined “*amīr*” as referring to those “on whom rests the responsibility for giving the *khutbah*, and so they exhort the people and admonish them.”<sup>23</sup>

What we are encountering here is the complex of issues surrounding the fact that Islam, unlike for instance the Roman Catholic church, has no specific institutional structure for settling controversies of an ideological or doctrinal nature. This is a point which has been recognized for some time, and despite the perhaps natural tendency of Western scholars to fall back upon unfortunate terms such as “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” it is one that seems to be relatively well-settled.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the absence of a formally-constituted decision-making body does not mean that it is fruitless to attempt to define an “Islamic tradition,” nor that that tradition has not experienced the necessity of setting, or attempting to set, boundaries to what constitutes permissible thought and behavior. Islamic rulers have been capable of instituting very precise limits to the theological positions which could be publicly expounded, as during the third/ninth-century *miḥnah* (sometimes translated as “inquisition”) set in motion by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn. Less formally, the doctrine of “consensus” (*ijmā'*) has given the ulama an instrument, however unwieldy, which can be used to define what is and is not acceptable, particularly in the area of ritual and behavior. But inevitably, the process of defining what is “Islamic” has been a flexible one, and one subject to a variety of internal and external pressures.<sup>25</sup>

This was certainly the case in the city of Cairo under the Mamluks, the forum in which Zayn al-Dīn al-'Irāqī and 'Alī ibn Wafā' waged their polemic over the storytellers. The Mamluks were perfectly willing to intervene in religious matters when a dispute threatened directly to disrupt the social order, or when doing so would strengthen their own political position. Sultan Qaytbāy, for instance, stepped into the simmering controversy over the verse of the Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ, firmly aligning himself with those scholars who considered it religiously unobjectionable, when doing so enabled him to realign the power structure within the ulama hierarchy

<sup>22</sup>Al-Suyūṭī, *Taḥdhīr al-Khawāṣṣ*, 172; see also Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, 28-29 (Eng. trans., 114-15). Other versions of the hadith replace *murā'ī* with *mukhtāl* (deceitful) or *mutakallaf* (false).

<sup>23</sup>Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, 28-29 (Eng. trans., 114-15).

<sup>24</sup>Bernard Lewis, “The Significance of Heresy in Islam,” *Studia Islamica* 1 (1953): 43-63; Alexander Knysh, “‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Heresy’ in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment,” *Muslim World* 83 (1993): 48-67.

<sup>25</sup>On this point, see Berkey, “Tradition, Innovation, and the Social Construction of Knowledge,” *passim*.



in such a way as to consolidate his own authority and that of his Mamluk supporters.<sup>26</sup> More generally, the Mamluk practice of building and endowing religious and academic institutions should be read in part as an effort to bring the ulama and the religious sphere under some degree of influence and control.

But the Mamluks had little interest in taking up the daunting task of systematically policing popular preachers and storytellers; neither, for that matter, had most previous governments in the Islamic Near East. Al-‘Irāqī objected that the storytellers of his day did not bother to seek the permission of those in a position to judge whether or not they were sufficiently trained and knowledgeable to practice their art—in the absence of qualified rulers such as the “rightly-guided caliphs” (*rāshidūn*), al-‘Irāqī mentioned somewhat vaguely “those who govern” (*al-ḥukkām*) and, more pointedly, the ulama themselves. In this they compared unfavorably even with Tamīm al-Dārī, who at least sought the permission of the caliph ‘Umar before he began to recite his stories. ‘Alī ibn Wafā’ responded that nothing in the report about Tamīm indicated that one is always *required* to seek the permission of those in authority in order to recite stories, only that Tamīm had once done so; perhaps, ‘Alī suggested, he had done so out of respect for the pious and esteemed caliph ‘Umar, as if to remind al-‘Irāqī that, in political terms, the eighth century after the Hijrah was very different from the first.<sup>27</sup> But ‘Alī also went beyond the formal question of permission. The hadith limiting “storytelling” (*al-qasās*) to those who command (*al-amīr*) or who are granted permission (*al-ma’ mūr*) was directed specifically, said ‘Alī, at the delivery of the formal Friday sermon (*khutbat al-jum‘ah*), which, since it had an explicitly political purpose, was indeed to be delivered by those in authority (*al-umarā’*) or their substitutes (*nuwwāb*). Alternatively, he argued, the storyteller criticized in the tradition was one who did not “command the good and forbid the evil,” or whose intentions in delivering his sermon were not pure. As long as the storytellers told tales which incline their listeners to that which is good and drive them away from the wicked, or which in some way “elucidate the book of God,” in ‘Alī’s opinion they had already been granted “permission” by God and His Prophet (*ma’ mūr bi-dhālika min Allāh wa-rasūlihi*).<sup>28</sup>

Such license posed any number of dangers. On the one hand, it threatened to make the definition of what constituted legitimate religious knowledge far too open and uncritical.<sup>29</sup> It also opened the door to quacks and unscrupulous and

<sup>26</sup>Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fārīd, His Verse, and His Shrine* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1994), 55-75, esp. 69-75.

<sup>27</sup>“Al-Bā’ith ‘alā al-Khalāṣ,” fol. 4r-v.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., fols. 4v-6r.

<sup>29</sup>This is an important but analytically separate issue, taken up in my book *Popular Preaching and*



venal profiteers—individuals who resorted to various tricks to delude their gullible audiences, to convince them of the false preachers' sincerity and so to elicit from them generous financial contributions.<sup>30</sup> But the problem must also be seen against the background of the power wielded, or potentially wielded, by preachers and storytellers, because of their deep and privileged connections to the common people. Both al-'Irāqī and Ibn al-Jawzī understood the danger posed by the preachers and storytellers in social terms. According to a tradition cited by al-'Irāqī, and one which should perhaps be seen against the background of the broader concern that the Muslim community would share the unhappy fate of the earlier chosen peoples, the Banū Isrā'īl had *quṣṣās*, and this was a cause of their destruction.<sup>31</sup> He also recounted a tale about the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'āwiyah, encountering and condemning a storyteller who preached without permission, and then himself preaching a sermon suggesting that freelance preaching had contributed to the hateful fissiparousness of the Jews and Christians. Could its consequences be any different for the Muslim community?<sup>32</sup>

All sermonizing took place in a social and even political context, but the connection between storytellers and preachers and the ruling order was problematic and fraught with tension. As George Makdisi has shown, preaching played an important role in the revival of Sunni power and the articulation of a more precisely defined Sunnism in Baghdad in the fifth/eleventh century.<sup>33</sup> During the Crusades, too, Muslim rulers employed preachers to instill the spirit of jihad into their soldiers and subjects.<sup>34</sup> Such preaching worked to the advantage of the secular authorities, but possessed a power and momentum of its own, which at times threatened to spiral out of hand. In the early sixth/twelfth century, for example, a jurist named Ibn al-Khashshāb whipped an Aleppo crowd into a frenzy with his denunciations of the Franks for their profaning of Muslim shrines in Jerusalem,

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<sup>30</sup>Zayn al-Dīn 'Abd al-Rahīm ibn 'Umar al-Jawbarī, *Al-Mukhtār min Kashf al-Asrār* (Damascus, 1302 AH), 33-38; *ibid.*, trans. René Khawam as *Le voile arraché*, (Paris, 1979), 91-101; C. E. Bosworth, *The Medieval Islamic Underground: The Banū Sāsān in Arabic Society and Literature* (Leiden, 1976), 1:88, 111-12, 291; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, 93-94 (Eng. trans., 171); Ibn al-Hājj, *Madkhal*, 2:271.

<sup>31</sup>"Al-Bā'ith 'alā al-Khalāṣ," fols. 10r-11r. See also Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, 37, 127 (Eng. trans., 122-23, 211), and M. J. Kister, "Ḥaddithū 'an Banī Isrā'īla wa-lā Ḥaraja: A Study of an Early Tradition," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 232.

<sup>32</sup>"Al-Bā'ith 'alā al-Khalāṣ," fols. 6r-10r.

<sup>33</sup>George Makdisi, *Ibn 'Aqīl et la résurgence de l'Islam traditionaliste au xi<sup>e</sup> siècle (v<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'Hégire)* (Damascus, 1963).

<sup>34</sup>Emmanuel Sivan, *L'Islam et la croisade: Idéologie et propagande dans les réactions musulmanes aux croisades* (Paris, 1968), 68-69.



and then by way of revenge led them in a march to forcibly convert several Christian churches into mosques.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, some preachers drew their standing and influence from their close connection to those in authority. Such individuals were, of all possible types of preachers, perhaps the most likely to catch the eye of biographers such as Ibn al-Jawzī, who both sought to record an accurate account of the leading men and women of their day, and also hoped to help set standards for the preaching profession. For example, the son of Ardashīr al-‘Abbādī, Abū Maṣū‘ al-Muzaffar (d. 547/1152) (an even more famous preacher than his father), whose sermons in Baghdad were widely attended, developed an especially close relationship with the caliph al-Muqtafī, whose trust extended to sending the preacher on diplomatic missions.<sup>36</sup> Given the tense but symbiotic ties which bound religious scholars and the ruling military elites together during the Middle Ages, it is not surprising that some preachers developed close relationships with the predominantly Turkish rulers, and even profited from them. The Egyptian Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Qurdāḥ (d. 841/1438), for example, a noted *wā‘iz*, musician, and student of astronomy, had the good graces of Mamluk sultans and the leading amirs, connections which allowed him to die a wealthy man.<sup>37</sup>

Others preachers, however, derived their reputations directly from their oppositional stand, from setting themselves against those in positions of power. Despite the formal connection between Friday sermons and political legitimacy, such opposition was quite natural to a preaching tradition which frequently stressed the ephemeral, even diseased, character of worldly success, wealth, and power, and indeed forms a sort of trope of literary accounts of famous preachers. What was required in a preacher was courage sufficient to preach a sermon capable of making the high and mighty weep, as Maṣū‘ ibn ‘Ammār did in preaching before Hārūn al-Rashīd.<sup>38</sup> The famed Hanbali mystic and preacher Ibn Sam‘ūn (d. 387/997), for example, ignored a prohibition on preaching promulgated by the Buyid amir ‘Aḍūḍ al-Dawlah in an effort to suppress the communal violence between Hanbalis and Shi‘is which plagued Baghdad in the fourth/tenth century. Called before the amir, Ibn Sam‘ūn continued to preach, and according to a report recorded by Ibn al-Jawzī, moved the sovereign to tears.<sup>39</sup> The *wā‘iz* Abū Sa‘d al-Mu‘ammar ibn

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 41-43.

<sup>36</sup>Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A‘yān wa-Anbā’ Abnā’ al-Zamān*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut, 1978), 5:212-13; *ibid.*, trans. William MacGuckin de Slane as *Ibn Khallikān’s Biographical Dictionary* (Paris, 1842), 3:365-66; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Muntaẓam*, 10:150-51.

<sup>37</sup>Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā’ al-Ghumr*, 9:15-165; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi*, 2:78; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw’ al-Lāmi’*, 2:142; Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, 7:238.

<sup>38</sup>Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣayd al-Khātir* (Amman, 1987), 409-10.

<sup>39</sup>Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Muntaẓam*, 8:88-89; Adam Mez, *The Renaissance of Islam*, trans. Salahuddin



‘Alī Ibn Abī Imāmāh (d. 506/1112-13), who had “a sharp mind and a Baghdadi intellect,” was by all repute fearless in preaching to kings and princes, whether the caliph al-Mustazhar billāh or the famous vizier Nizām al-Mulk. Once, according to Ibn al-Jawzī, he delivered a sermon to the latter in a mosque in Baghdad, addressing him directly as the “hireling of the Muslim community” (*ajīr al-ummah*), and reminding him in no uncertain terms that his duty consisted in looking after the well-being of the Muslims, and that God would demand of him an accounting of how he had discharged that responsibility. At its conclusion, Nizām al-Mulk was so moved to tears that he handed Abū Sa’d 100 dinars, which the preacher piously refused, instructing the vizier instead to distribute the money to the poor.<sup>40</sup> Just so, a preacher named Abū ‘Umar al-Ḥasan Ibn al-Filw (d. 426/1035) composed a poem in honor of himself and his preaching to an unnamed sultan: “I went in to the sultan in the palace of his majesty / In poverty—I did not make noise with horses or foot soldiers [*wa-lam ujlib bi-khayl wa-lā rajil*] / —And I said: ‘Look! Between my poverty and your wealth / is the distance between sainthood and separation [from God].”<sup>41</sup>

Not every ruler was as pious and god-fearing as the sources portray Hārūn al-Rashīd or Nizām al-Mulk, and even Ibn al-Jawzī urged circumspection. Those who preach to sultans, he warned, should exercise extreme caution (*ghāyat al-taḥarruz*), for sultans reserve to themselves a monopoly on the use of force, and a sharp reprimand (*tawbīkh*) may appear to them as an intolerable public humiliation (*idhlāl*). Ibn al-Jawzī shared the common medieval attitude that manners and morals were in steep decline. Rulers such as Hārūn used to listen attentively to sermons, but now times have changed: rulers are arrogant, and corrupt ulama seek to flatter them. “In these times,” said Ibn al-Jawzī, “it is preferable [for the honest preacher] to distance himself from such people, and to avoid preaching to them, for that is the safer approach.” If a preacher is forced to speak before men of authority, he should take an indirect approach: he should preach by way of allusion (*ishārah*), or direct his remarks to the people generally (*‘awāmm*), and mix his exhortation with statements about the nobility of rulership and remind his audience of the comportment of the just rulers of earlier days.<sup>42</sup>

Ibn al-Jawzī’s personal circumstances—an enormously popular and well-respected preacher in twelfth-century Baghdad—made him especially aware of the complex nexus of preaching and power. Some members of the ulama no doubt played the sycophant to those who wielded the sword, but the rulers, too, were

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Khuda Bukhsh and D. S. Margoliouth (New York, 1975), 330-31.

<sup>40</sup>Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Muntaẓam*, 9:173-74.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 8:87.

<sup>42</sup>Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣayd al-Khāṭir*, 409-10.



cognizant of the power of the preachers' word, and so, he implies, feared it. Consequently, despite his warning, the ideal of the confrontational stance remained popular with preachers throughout the later Middle Ages, and instances in which individuals lived up to the ideal were carefully noted by their biographers. In 638/1240, the famous preacher 'Izz al-Dīn Ibn 'Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī (d. 660/1262) quarreled with the Ayyubid sultan of Damascus, al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl, over the latter's treaty with the Crusaders by which he surrendered to them a number of fortresses and the town of Ṣafad. To chastise the sultan for his cowardice in dealing with the infidel Franks, Ibn 'Abd al-Salām refused to pray for him and dropped his name from the official Friday *khutbah*, as a result of which al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl exiled the preacher to Cairo, where his nephew and rival al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb was happy to appoint the famous man to the pulpit of the mosque of 'Amr.<sup>43</sup>

The Mamluk sultans and amirs provided the more intrepid among late medieval preachers with ample opportunities to chastise those in power. 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Naqqāsh (d. 819/1416), a popular preacher who was appointed *khaṭīb* at the large congregational mosque of Ibn Ṭulūn south of Cairo, was respected for "his severe and sharp ordering of the good and in his preaching [*wa'z*], both in his Friday sermons and his storytelling [*fī khutabihi wa-qaṣaṣihi*], so that he came to have high standing among both the elite and the common people"; more particularly, he was credited with a willingness to condemn whatever evildoing he witnessed or heard about, even if it embroiled him in controversy with the ruling Turkish authorities.<sup>44</sup> Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Dayrūṭī (d. 921/1515), a famous preacher at the end of the Mamluk period, was respected and feared, according to the Sufi biographer al-Sha'rānī, by sultans and amirs, as well as by those of lesser station. Many of the leading figures of state attended his sessions; all left humbled.<sup>45</sup> Zakarīyā al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1520), by his own account, was fearless in preaching to the awesome but pious sultan Qāyṭbāy. "If I was unable to speak to him directly," he recalled, "I would give him my advice in a sermon [*khutbah*], and he would grasp my meaning; and if I then greeted him at Friday prayers, he would come up to me to greet me and say: 'May God reward you for your faithful advice to us.'" The envious, he said, sought to turn the sultan

<sup>43</sup>Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr Ibn Qādī Shuhbah, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'īyah* (Hyderabad, 1979), 2:138; Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-Nihāyah* (Cairo, 1932-39), 13:235-36; Tāj al-Dīn 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'īyah al-Kubrā*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥilw and Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭanṭāwī, 2nd ed. (Cairo, 1992), 8:209-55; R. Stephen Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols: The Ayyubids of Damascus, 1193-1260* (Albany, 1977), 267; Sivan, *L'Islam et la croisade*, 149-52.

<sup>44</sup>Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, 7:232-33; Ibn Qādī Shuhbah, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'īyah*, 4:31-33; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi*, 7:223-34; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw' al-Lāmi*, 4:140-42.

<sup>45</sup>Al-Sha'rānī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, 2:164-65.



against him, and encouraged the sultan to forbid al-Anṣārī to preach to him in a disrespectful manner. But Qāyṭbāy responded: "What [would you have me] say to someone who has opened my eyes to my own faults and has given me good advice?" Summoning up all the rhetorical weight of the Islamic preaching tradition and applying it directly to the Mamluk system itself, al-Anṣārī was able to drive this sultan to tears. "One day I said to him in a sermon [*khutbah*]: 'Awake, O you whom God has put in charge of His servants, and think of your origins, and of your condition today. Once you did not exist, and now you do; once you were an unbeliever, and now you are a Muslim; once you were a slave, and now you are free; once you were ordered [*ma'mūran*], and now you give orders [*amīran*]; once you were an amir, and now you are a sultan. Do not accept these blessings with vainglory and pride, and [do not] forget your beginning and your end: for your nose will be ground in the dust when you die, and the worms will eat [you] and you will become dust.' Then the sultan wept and said to those amirs around him: 'If I were to send this one away, who would preach me such a sermon [*wa'z*]?'"<sup>46</sup>

Given the influence which preachers at least potentially wielded, the issue of control was especially problematic. Direct control of course was impossible, given the absence of a formal ecclesiastical structure. Further complicating the situation, much sermonizing and storytelling took place in settings which even the informal sinews of Islamic religious authority found it difficult or inexpedient to police, such as the vast cemeteries outside Cairo. Ibn al-Ḥājj, for one, harbored a particular concern that unscrupulous storytellers and preachers would ply their trade to gullible audiences in the shadowy warrens of the Qarāfah.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, many preachers and storytellers were peripatetics, traveling through the Islamic world, sometimes on pilgrimage, and practicing their art before always new and different audiences. Such wanderers already provided a stock character for al-Ḥarīrī's fifth/eleventh century *Maqāmāt*, where one tale describes the rascally hero Abū Zayd as appearing in "the equipment of pilgrimage" and preaching to the people of the Yemeni city of San'ah.<sup>48</sup> Not infrequently, such individuals acquired a good deal of contemporary fame: so, for example, al-Sayyid 'Alī ibn Ya'lā (d. 527/1133), a famous preacher from Khurasan, roamed through Iran and Iraq, receiving the enthusiastic approbation of the people (*wa-zahara lahu al-qabūl al-tāmm min al-nās*), finally arriving in Baghdad where he received the welcome of both the

<sup>46</sup> Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣuḡhrā* (Cairo, 1970), 42.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, 1:268.

<sup>48</sup> Qāsim ibn 'Alī al-Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt* (Beirut, 1980), 16-21; *ibid.*, trans. T. Chenery as *The Assemblies of al-Ḥarīrī* (London, 1867), 1:109-11.



elite and the common people.<sup>49</sup> The Sufi preacher known as al-Shābb al-Ṭā'ib (d. 832/1429), who held preaching and instruction sessions "in the manner of the Shādhilīyah," circulated widely among the common people: he was born and educated in Cairo, but visited Yemen, the Hijaz, Iraq, and Syria, most of them several times, and "constructed a number of *zāwiyahs* in the various countries" in which to ply his trade.<sup>50</sup>

Given the fluidity of the situation, one can understand the bitterness of scholars such as al-Suyūṭī who perceived the power and influence of the preachers and storytellers, and who worried that their discourses were not always, as it were, kosher. A treatise such as Ibn al-Jawzī's *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās* or al-'Irāqī's polemic against the storytellers was fundamentally an effort to assert control over what its author perceived to be a lawless activity, or, perhaps more accurately, a cry of frustration that wicked and ignorant practitioners of the craft operated without any effective restraints. But in fact the predicament was not so stark as the scholars believed. The issue of authority and control, in relation to the activity of popular preachers and storytellers, was extraordinarily complex, as it was in all aspects of medieval Islamic religious life. There were at least sporadic, and not altogether unsuccessful, efforts to exert formal, if not systematic, control. More importantly, the preaching tradition itself set certain boundaries which prevented a degeneration into wholesale anarchy. Those boundaries were reinforced by the symbiotic, if sometimes tense, relationship between popular preaching and storytelling and the more disciplined transmission of religious knowledge represented by scholars such as Ibn al-Jawzī, al-'Irāqī, and al-Suyūṭī, and also by the thematic content of the preaching tradition itself.

The prospect of some form of direct control of preachers and storytellers by the ruling authorities was an old one, which at least in theory stretched back to the caliph 'Umar's ambivalent attitude toward the *qāṣṣ* Tamīm al-Dārī. Al-Suyūṭī peppered his polemic against the storytellers with narratives from the early decades of Islamic history about the *sāhib al-shurṭah* (indicating some high-ranking officer charged with policing responsibilities) taking action to prevent unauthorized *quṣṣās* from practicing their art.<sup>51</sup> Those who dare to transmit false stories about the Prophet, he indicated, deserve to be whipped and threatened with even worse punishments; in these matters, said al-Suyūṭī, the ruler (*al-ḥākim*) should be appealed

<sup>49</sup>Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *Al-Wāfi bi-al-Wafayāt*, ed. H. Ritter et al. (Istanbul, 1931- ), 22:333-34.

<sup>50</sup>Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw' al-Lāmi'*, 2:50-51; Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah and Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Ashūr (Cairo, 1956-73), 4:815-16.

<sup>51</sup>Al-Suyūṭī, *Taḥdhīr al-Khawāṣṣ*, 198.



to for help.<sup>52</sup> Such arguments and anecdotes may be read most accurately as expressions of a pious hope and of the widespread pessimistic conviction that Muslim society no longer operated as it once had, and as it should, rather than as an accurate memory of a formerly consistent pattern. On occasion, however, rulers had complied, as when the caliph al-Mu‘taḍid ordered the storytellers (along with astrologers and diviners) swept from the streets of Baghdad in 279/982.<sup>53</sup> Several decades later, the vizier Ibn al-Muslimah ordered preachers and sermonizers, both *khuṭabā’* and *wu‘āz*, not to recite hadiths in their sermons without first checking their authenticity with the traditionist al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī.<sup>54</sup> The assertion by Ibn al-Ukhūwah (d. 729/1329), in his manual of instruction for the *muḥtasib* (roughly, “market inspector”), that individuals who were not qualified to preach should be forbidden from doing so, and that those who did so anyway should be punished, would seem to indicate that this official appointee of the sultan held, at least formally, some right of supervision over the activities of preachers.<sup>55</sup>

It is difficult to determine whether medieval ruling authorities followed the advice of Ibn al-Ukhūwah and al-Suyūfī and systematically supervised the activities of popular storytellers and preachers, since routine matters often escaped the notice of chroniclers and biographers. Authority to regulate their activities was diffuse, and shared by numerous individuals. Sultans, of course, held rights of appointment over preachers in the Friday congregational mosques, or at least some of them, and when an official *khaṭīb* preached a sermon which challenged the political order, he could find himself dismissed, as Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī discovered. But al-Qalqashandī noted in his eighth/fourteenth-century reference manual for scribes and bureaucrats that in practice, the ruler’s prerogatives were limited. He identified the official Friday preaching post (*khiṭābah*) as “in truth, the most powerful [religious] post and most exalted in rank,” since the Prophet himself had undertaken it. By his day, however, there were “countless” such positions all over Egypt, so that the sultan did not routinely concern himself with any but the most important, such as that in the congregational mosque in the Citadel of Cairo, or those in which, by the terms of their endowment, he held the right of supervision.<sup>56</sup>

Preachers in less visible positions must have been subject to even looser control. On the other hand, occasionally matters did reach a point where secular

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 109-38.

<sup>53</sup>Bosworth, *The Medieval Islamic Underground*, 28.

<sup>54</sup>Makdisi, *Ibn ‘Aqīl*, 419-20.

<sup>55</sup>Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn al-Ukhūwah, *Ma’ālim al-Qurbah fī Aḥkām al-Ḥisbah*, ed. Reuben Levy, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series, n.s., vol. 12 (Cambridge, 1938), 179.

<sup>56</sup>Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A‘shā fī Ṣinā‘at al-Inshā’* (Cairo, 1914-28), 4:39.



and/or religious authorities found it expedient to intervene, as did the Saljuq Sultan Mas'ūd in forbidding 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ghaznawī (d. 551/1156) from preaching, after the latter began to incline toward Shi'ism.<sup>57</sup> Occasional anecdotes in the chronicles and biographical dictionaries give us some sense of how the mechanisms of control might operate. The Sufī 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī recounted a wonderful tale about Ibrāhīm ibn Mi'ḍād al-Ja'barī (d. 687/1288), a charismatic Cairene preacher. According to al-Sha'rānī, the qadis held a council in order to condemn al-Ja'barī's preaching, and in particular his ungrammatical singing of the Quran. After the council meeting, the Maliki qadi issued a *fatwā* forbidding al-Ja'barī to preach, but shortly thereafter fell from a gate of Cairo's citadel and broke his neck; chastened by this expression of God's judgment, the other qadis threw themselves at al-Ja'barī's feet and begged his forgiveness. Triumphant, the preacher told them that it was not he who had recited improperly, but their ears which were at fault.<sup>58</sup> This story, and a parallel one in which, after condemning the preacher, the leading ulama of Cairo suffered from the painful retention of urine, clearly contain apocryphal elements, but the essence of the story is confirmed by the earlier and far more sober biographer, Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī. He reports the council of qadis and their condemnation of al-Ja'barī, although in his account the accusing jurist fell, more prosaically, from his mule, and broke his wrist, rather than his neck. He indicates that others, too, had condemned his preaching, but that al-Ja'barī had persisted nonetheless and proved "his innocence and the correctness of his belief."<sup>59</sup> What is of interest in both of these accounts is the interactive pattern of control and resistance: of a council of qadis and jurists seeking to restrain a popular and charismatic preacher of suspect convictions or dubious intellectual competence, and his assertion of an independent right to preach. No doubt al-Ja'barī felt, as 'Alī ibn Wafā' might say, that he had been granted permission to preach by God and His Prophet.

Sometimes the qadis sought to involve the sultan in an effort to give their interdictions more force. Al-Sha'rānī records another imaginative tale about Ḥusayn al-Jākī, a pious preacher who died in 730/1329-30, who like al-Ja'barī was accused of mispronouncing the Quran. Again a council was held, this one presided over by the sultan, as a result of which al-Jākī was forbidden to preach. The *wā'iz* complained to his shaykh, Ayyūb al-Kannās ("the sweeper"), who arranged a trick. After the sultan had entered a toilet, Ayyūb appeared to him, emerging through a wall, with a broom in his hand. The sultan mistook him for a lion, and, afraid that the cat was about to swallow him up, fell down trembling. Ayyūb then ordered the sultan

<sup>57</sup>Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Muntazam*, 10:166-68.

<sup>58</sup>Al-Sha'rānī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, 1:177.

<sup>59</sup>Al-Subkī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'īyah*, 8:123.



to issue an edict allowing al-Jākī to preach; the sultan having done so, the shaykh then slipped back through the wall.<sup>60</sup> The colorful ending of this story aside, its central drama—the qadis and sultan, in council, examining and condemning a popular preacher—was not unique. The jurist, exegete, and preacher Ibn al-Labbān (d. 749/1349), who was criticized for weaving monism and other suspect doctrines into his sermons, was condemned by the Shafi‘i chief qadi Jalāl al-Dīn al-Qazwīnī and forbidden to preach at the insistence of a group of legal scholars, but not before the sultan and a group of amirs had become involved, the latter apparently interceding to seek his repentance.<sup>61</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to view the situation as one that uniformly pitted qadis and senior scholars, allied with sultans or other ruling authorities, representing a kind of quasi-official religious establishment, against more free-wheeling preachers and storytellers catering to a popular constituency. There was considerable overlap between the different groups and the perspectives they represented. The various individuals of the Bulqīnī family, for example, ranked among the most accomplished and respected members of the learned elite of Cairo; but in addition, they held popular preaching sessions, in mosques and madrasahs, large and small, throughout the city. Here, too, the fundamental similarity of the material which formed the subject of class sessions, official Friday sermons, and popular preaching and storytelling is important. Tales of the prophets were to be found in rigorous and esteemed exegetical works, as well as in more popular circles, and hadiths of course were a fundamental component of religious discourse at any level.

As a result, the storytelling and preaching tradition generated its own informal mechanisms of control, mechanisms built largely upon reputation and the moral force wielded by particularly respected preachers. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Kallā‘ī (d. 801/1398), a Shādhilī Sufī, began his career as an official notary (*shāhid*) in a shop outside Bāb Zuwaylah in Cairo, but later became the companion of the shaykh and preacher Ḥusayn al-Khabbāz, and in fact took up the latter’s preaching duties in his *zāwiyah* after his death.<sup>62</sup> Al-Kallā‘ī seems not to have

<sup>60</sup> Al-Sha‘rānī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, 2:2.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah fī A‘yān al-Mī‘ah al-Thāminah* (Cairo, 1966), 3:420-21; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 2:408. For another example, see Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi*, 1:184-85. On Ibn al-Labbān, see Jean Claude Vadet, “Les idées d’un prédicateur de mosquée au xiv<sup>e</sup> siècle dans le Caire des Mamlouks,” *Annales islamologiques* 8 (1969): 63-69.

<sup>62</sup> Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā’ al-Ghumr*, 4:91-92; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-Lāmi’*, 10:113-14. Ibn Ḥajar and, following him, al-Sakhāwī give his shaykh’s name as Ḥusayn al-Ḥabbār; that may, however, be a scribal error, for the individual intended is clearly the same whom most sources name al-Khabbāz. See ‘Alī ibn Dā‘ūd Ibn al-Ṣayrafī al-Jawharī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs wa-al-Abdān fī Tawārīkh al-Zamān*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 1970- ), 1:277; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 3:685-86; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1929-72), 11:385. Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn



been a shining example of the preaching tradition: the sources report that he made glaring errors and carelessly mispronounced God's word, and that his sermons contained misguided and unjustified exegeses of Quranic texts. His errors came to the attention of the aged Sirāj al-Dīn al-Bulqīnī (d. 805/1403), who took it upon himself to prohibit him from "speaking to the people" (*al-kalām 'alā al-nās*). In essence, al-Bulqīnī's reprimand was that of a widely admired scholar and preacher directed against an individual whose incompetence threatened to undermine the authority of all those who preached.

Practitioners of the art of preaching and storytelling might close ranks in order to silence a particularly dangerous individual. In response to al-'Irāqī's repetition of the tradition that "the storyteller can anticipate only God's wrath," 'Alī ibn Wafā' agreed—if, that is, the storyteller preached that which contradicted the shari'ah. Such an individual should indeed worry about the retribution he will face on the Day of Judgment.<sup>63</sup> But in fact even the Wafā'īs did not rely entirely on conscience to ensure the integrity of their preaching. Take, for example, the case of 'Abd al-Qādir ibn Muḥammad al-Qāyātī al-Wafā'ī (d. 873/1469), a member of the order who was originally trained to be a muezzin, but who was drawn to preaching because of the "power, fame, and reputation" it brought him. 'Abd al-Qādir, it seems, was something of an imposter, reciting poetry which he falsely claimed was his own, and impersonating more famous scholars: once, while on the pilgrimage, he claimed to be Walī al-Dīn al-Bulqīnī (d. 865/1461), and led preaching sessions in his name. His ensuing altercation with Walī al-Dīn, who was described as having preached "in the manner of the Banū al-Wafā',"<sup>64</sup> seems in some way—the biographer al-Sakhāwī is sparse with details—to have led to a falling out between 'Abd al-Qādir and the Wafā'ī order. As a result, some wags gave him the *nisbah* "al-Jafā'ī," i.e., "one who is alienated," or "one who is treated with distaste." The order, that is, took it upon itself to ostracize a member whose misdeeds embarrassed it in front of a family known for its concern for preaching and the transmission of knowledge to the common people.<sup>65</sup>

In the end, the nature of the preaching tradition, and the character of the sermons and tales which formed the bulk of the material transmitted in storytelling circles, themselves acted to blunt the hard edge of the power potentially wielded by religious figures with close ties to the common people, and to minimize the threat which they presented to the social and political order. Generalizations are dangerous, since we can know so little about the particular circumstances in

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al-Furāt, *Tārīkh*, ed. Qusṭanṭīn Zurayq and Najlā' 'Izz al-Dīn (Beirut, 1938), 9:173-74, however, named him al-Ḥabbār. There seems also to have been confusion as to whether his name was Ḥasan or Ḥusayn.

<sup>63</sup>"Al-Bā'ith 'alā al-Khalāṣ," fols. 11r-12v.

<sup>64</sup>Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-Lāmi'*, 2:188-90.



which sermons and stories were recited, and still less about the audiences' reaction to them. However, we can be certain that popular sermons typically focused on sin, suffering, and death, on poverty and its endurance, on the trials and tribulations of this world, and in particular on the promise of personal (as opposed to social) salvation. The root meaning of the verb *wa'aza*, after all, is "to admonish," "to warn." Meditation upon the misery to which humans are subjected in life, the horrors of death, and the promise of release to those who are God-fearing, was a staple of medieval sermonizing. It finds reflection in a variety of sources: in collections of sermons by well-known figures such as Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Nubātah al-Fāriqī (d. 374/984-85); in a compendium of hadith in use among the storytellers, as compiled by Ibn Taymīyah; and in the sermons and tales recounted by popular preachers such as the Sufi Shu'ayb (or 'Ubayd) al-Ḥurayfīsh.<sup>66</sup> Popular preachers such as al-Ḥurayfīsh laid special emphasis on patience in the face of adversity. So, for example, he elucidated for his audience the saying that "the poor man is doctor of the sick, and his bleacher": if a rich man is ill, and gives alms, and a poor man prays for him, he will be cured; and if a rich man gives alms to the poor, and the poor man prays for him, the rich man will be cleansed of his sins.<sup>67</sup> Such a sermon grants the poor a certain power, it is true, but it is a power which manifests itself in the next world, and not in this.

Accordingly, popular sermons must surely in many instances have acted as a kind of social safety valve, deflecting and deflating the various pressures experienced by those medieval Muslim men and women who listened to the preachers and storytellers. The excessive weeping which disturbed Ibn al-Jawzī, and which was noted by many medieval observers of preachers and preaching circles, played the social role of internalizing the despair, anger and angst of listeners. The suspicion of and hostility toward the world which were characteristic of sermons hardly amounted to a call to arms against those who benefitted from the established social order. On the contrary, the spirit of penitence which sermons sought to induce, the copious weeping, and all the reminders of our frailty and sin and the hopelessness and injustice of the present world, reminded listeners that true justice would be found only in eschatological time. Al-Ḥurayfīsh and his listeners drew comfort from the Prophet's observation that of the eight doors to paradise, seven are reserved for the poor, while six of seven entrances to hell are set aside for the rich.<sup>68</sup> Social distinctions will be set aside at the end of time—God created heaven

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 4:296-97.

<sup>66</sup>Shu'ayb al-Ḥurayfīsh, *Al-Rawḍ al-Fā'iq fī al-Mawā'iz wa-al-Raqā'iq* (Cairo, 1949). On al-Ḥurayfīsh, see William M. Brinner, "The Significance of the *Ḥarāfīsh* and Their 'Sultan'," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 6 (1963): 190-215. For more on the content of popular sermons, see my *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority*, Chapter 3.

<sup>67</sup>Al-Ḥurayfīsh, *Al-Rawḍ al-Fā'iq*, 67-68.



for those who obey him, “even a black Ethiopian slave,” and hell for those who do not, “even a Qurayshī *sharīf*”<sup>69</sup>—but in the meanwhile, the underlying hierarchies went unchallenged. Ibn Abī Imāmah preached fearlessly to Niẓām al-Mulk, so vigorously and forthrightly reminding him of his duties in this world and the punishment which threatened him in the next that the vizier, under the preacher’s instructions, distributed a sum to the poor of Baghdad—but Niẓām al-Mulk remained vizier, of course, and the social and political order unchanged. Qāyṭbāy appreciated being reminded of his sins and the frailty of his soul, but for all his piety thoroughly understood the modalities of raw political power in which he operated. In one of the few records we have of an actual medieval preaching circle, the preacher observed that on the Day of Judgment, our lots in life will be reversed. Ascetics (*zuhhād*) and those who serve God (*‘ubbād*) will, in paradise, have plenty to eat and drink, and live in large palaces, and be served by houris, as do the profligate (*fujjār*) and dissolute (*fussāq*) in this world. By contrast, the profligate will, after the judgment, suffer the lot of those who scorn (or who are denied) the joys of this life: they will be poor, sad, and afflicted by trials and tribulations.<sup>70</sup> But such a sermon postpones the social revolution beyond the limits of history.

Through mechanisms such as these, the social and even political power latent in the tradition of Islamic preaching, and in the ties which bound preachers to their audiences, was softened, its disruptive potential muted. The activities of popular preachers and storytellers remind us of the complex nexus of political and religious power which characterized the society of Mamluk Egypt, as well as that of other military regimes in the medieval Islamic world. The Mamluks stood in an ambivalent and problematic relationship to the Muslim Egyptians over whom they ruled: religious identity and commitment always represented a potential threat, but could also, under certain circumstances, be harnessed to lend prestige and credibility to their regime. It is in such light, of course, that the decision of individual Mamluks to construct and endow religious institutions should be understood. As it turned out, however, many leading religious scholars themselves perceived an ambivalence in certain popular religious phenomena, such as the sermons and recitation of tales which form the subject of this article. The *quṣṣās* and *wu‘āz* held a privileged position in the transmission of religious knowledge to the Muslim masses, but were also perceived as a threat by senior scholars and representatives of the faith, men such as al-Suyūṭī and Ibn al-Ḥājj. Religious power in Mamluk Egypt did not emanate from individuals or institutions as much as it flowed in circles around them. It could be tapped to support the social and political hierarchies, but at the same moment could undermine them. In this way it

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 73.



bound everyone—Mamluks, scholars, popular preachers and their audiences—to the common project of continually constructing and reconstructing Islam.

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<sup>70</sup>“Al-Bā‘ith ‘alá al-Khalāṣ,” fol. 56v.



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