Popular Religious Preaching as Informal Education and its Impact on Medieval Islamic Culture

HATIM MAHAMID AND YOUNIS ABU ALHAIJA

Abstract

This study examines popular preaching in medieval Islamic culture, which served as a form of mass education for the public. Public assemblies (*majālis*) and gatherings were organized by scholars on their initiative of scholars, or by rulers for various purposes. The assemblies took the form of a sermon (*khuṭba*), preaching (*waʿẓ*), *daʿwa*, *dhikr* with a Sufi shaykh, or as a part of a visit (*ziyāra*) to a shrine of a righteous person. Assemblies

Hatim Mahamid is a Senior Lecturer at The Open University of Israel and Sakhnin Academic College for Teachers' Education. He has published several articles and books, including *Waqf, Education and Politics in Late Medieval Syria* (Saarbrücken: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013). Younis Fareed Abu Alhaija is a Lecturer in the Department of Education at Sakhnin College Academic College for Teachers' Education.

Mahamid Hatim and Abu Alhaija Younis. 2024. "Popular Religious Preaching as Informal Education and its Impact on Medieval Islamic Culture." *American Journal of Islam and Society* 41, nos. 3-4: 56–83 • doi: 10.35632/ajis.v41i3-4.3461

and gatherings were held in mosques, in the courts of rulers, or in public places. The goals of these gatherings depended on the desires of their organizers, the time and place in which they were held, and the religious or social events for which they were arranged. Therefore, the nature of gatherings tended toward religious preaching, the personal interest of the organizers, propaganda, political activities, critique and oversight, and sometimes as a form of celebration or leisure. By means of these assemblies, some leaders enhanced their status, as well as garnering greater publicity from among the general population. The gatherings displayed the level of knowledge among the educated and among the '*ulamā*'. In addition to the stated objectives of holding these assemblies, this study shows that the primary objective centered on the preserving of Islamic values and moral rules.

Keywords: preaching, mass education, medieval Islamic culture, '*ulamā*', Rulers

Introduction

In general, civilization is the cultural, intellectual, and material product of a nation, which distinguishes itself from others in terms of advancement and prosperity in all fields of life. It is measured by characteristics such as material heritage, like buildings, castles, and palaces, its political features, as well as its cultural production. Here, cultural production can be understood as comprising four main elements: political systems, economic resources, moral traditions, sciences and arts. As for Islamic civilization and culture, it is the totality of that which has resulted from Islamic thought, the sciences, and other developments shaped by the religious influences of the Holy Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. The Qur'an and Prophetic Sunna have had a central role in the lives of Muslims in a wide range of fields, in addition to what was absorbed from other cultures prior to Islam, and which do not contradict its religious and moral rules. Thus, this study focuses on the cultural phenomena of

informal popular preaching (*majālis waʿẓ*), which had the aim of preserving and consolidating Islamic civilization, and spreading it widely along with religious, intellectual, scientific, as well as political developments of the medieval Islamic era. In Islamic culture, preaching and popular gatherings held by '*ulamā*' were usually devoted to discussion of religious issues and the dissemination of religious and moral values of interest to Muslim societies and rulers alike.[1]

Since the beginning of Islam, important mosques have served as gathering places to hold preaching assemblies, meetings for religious purposes, and to spread the Islamic message. They became official and unofficial religious and cultural centers, overseen and attended by people with religious knowledge and intellectuals, and attended by the public. Later, especially since the first Abbasid era, the palaces of rulers and caliphs, the homes of '*ulamā*' and public places also became gathering centers for such assemblies on the initiative of '*ulamā*' or under the patronage of rulers. These popular gatherings and religious preaching assemblies began to become more diverse in their goals and methods of holding celebrations and offering religious rituals during the month of Ramadan, as well as celebrations of the Prophet's birthday (*ʿīd al-mawlid*) or visits to some holy sites such as the graves of the righteous on religious occasions to seek blessings. They were also sometimes held during periods of drought and natural disasters, or in times of disease and epidemics, etc. in order to ask for mercy and forgiveness.

In addition to these goals, some of the organizers or public attendees considered these assemblies a means of entertainment and an activity to pass time. Thus, by the end of the Mamluk era in the Levant and Egypt, popular religious preaching assemblies often took on the character of a a form of entertainment, in addition to their other religious goals. The importance and success of these gatherings was related to the extent of public participation and interest, and the influence of scholars and their religious status within society, be it in matters of education, religion, morals, and values on the one hand, or as a propaganda tool intended to enhance the status of rulers or scholars on the other. Therefore, these assemblies began to diversify their methods, types, and goals over time to suit certain sectarian, political and social developments. By way of

example, some of these assemblies took on the role of disseminating scientific knowledge (*majālis ʿilm*), some of them served as preaching assemblies (*majālis waʿẓ*), and others were for storytelling, including poetry and literature (*majālis al-samar*).[2]

A study of such assemblies clearly show their goals and their positive nature, which reflects the initiative and leadership of the organizers, as well as the cooperation of wider society. Literary and historical sources from the period indicate the interactions, feelings, and conversations of the participants within the educational and cultural atmosphere of the assemblies.[3] The vivid impressions of various gatherings and assemblies held for a range of different purposes across Islamic civilization demonstrate a need to explore this important phenomenon, which is common to Islamic cultures from different periods, such as from the Abbasid era in Baghdad until the Mamluk era in Egypt and the Levant. Indeed, these kinds of gatherings still exist to this day.

This study focuses on the cultural activities that occur outside formal educational settings. It examines the purposes behind the organizing of such initiatives, most of which are commonly understood as teaching or preaching assemblies. The research methodology in this study relied on a close reading of primary sources from the medieval period. These sources described historical and religious events, and included the biographies of famous figures and scholars in key Muslims regions, such as Egypt and the Levant. Therefore, this study aims to understand the goals and objectives of holding preaching, missionizing and knowledge assemblies, their process, and the desired results achieved from their conduct, by analyzing their results and comparing them with recent studies. To achieve these goals, several hypotheses are proposed:

1 What factors contributed to strengthening the culture of holding such assemblies in Islam?

2 Who are the important actors in running these assemblies and making them successful?

3 What cultural and methodological differences can be deduced between formal education in *madrasa*s and private study circles disseminating scientific knowledge (*al-ḥalaqāt al-ʿilmiyya*), and

between informal preaching assemblies in public meetings or in the palaces of rulers?

4 What are the effects of holding such assemblies at the popular and personal level of those in charge of them, whether positive or negative?

Preaching as Public Religious Culture and Religious-Political Propaganda: *al-Waʿẓ* and *al-Daʿwa*

From Ibn Kathīr's description in the biography of Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 654/1256), one can understand, in a brief and general way, the personality and work of the preacher (*wāʿiẓ*) in Islamic civilization, his education, the method of preaching and his influence among the public:

> *"He was of good figure, good voice, good preaching, many virtues, and compilations, and is the author of Mir'āt al-zamān, in twenty volumes, one of the best chronicles. … He preached a sermon every Saturday in the morning at the al-Sāriya [A place in the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque], where the preachers stand today, by the Gate of the Mashhad of ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, and people would sleep overnight on Saturdays in the mosque and leave the orchards in the summer until they heard his peroration, and then rush to their orchards and repeat to each other the beneficial and good words he had said, in the manner of his grandfather…"* [4]

The culture of sermonizing and preaching has existed had been a part of Islamic civilization since the time of the Prophet, with the aim of disseminating religious knowledge, popular education and spreading religious and moral values among the Muslim community using the stories of ancient prophets and legal maxims. The early forms of preaching (*waʿẓ*) were included as a part of formal sermons (*khuṭba*) of Friday prayers in the central mosques in the major cities, especially in the Rashidun and Umayyad periods. Its main purpose was to make political announcements, talk about policy changes, or announce the

calling up of men for military service.[5] Later on, this culture also moved to the courts of rulers and took on a political usage, and also had a positive effect on the development of the Arabic language in literature and poetry.[6] At first, preachers and sermonizers were respected, and had the positive image of being knowledgeable and influential among the public. Jonathan Berkey's study of popular preaching highlights the importance of the various classes of popular preachers (*wāʿiẓ / wuʿāẓ*) and storytellers (*qāṣṣ / quṣṣāṣ*) in pre-modern Islamic society. Those popular preachers and storytellers had the opportunity to reach and influence society to a greater extent than texts written by the '*ulamā*'.[7] This type of preaching became more prevalent due to the conflicts and religious controversies that erupted between different streams of thought in Islam, with each stream trying to influence the community more and spread its teachings, for example the struggles between the legalist-traditional current (*ahl al-naql*) and the rationalist current (*ahl al-ʿaql*). As a result, a strong religious culture can be seen to have spread, both among the rulers and among the 'ulamā' who sought to influence the general population. This activity of preaching also became more prevalent with the intensification of the struggle between the Sunni and the Shiʿi sects. Preaching that took place in the background of these struggles was intended to function as a form of popular education in the mosques, which served the entire population for free, regardless of any official forms of education that was being provided. As an example, consider Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, the founder of the al-Qādiriyya or al-Jīlāniyya Sufi order, who was famous as a well-known preacher in Baghdad, in addition to being one of Ḥanbalī 'ulamā'. Many considered him a popular preacher, yet he adhered to the commandments of the *Sharīʿa* that rely on the Qur'an and the Sunna, and even criticized Sufi movements that deviated from the path of the *Sharīʿa*. After his death, his sons and followers spread his mystical teachings throughout the Muslim world.[8]

Preaching assemblies in mosques were considered informal activities and were held on dates personally determined by the '*ulamā*'. Their primary purpose was religious preaching at the popular level, without any fees expected in return. This was not like private assemblies in formal education in endowed *madrasa*s or other private institutions, which

also indicates the involvement of these scholars in community affairs. Typically, these assemblies were held one day a week, depending on the preacher's availability. The subjects of the sermons or preaching in mosques typically dealt with matters of law and the Islamic tradition at a simplified level, which matched the level of education of the audience. Usually, preaching assemblies were held on Fridays, before or after the sermon and congregational prayer, and often preaching assemblies were held during Ramadan to take advantage of the religious-spiritual atmosphere during this holy month. These assemblies contributed greatly to the dissemination of popular knowledge, education and the preservation of Islamic culture especially in terms of morals and values. These sermons attracted large crowds of people and participants because the mosque functioned as a general religious and educational institution that served the entire Muslim population without any restrictions. Religious preaching, especially in the central mosques, served as a site of competition among preachers from competing religious sects, including between the different schools of Sunni Islam.[9]

At the same time, with the intensification of political struggles, divisions, and religious controversies in medieval Islam, preaching assemblies in mosques in regions such as Syria and Iraq also came to serve a political purpose. These political purposes included, propaganda campaigns against the influence of Shi'i groups on the one hand, and the Crusader occupation of Islamic lands on the other.[10] The example of the great preachers from the Ibn al-Jawzī family serves as a case study of popular preachers who became particularly popular. In Iraq, the name of Jamāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) became widely known. He bequeathed his skills in preaching to his son, Muḥyī al-Dīn Yūsuf Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 656/1258), who preached throughout Iraq and also in Damascus.[11] Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-Jawzī rose to prominence in Baghdad with the support and backing of the Abbasid caliph, and then served as an official envoy to the Ayyubid rulers in Syria and Egypt. He achieved a high status, both in terms of official education as a teacher (*mudarris*) in Baghdad and Damascus, and in the establishment of the al-Jawziyya Madrasa in Damascus. Like his father, he too engaged in popular sermonizing and preaching in front of large

crowds that gathered to hear his sermons. In the words of Ibn Kathīr, "and when his father died, he preached in his place, and he did good, and worked hard…."[12]

Abū al-Faraj's grandson, also known as Shams al-Dīn Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 654/1256), was also famous for preaching in Damascus. He was an exemplary preacher, who helps us understand preachers' motivations and goals during the medieval period. In the words of Ibn Taghrī Birdī, "he preached in Baghdad and elsewhere… he came to Damascus and settled in it… and he had a sweet tongue in preaching and remembrance… and he was acceptable to both the private and the public…."[13] Talmon-Heller describes the personality and preaching of Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, as well as the influence of his sermons on rulers, '*ulamā'*, and the wider Muslim community. Her work examines Islamic religious life at the time, while highlighting preachers' motives and goals . These ranged from conveying political messages and particular religious interpretations, to mobilizing public opinion in favor of holy wars (*jihād*), and also as a form of leisure.[14]

Preaching assemblies were also often used as a form of political critique against rulers. Marilyn Swartz, in her study of popular preaching in Baghdad in the sixth/twelfth century and analyzed the sermons of Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, argues that *majālis al-waʿẓ* in Baghdad at the time were sometimes used to criticize the authorities. This led rulers, in turn, to sometimes take action against particular preachers, canceling certain their gatherings, or imposing a ban on preaching for a period.[15] Talmon-Heller also notes a similar phenomenon in Damascus, but suggests this was less common than in Baghdad, which at the time was the center of the Abbasid Caliphate until the Mongol conquest in 656/1258.[16]

The Shiʿi Fatimid dynasty (*al-Ismāʿīliyya*) in Egypt also used preaching as a form of religious and political instrument against their enemies. To this end, the Fatimids took care to institutionalize the practice of preaching and the holding of sermon known "*majālis al-daʿwa*" at the al-Azhar Mosque and inside the Fatimid Palace, as well as in the *Dār al-ʿIlm* in Cairo. The purpose of these assemblies was diverse: to train missionaries (*duʿāt*) and preachers in the service of the Ismāʿīlī sect, and to spread its doctrines throughout the Muslim world. This process

highlighted the importance and skill of the Chief Preacher (*Da'ī al-Du'āt*), who headed this institution and maintained a ramified hierarchy among missionaries operating in all the regions of the Muslim world. Thanks to these preachers, the Shi'i Fatimid dynasty became well-established in vast areas far from its center of power in Egypt.[17] Daftary has discussed this history in great detail, highlighting in particular the process by which the Ismā'īliyya separated from other Shi'i groups under the leadership of their own imams. After this occurrence, the Ismā'īlīs used *da'wa* as a tool of propaganda, aiming to uproot the Sunni Abbasid rulers, and establish a new Shi'i caliphate headed by the Ismā'īlī imam.[18] Preaching also became a tool for the Sunnis as well. Preaching in mosques contributed to the revival of Sunnis against Shi'i movements, after Shi'i rulers had governed the Islamic world for nearly a century ("The Shi'i Century"). In Baghdad, for example, the role of the preacher was institutionalized, as he was by the caliph to strengthen the Islamic Sunni streams of thought against the Shi'i and rationalist streams.[19]

Ibn Kathīr also stresses the importance of the preacher's authority, such as Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī his position in Baghdad. Here, Ibn Kathīr notes Ibn al-Jawzī's preaching assemblies and their influence among his admirers saying, "The caliphs, ministers, kings, emirs, '*ulamā*', the poor, and all the other types of people attended his preaching. The fewest number that gathered to hear his preaching was [several] thousand, and often a hundred thousand or more."[20] Under Fatimid rule, the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo was initially a center for Shi'i *da'wa* and propaganda. Later, this changed, especially in the Mamluk period (648-923/1250-1517), and the al-Azhar Mosque became a religious-educational and propaganda institution for the Sunnis.[21] Preaching competitions during this period also gave rise to a rich literary and intellectual culture, and contributed significantly to the "cultural renaissance" of Islam.[22]

Preaching Assemblies as a Platform for Oversight and Criticism

In general, formal teaching occurred within *madrasa*s and other educational institutions under the supervision of judges, rulers, or the owners

of an endowment (*waqf*). Education in these institutions was conducted according to decisions of these supervisors and the conditions of their endowments. The inauguration ceremonies for new teachers were carried out in the presence of judges and the endowment owner as a method of supervising the teacher and testing their work and aptitude for teaching, in addition to applying the endowment conditions to these institutions. Judges and dignitaries attended these ceremonies, which also indicates that they were a way to evaluate the teacher's suitability for the job and showcase their academic, educational, and pedagogical level in addition to acting as an official inauguration ceremony.

Such oversight was not only a part of formal education, but also occurred during informal educational gatherings. There were typically held at the initiative of rulers, both in mosques and at the rulers' courts. These assemblies had various purposes, one of which was a form of competition between learned scholars, resulting in one's colleague's defeat during a debate and opportunity to boast in front of the audience. Indeed, some scholars used these opportunities to showcase their expertise and boast of their knowledge and skills. At the same time, the competitors often participated the discussion in the form of riddles, queries and occasionally jokes about religious matters to embarrass their colleagues and expose their deficiencies to the audience. In so doing, the prime goal was to present their own proficiency in the topics under discussion for the sake of pride, praise, and arrogance, rather than for the purpose of imparting education and knowledge to the audience. There is no doubt that often the audience attended these assemblies to spend time listening to the discussion and debates between the contestants as a form of leisure. Such a confrontation satisfied the audience and aroused in them a curiosity and expectation to know who the winner was and who was more knowledgeable in matters of religion.

Most often, such gatherings and assemblies were held at the initiative of rulers to examine and embarrass a religious scholar in front of his colleagues. The case of the Mamluk Sultan al-Ashraf Qāytbāy (d. 901/1496) and Shaykh Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī is one such example. The Sultan addressed a question to al-Suyūṭī before the great judges and '*ulamā*' who were seated in the palace. The question was related to an

event connected to the Prophet Muḥammad, which surprised al-Suyūṭī and embarrassed him at first. But, being one of the greatest '*ulamā'* in Egypt, and renowned for his abilities in matters of religion and interpretation of the Qur'an, he eventually managed to answer wisely and convincingly. Ibn Iyās mentions this event saying, "Then Shaykh Jalāl al-Dīn answered after that with a good enough answer on this issue."[23]

Some of these assemblies were held by the order of a ruler, to test the proficiency and level of the '*ulamā'*, and to discuss a controversial religious issue. The experience of these debates intrigued the audience and attracted many to watch them. Those present even participated in celebrating the victory, encouraging the winner, and showed their respect and support. This highlights the degree of audiences' involvement in these gatherings and their results, too, as well as the influence of the public's impression on the debaters. An example of this is the gathering held during the reign of the Mamluk Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh in 818/1415, which was intended to examine the religious knowledge of Shams al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Harawī (d. 829/1426), especially in the sciences of Hadith and the Sunna of the Prophet. The assembly at the Sultan's court was crowded with ordinary people and '*ulamā'*. As a result of this gathering, which took the form of a test by means of debate to check al-Harawī's level of religious knowledge and credibility, his ignorance and falsification of religious knowledge relative to his colleagues became clear. As Ibn Iyās writes, "A debate broke out between him and Ibn Ḥajar in the presence of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad, and his falsity became apparent."[24]

At times, preachers provoked the anger of senior '*ulamā'* or riots from the audience if the topic of the preaching was markedly different from the views of those present. This was the case, for example, with Shaykh ʿAlī b. al-Bannā in 762-763/1360-1361 when, during one of his sermons, he attacked the eponym of the Hanafi School, Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān and his opinions. This behavior led to the issuance of an arrest warrant against the Shaykh by the chief Hanafi judge in Damascus, and he was even banned from giving sermons at the Umayyad Mosque.[25]

Some rulers held gatherings and study assemblies with the aim of correcting distortions of the *Sharīʿa* and behaviors that contradicted religious laws and values. This was especially the case in the later

Mamluk period, with was characterized by the spread of corruption among the ruling class as well as among the '*ulamā'* and educators. The rulers wanted to appeal legal rulings issued by some corrupt '*ulamā'*.[26] Mauder discusses some of these assemblies (*majālis*) held by Mamluk sultans at their courts, which were a key part of the court life during the Sultan Qānişawh al-Ghawrī (r. 906-922/1501-1516) in particular. These assemblies took the form of debates or seminars, where different '*ulamā'* presented their thoughts on topics such as religion, history, law, and literature, and discussed them with the sultan. This shows that al-Ghawrī was not only educated but also worked on improving his knowledge and his image as a scholar. Al-Ghawrī's court and its assemblies were open to different kinds of people, not only the elite. Among the audiences were scholars and officials, as well as travelling scholars and foreigners, and even servants, who were just there to listen.[27]

In one of the assemblies held by Sultan al-Ghawrī in 919/1513, his obvious purpose in summoning judges representing the different Islamic Schools of Law and the presence of many interested '*ulamā'* was to appeal one of the rulings regarding acts considered reprehensible in Islam. He also sought to insult the '*ulamā'* and judges who did not properly enforce the *Sharī'a*, such as banning the drinking of wine, prostitution, selling *waqf* property, and other forms of corruption. However, the historian Ibn Iyās argues that Sultan al-Ghawrī's purpose in hosting these gatherings was also to obtain greater personal fame and to be seen as a man of justice and morality, who would then be remembered in history for putting religious laws into practice. As Ibn Iyās stated, "He intended by that to show justice so that it would be written in his chronicle that he stoned those who committed fornication in his days, as happened in the time of the Prophet…."[28]

Among the '*ulamā'* and scholars of jurisprudence (*fuqahā*'), preaching was used to enhance their status within the community, while at the same time insulting the status of others. Preachers' proficiency and knowledge of religious matters, and their ability to attract supporters, provoked competitions and among the '*ulamā*'. The powerful preacher is the one who attracts a large crowd to hear his sermons and preaching, which provoked jealousy and hostile attitudes among his learned

competitors and other preachers. It can be understood that preaching served as a competition among '*ulamā'* and legal scholars and worked to highlight their knowledge and learnedness among the public in order to gain power, status, and influence in the community. Generally, the high status of the preacher would attract a larger number of followers. In Damascus, for example, the sermons of the Hanbali shaykh 'Abd al-Ghanī Ibn Surūr al-Maqdisī at the Umayyad Mosque attracted large crowds from the lower-class population of the city. They would gather around Ibn Surūr after Friday prayers at the mosque, which would arouse a great deal of jealousy toward him on the part of his competitors, who were preachers from the other Schools of Law. This jealousy led to Ibn Surūr al-Maqdisī's exile from Damascus to Cairo, where his sermons and views were also opposed, especially by the Shafi'i '*ulamā'*.[29]

Preaching to a popular audience did not require a high level of knowledge on the part of the preachers. Gatherings were pitched according to the educational level of the audience, using easily understood methods to arouse the audience's enthusiasm and hold their attention. Since the preacher was aware of the extent of his influence on the audience before him, he would use an attractive and approachable style, such as speaking with a beautiful voice, using folk tales and poetry etc. Shaykh Ibn al-Jawzī's beautiful voice, for example, gave him a strong following in comparison with others, and was an important factor in gaining the attention of those present at his assemblies in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.[30]

By the late Mamluk era in Egypt and the Levant, preaching assemblies and gatherings had acquired a negative image, and the level of religious knowledge had decreased. Some '*ulamā'*, preachers and other religious officeholders were variously criticized or praised for their work, educational activities, knowledge, or status. Such criticism or praise might focus on scholars' and preachers' diligence and level of knowledge, their behavior and morals, or on the mistakes of some scholars, their positions on particular religious matters, and their positions in the service of the rulers. Criticism was aimed at those who strayed from the path of morals, virtue, and the *Sharī'a*, and those who led teaching or preaching assemblies without qualifications or mismanaged the

educational process, or showed a lack of good morals towards others.[31]

From a review of biographies of preachers in this period, it appears that it was the '*ulamā'* who were inferior in terms of their level of education who were the ones who engaged in religious preaching in mosques. This is shown by the case of Shaykh Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad b. al-Maylaq, who was appointed on behalf of the Mamluk Sultan al-Ẓāhir Barqūq to the post of chief Shafiʿi judge in Egypt in 1387. Ibn al-Maylaq refused to take the office because he knew he did not have the right status for the position of judge, as he was only engaged in preaching and lacked the necessary religious education. Nevertheless, the Sultan forced him to take up the role. Ibn al-Maylaq refrained from wearing the *khilʿa* (robes of honor, indicating acceptance of a position from the sultan), "so the Sultan obliged him to do so, despite his reluctance…."[32]

With the spread of corruption in the later Mamluk period, these preachers were a convenient tool and were exploited by the rulers. This led to the appointment of judges from among those engaged in preaching, and not from among the '*ulamā*' with the right level of education. At the same time, some of the preachers did agree to take up the role of judge even though they were inferior to other high-ranking '*ulamā*'. This was the case with the Hanbali Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn Ibn Mufliḥ (d. 824/1421), who was appointed chief Hanbali judge in Damascus in 1414. Young and lacking in religious education, he only gained the respect of the common people (*al-ʿawāmm*), and even then, engaged only in preaching to the lower-classes and to women while seated on a chair. Al-Nuʿaymī notes this point in the biography of Ibn Mufliḥ saying, "*he used to work for a while in the Umayyad Mosque after the Friday prayer at the Hanbali miḥrāb, and people gathered there and benefited from it… He is a young man with little to offer, he knows nothing of the sciences except that he preaches to the common people and women, while he was sitting on chairs….*"[33]

It seems that taking a chair for preaching in mosques was widespread at this time in Muslim areas. Erzini and Vernoit found that many mosques in Morocco are equipped with one or more chairs, beside the main *minbar* (pulpit) of the mosque, which differ in their form and function from the *minbar*. These chairs are used to give regular lectures to

students of traditional education, or to give occasional lectures to the public for preaching or instruction and guidance (*lil-waʿz wal-irshād).* Erzini and Vernoit say that this tradition of the professorial chair was probably introduced to Morocco from Egypt and the Levants in the seventh/thirteenth century. Most of the existing chairs in Morocco seem to date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and they continue to be used till to this day.[34]

Preaching and Learning Through Festive Gatherings and a Culture of Entertainment

Some of the assemblies that were held under the auspices of rulers were intended to serve as a leisure activity, even though they had a religious or scientific character.[35] Such gatherings were usually organized on the initiative of the ruling elite or with its support, and sometimes rulers even donated money as prizes for participants in debates. When these assemblies were held in the courts of the rulers, the audience was composed of members of the governmental elite. When they were held in public places, they attracted large and unrestricted crowds from the general population, depending upon the gathering's purpose and location. On such occasions, the presence of a large audience might be out of curiosity or a desire to be entertained and spend time watching the debate between the contestants or have the aim of acquiring religious knowledge from the discussions. Talmon-Heller also notes in her work on preaching assemblies as entertainment that they also included jokes and wordplay, and that these gatherings can be seen as part of the leisure culture of the period in question.[36]

The second half of the second/eighth century to the middle of the third/ninth century (i.e., the early Abbasid period) has been characterized as a period of Islamic renaissance, distinguished by the influence of the rational and philosophical "sciences of the ancients" (the Greek sciences) on Islamic culture. At the time, scholarship in these subjects were the rulers' priority, and their courts served as an arena for the gathering and debates of famous intellectuals. Although the rulers used such assemblies as part of their own leisure activities, the main purpose

was to encourage the advancement of the rational sciences in Islamic culture. The rulers generously supported and funded these activities, thereby creating favorable conditions for such things as the establishment of institutions, creativity in translation and learning, and they were also generous in providing financial prizes to participants in these gatherings.[37]

The theological current that emerged during this period among thinkers with a rationalist and philosophical background (the Mu'tazila) left its mark on some of the rulers. It reached its peak with the establishment of the *bayt al-ḥikma* ("House of Wisdom") in Baghdad in the first half of the third/ninth century.[38] This ruler-supported, rationalist activity provoked a sharp rift and a theological controversy, which began among the elite and then spread to the masses. Shawqi Dif notes that these gatherings in the rulers' courts were characterized by the choice of the most learned scholars in Baghdad in the various sciences, including learned Jews and Christians. The court of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833) was known for its experts, scholarship and debates, which included topics of such as theology, philosophy, literature and poetry, the religious sciences etc.[39]

From time to time, the intervention of the rulers in support of a particular religious current also affected the contents and topics of the gatherings. Later, with the victory of the legalist-religious current over the rationalist current, and especially in the Mamluk period, the rulers contributed greatly to this shift by holding gatherings and assemblies of a religious nature.[40] The purpose of this policy of the Mamluk rulers was to strengthen their religious status. This was especially the case since the Mamluks were foreigners from outside the region, either from non-Muslim backgrounds or slaves. That is why the Mamluk sultans made sure to define their military campaigns as fighting a holy war against the Crusaders and then against the Mongols. As for domestic policy, they implemented a policy favoring religion, both in the dedication of educational and religious institutions, and in religious studies with the endowment of *waqf*s. In addition, the Mamluks were careful to appoint chief judges from the four schools of Sunni Islam, starting with the first Sultan, Baybars.[41] Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (d. 824/1421) also

issued an order in 819/1416 requiring the four chief judges of the various schools to come to the Citadel in Cairo on two days a week (Sunday and Wednesday) to be present at the assemblies dediecated to reciting Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī. Discussing this order, Ibn Iyās says, "And in it the Sultan decreed that the four judges should go to the Citadel every Sunday and Wednesday, and attend the reading of al-Bukhārī, and the old custom was that only the Shafi'i judge would attend, with a small group of jurists."[42]

These assemblies also formed part of the rulers' leisure activities. Typically, these gatherings were held in the Cairo citadel, in the palaces of the rulers or in other mosques and institutions they endowed. Although these assemblies were characterized by matters of religion, many present saw them as a means of passing time. In these gatherings, it was salient that the main purpose was the revival of certain celebrations and festivals or discussing religious issues, which were conducted while holding debates between the '*ulamā*' on religious matters, sermons and preaching, the festivals of Sufi movements and celebrations such as the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday, parties and religious ceremonies during the nights of Ramadan, etc. Ibn Taghrī Birdī describes one of the ceremonies performed by Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh in 818/1415 at the Siryāqūs Khānqāh in Cairo, which was attended by groups of Sufis and Qur'an readers. This gathering was also attended by singers who sang religious hymns (*munshidūn*) and preachers of the Hadith (*al-samā'*). Sufi and other dancers even participated (*wa-raqaṣat akābir al-fuqarā' al-ẓurafā'*). The ceremony continued all night with food, sweets, and drinks. At the end, the Sultan gave alms of money to the readers and singers (*al-qurrā' wa-l-munshidūn*).[43]

Some rulers used to hold these gatherings in their palaces constantly to discuss religious matters, and controversial religious issues, or to highlight the level of religious scholarship of some of the great '*ulamā*'. The Mamluk Sultan al-Ghawrī arranged ceremonies and parties in the presence of the four chief judges, the '*ulamā*', preachers and Qur'an readers. Sultan al-Ghawrī also held these meetings and assemblies in palaces or public places, such as his annual celebration of the Prophet's Birthday (*'amila al-sulṭān al-mawlid al-sharīf al-nabawī 'alā al-'āda*). Mauder's study of Sultan al-Ghawrī's salons, provides a theoretical

conceptualization of the term "court." Al-Ghawrī's court functioned as a transregionally interconnected center of dynamic intellectual exchange, theological debate, and performance of rulership that triggered novel developments in Islamic scholarly, religious and political culture.[44]

Ceremonies for festive purposes were usually held at the end of Ramadan, and consisted of celebrations attended by great sages of various kinds. In these gatherings, the Qur'an would be recited by readers with beautiful voices and excellent command of the rules of recitation. Senior government officials and '*ulamā*' would be present at these ceremonies.[45] It was also customary to hold gatherings and assemblies at the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo during Ramadan, the purpose of which was to read from the works of the great scholars of Hadith for religious and educational purposes in an atmosphere appropriate to the holiness of Ramadan. The rulers also used to hold assemblies and gatherings in the Sultan's palace in the Cairo citadel, with the participation of judges and various '*ulamā*'. The rulers' purpose was to perform acts of charity and celebration in Ramadan. At the end of these ceremonies, the rulers would distribute prizes to the participating '*ulamā*' and judges.[46] Other ceremonies were also held such as ceremonies to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet.[47]

During the sixth and seventh / twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Sufism formed into organized public orders, and shifted from a phenomenon of individuals to one of organizations, which were influential and popular among the public. With the spread of Sufi institutions (*ribāṭ*, *zāwiya*, *khānqāh*), Sufism became well-established, both among the ruling classes and other strata of Muslim society.[48] As Sufism further developed, especially in the late medieval Islamic periods, the burial sites of Sufi leaders and various shrines of holy men became places of pilgrimage known as *maqām*, *mashhad*, *mazār* or *ḍarīḥ*. Ceremonial visitations became custom at certain times, and were called *mawṣim* or *ziyāra*. These sites became centers where all kinds of memorial services, sermons and readings were held in memory of the people buried there, or in the hope of obtaining blessings (*baraka*) from them. The preservation of the memory of those buried in these tombs encouraged a popular religious culture that provided spontaneous religious education and knowledge

to the masses.[49] Believers flocked to the homes and graves of holy men to seek their divine intercession, to be near them, and to participate in Sufi rituals. Usually, buried shaykhs and other religious leaders, and their lodges turned into a public place central to the life of the community, and became important for the development of a pilgrimage literature around such places.[50] Mulder has shown how changes in religious sentiment influenced the creation of a unified "holy land" in medieval Syria, which centered around the shrines of the followers of ʿAlī bin Abī Ṭalib from Shiʿi communities. This was the result of the visits (*ziyāra*) and general popular celebrations around these shrines.[51]

The assemblies of Sufi movements stood out as having a popular character, especially during ceremonies and preaching. It is important to mention the Sufis' holding of *dhikr* assemblies within their institutions for reciting praises to God, sometimes called *awrād* (sg. *wird*), as well as holding parties and popular ceremonies, especially during Ramadan, or to mark the birthday of the Prophet. These activities attracted large numbers of people.[52] The prayer and *dhikr* assemblies within the Sufi brotherhoods were open to members only. The purpose of such assemblies was to glorify the name of God through singing together in praise of God and the Prophet (*madāʾiḥ*). The influence of the Sufi orders among the elite and rulers was strong, and especially during the period of Mamluk rule in Syria and Egypt, in which the rulers' support for Sufi activities was prominent, both in dedicating institutions to their service and in participating in their special ceremonies.[53] At one of the gatherings held by the Emir Ḥusām al-Dīn Lājīn in 1261 at his home in Damascus, he invited a group of Sufis, and participated himself in the *dhikr* ceremony, which was accompanied by singing and dancing. The Emir Lājīn honored the Sufis in serving a meal with his own hands, and at the end he also presented them with gifts.[54]

Organizations of mystics and Sufi movements held their own assemblies, gatherings, and ceremonies, which were different from the preaching assemblies of the '*ulamā*'. These movements became stronger and more popular across Egypt, Syria, and the eastern Muslim regions, especially from the seventh/thirteenth century onwards. This popularity was found not only among the general populace, but also among rulers

and dignitaries who were influenced by the Sufis. The rulers tended to become more sympathetic to these popular orders as they funded, aided, and supported their religious activities, out of a desire to receive blessings and also to broaden their popular support. Some of the Sufi gatherings were accompanied by poetry, singing, drums and dancing, and innovations and miracles that contradicted the culture of traditional Islam. Such ceremonies, sometimes held in popular processions in the streets and at parties or on holidays, attracted large crowds, and became a typical custom in the public sphere in Islamic culture. This popularity provoked the fierce opposition of the '*ulamā*' from all the orthodox Islamic sects, who viewed the activity of the Sufis as undesirable innovations (*bidʿa*).[55] But, because of the good relationship that had developed between Sufi movements and the ruling class in the Mamluk period, the '*ulamā*' were unable to eradicate this phenomenon of the Sufis' use of drums and music. By the late Mamluk period, these Sufi customs had become commonplace and were regarded as an ordinary part of their behaviors in celebrations. Consequently, '*ulamā*' could not prevent Sufi celebrations accompanied by drumming and dancing, even when they were held in mosques.[56]

Conclusions

By the late medieval Islamic period, preaching, public gatherings, and other informal religious meeting had become a part of the general atmosphere in Muslim socieites. Rulers, '*ulamā*' and Sufi shaykhs maintained this culture, although the purposes for holding these gatherings were different. The rulers held these gatherings mainly in their courts to encourage and strengthen one religious current against another. Rulers benefitted from this propaganda in terms of their status and influence, while some of the preachers were also inspired by the rulers themselves. At the same time, '*ulamā*' held preaching assemblies on their own initiative mainly within the central mosques to increase their status among the public, or to spread simple and popular religious messages to a wider audience. Thus, the main goals of holding these gatherings in Muslim culture were as a form of educational-religious preaching and *daʿwa*;

enhancing one's personal status; preaching as political propaganda, critique and oversight, as well as celebration and as a form of leisure.

Gatherings and assemblies of scholars spread among the ordinary population, increasing the participation of the public, as well among the ruling class. The revival of religious ceremonies expanded in medieval Muslim societies and their purposes were varied. In the early periods of the Muslim empire, gatherings and assemblies were characterized by emphasizing the level of expert knowledge among the educated and the '*ulamā*' with the support of the rulers. In later periods, gatherings for preaching were characterized by being more popular among the lower classes. Nevertheless, the main goal behind these assemblies and gatherings remained the preservation of Islamic values and moral customs.

The conclusions from this study can be summarized in two basic points: First, public and informal meetings and assemblies contributed to the spreading of a popular religious culture among the public. Second: the diversity of religious sects and intellectual and political movements who organized such assemblies for religious preaching and advocacy led to the expansion and multiplication of intellectual and religious viewpoints in thought and practice. This diversification occurred between Shi'is and Sunnis as well as among different Sunni sects, and also between the '*ulamā*' and Sufi movements.

Endnotes

1 On the term *majlis* and its types in Islam, see George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), pp. 10-12.

2 See Shawqī Ḍīf, *Tārīkh al-Adab al-ʻArabī: al-ʻAṣr al-ʻAbbāsī al-Awwal*, (vol. 3), (Cairo, Dār al-Maʿārif, 1966); See also Luṭfī Aḥmad Naṣṣār, *Wasāʾil al-Tarfīh fī ʻAṣr Salātīn al-Mamālīk fī Miṣr*, (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Maṣriyya al-ʻĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1999), pp. 19-109.

3 For a description of Ibn al-Jawzī's preaching and its effect on his audience in Damascus see Ismāʿīl b. ʻUmar Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya,* (vol. 13) (Beirut: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 1988): 194.

4 See Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, (vol. 13), p. 194; ʻAbd al-Qādir bin Muḥammad al-Nuʿaymī, *al-Dāris fī Tārīkh al-Madāris*, (vol. 1), (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1981), p. 478.

5 See Makdisi, *The Rise*, pp. 10-11.

6 For further works on the culture of preaching assemblies (*majālis al-waʻẓ/al-daʻwa*), their spread in the Fatimid and Abbasid eras, and their religious and political impact see al-Qādī al-Nuʿmān bin Muḥammad bin Ḥayyūn, *Kitāb al-Majālis wa-l-Musāyarāt*, (Beirut: Dār al-Muntaẓar, 1996); ʻAlam al-Islām Thiqat al-Imām, *al-Majālis al-Mustanṣiriyya*, (Beirut: Muʾssasat al-Nūr, 2006); al-Muʾayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, *al-Majālis al-Muʾayyadiyya*, (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1994); ʻAbd al-Raḥmān bin ʻAlī Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mawāʻiẓ wal-Majālis*, (Tanṭā: Dār al-Ṣaḥāba, 1990).

7 See Jonathan P. Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near* East, (Seattle: University of Washington Press: 2001); See also Adam Metz, *al-Ḥaḍāra al-Islāmiyya*, (vol. 2), (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʻArabī, 1967), pp. 146-156.

8 ʻAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī, *al-Ghunya*, (vols. 1-2), (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʻIlmiyya, 1997). See also Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

9 Ḍīf, *Tārīkh al-Adab,* (vol. 3), pp. 100-101; Hatim Mahamid, *Waqf, Education and Politics in Late Medieval Syria,* (Saarbrücken: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013), pp. 189-192; idem, "Mosques as Higher Educational Institutions in Mamluk Syria," *Journal of Islamic Studies (JIS)*, 20, Issue 2, (2009), pp. 205-211.

10 On preaching assemblies, see Daniella Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria: Mosques, Cemeteries and Sermons under the Zangids and Ayyūbids (1146-1260*), (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 115-144.

11 On Muhyī al-Dīn Yusuf Ibn al-Jawzī, see Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, (vol. 13), p. 211; al-Nuʿaymī, *al-Dāris,* (vol. 2), pp. 29-31; On Abu al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, see Shihāb al-Dīn ʻAbd al-Hayy Ibn al-ʻImād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab fī Akhbār man Dhahab*, (vols., 7), (Damascus-Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1992), pp. 494-496.

12 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidaya*, (vol. 13), p. 211.

13 See Yūsuf Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Maḥāsin Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm al-Zāhira fi Mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, (vol. 7), (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1963), p. 39; On the biography of Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, and his preaching in Damascus, see Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, (vol. 13), pp. 194-195; Al-Nuʿaymī, *al-Dāris*, (vol. 1), pp. 478-480; Ibn al-ʿImād, *Shadharāt*, (vol, 7), pp. 460-461; Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety*, pp. 128-131.

14 See Daniella Talmon-Heller, "Muslim Preachers during the Crusades," *Zmanim: A Historical Quarterly*, no, 97 (2007), pp. 84-90; idem, "Religion in the Public Sphere: Rulers, Scholars and Commoners in Zangid and Ayyubid Syria (1150-1260)," in M. Hoexter, S.N. Eisenstadt, N. Levtzion (eds.), *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, (Albany: SUNY, 2002), pp. 49-64; Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, pp. 53-69.

15 Merlin L. Swartz, "The Rules of the Popular Preaching in Twelfth Century Baghdad, according to Ibn al-Jawzi," in George Makdisi et al. (eds.), *Preaching and Propaganda in the Middle Ages. Islam, Byzantium, Latin West*, (Paris 1983), p. 224.

16 Daniella Talmon-Heller, "Islamic Preaching in Syria during the Counter-Crusade (Twelfth-Thirteenth Centuries)," in *Laudem Hierosolymitani: Studies in Crusades and Medieval Culture, in Honour of Benjamin Z. Kedar*, (Iris Shagrir, Roni Ellenblum, and Jonathan Riley-Smith, eds.), (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 85-100. On relations between rulers and preachers in Syria in the Zangid and Ayyubid Era, see idem, *Islamic piety*, pp. 123-28.

17 On the role of some of the Fatimid missionaries see al-Qādī al-Nuʿmān, *Kitāb al-Majālis*; Thiqat al-Imām, *al-Majālis al-Mustanṣiriyya*; al-Shīrāzī, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*; Mustafā Ghālib, *Tārīkh al-Daʿwa al-Ismāʿīliyya*, (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1965); Verena Klemm, *Memoirs of a Mission: The Ismaili Statesman and Poet al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi*, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris in assoc. with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2003); Hatim Mahamid, "Ismaʿili Daʿwa and Politics in Fatimid Egypt," *NEBULA* 3.2-3, (Sept. 2006), pp. 1-17.

18 See Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies: A Historical Introduction to an Islamic Community*, (I.B. Tauris, London, 2005), pp. 62-88; idem, *Ismaili History and Intellectual Traditions*, (London & New-York: Routledge, 2018); idem, "The Fatimid Age: Dawla and Daʿwa," in *A Short History of the Ismailis: Traditions of a Muslim Community*, (Edinburgh University Press; 2020), pp. 63-119.

19 Yitzhak Yehuda Goldziher, *Lectures on Islam*, (Translation: J. Rivlin), (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1997), pp. 145-146; Hatim Mahamid, "Sunni Revival in Twelve-Century Syria: A Renewed Perspective," *Hamizrah he-Hadash* (*The New East*) 49 (2010): 74-76; Makdisi, *The Rise*, pp. 17-19.

20 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, (vol. 13), p. 29.

21 Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo*, (Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 51, 85-87. Regarding the al-Azhar Mosque since it was

built in the Fatimid period to serve the Ismaʿili *daʿwa*, and until it was returned by the Mamluk Sultan Baybars to its activities as a mosque and an educational institution for the Sunni service see Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Ẓāhir*, (Al-Riyad: ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Khuwaytir, 1976), pp. 277-280; Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab*, (Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2004), (30), p. 87.

22 Mahamid, "Sunni Revival," 69.

23 See Muḥammad bin Aḥmad Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-Zuhūr fi Waqāʾiʿ al-Duhūr*, (vol. 3), (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Masriyya al-ʿĀmma lil-Kitāb, 1984), p. 297.

24 Ibn Iyās, *Badaʾiʿ*, (vol. 2), p. 21; See also the description of the assembly with al-Harawī, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Inbāʾ al-Ghumr bi-Abnāʾ al-ʿUmr*, (Vol. 3), (Cairo: Lajnat Ihyāʾ al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1972), pp. 57- 64; Ibn al-ʿImād, *Shadharāt*, (vol. 9), p. 194.

25 On this event, see Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, (vol. 14), p. 277. At another preaching session, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Rahmān (a Hanbali) encountered opposition from the followers of the Shafiʿi school, since his preaching in 1416 tended to be in favor of the Shiʿa in the mosques of Yalbughā and Umayyad in Damascus, see al-Nuʿaymī, *al-Dāris*, (vol. 2), pp. 123-124.

26 On the spreading of corruption and conflicts among the '*ulamā*', educators and judges in late Mamluk era in Egypt and Syria, see Mahamid, *Waqf*, pp. 113-129; idem, "Muslim Institutions of Learning (Madrasa) in Ayyubid and Mamluk Syria", in *Research Aspects in Arts and Social Studies* Vol. 8. (ed. Atila Yildirim), (India & United Kingdom: B P International, 2023), pp. 64-65; Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Rāziq Aḥmad, *al-Badhl wa-l-Barṭala Zaman Salāṭīn al-Mamālīk*, (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Masriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1979).

27 On holding councils and assemblies for scientific and religious aims by Sultan al-Ghawrī see Christian Mauder, *In the Sultan's Salon: Learning, Religion and Rulership at the Mamluk Court of Qānişawh Al-Ghawrī (r. 1501-1516)*, (vol. 1), (Leiden: Brill, 2021). On storytelling and preaching in medieval Islamic societies, especially in Egypt and Syria, see Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, pp. 36-52.

28 Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, (vol. 4), p. 343. On the spread of indecent acts contradicting Islam and the Shariʿa laws in that period, and the treatment of the Mamluk Sultan al-Ghawrī in matters which ultimately led to the dismissal and replacement of the four chief judges, see ibid, pp. 340-349.

29 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, (vol. 13), pp. 38-39; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Ṭūlūn, *al-Qalāʾid al-Ǧawhariyya fī Tārīkh al-Ṣāliḥiyya* (vol. 2), (Damascus: Majmaʿ al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya, 1980), pp. 441-442. See also the example of the Shaykh Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1256), and his influence among the popular crowd at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, (vol. 13), pp. 194-195; Al-Nuʿaymī, *al-Dāris*, (vol. 1), pp. 478-480.

30 See for some examples of such preachers, Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, (vol. 14), p. 277; Taqiy al-Dīn bin Aḥmad Ibn Qādī Shuhba. *Tārīkh Ibn Qādī Shuhba.* (vols. 3). Damascus: al-Maʿhad al-ʿIlmī al-Faransī, 1977), pp. 172-173.

31 On this topic, see Hatim M. Mahamid and Younis F. Abu Alhaija, "Scholars and Educational Positions under Criticism and Praise in the Medieval Islamic Era," *Educational Research and Reviews* vol. 16 (8), (Aug. 2021), pp. 336-342.

32 Ibn Qādī Shuhba, *Tārīkh*, (vols. 3), pp. 219-220; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*ʿ, (vol. 1/2), pp. 387-388.

33 On the Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn Ibn Mufliḥ, see Al-Nuʿaymī, *al-Dāris*, (vol. 2), pp. 50-52. Ibn al-ʿImād says that Ibn Mufliḥ's name became famous and known among common people, see Ibn al-ʿImād, *Shadharāt*, (vol. 9), p. 246.

34 See Nadia Erzini and Stephen Vernoit, "The Professorial Chair (*kursi* ʿ*ilmi* or *kursi li-l-waʿz wa-l-irshād*) in Morocco," *Al-Qantara* XXXIV 1, (2013), pp. 89-122.

35 In addition to assemblies with religious aims during the Mamluk era, some of the Mamluk rulers sometimes held entertainment meetings such as drinking, singing, and dancing, see Naṣṣār, *Wasā'il al-Tarfīh*, pp. 112-303.

36 Talmon-Heller, "Muslim Preachers," pp. 87-88.

37 Ḍīf, *Tārīkh al-Adab*, (vol. 3), pp. 102-103. On the rise of rational sciences in the Islam, see Younis F. Abu Alhaija and Hatim M. Mahamid, "The Impact of Doctrinal and Intellectual Conflicts on Medieval Islamic Sciences," *Journal of Positive Psychology & Wellbeing*, vol. 5, no. 4, (2021), pp. 542-546.

38 On the Bayt al-Ḥikma in Baghdad and its influence on the culture of Islam, see Claude Kahan, *Islam*, (Trans.: Emanuel Kopelevich), (Tel-Aviv, 1995). On al-Muʿtazila, its development and its most important intellectual views and works, see Muḥammad Salīm al-ʿAwwā, *al-Madāris al-Fikriyya al-Islāmiyya*, (Beirut: al-Shabaka al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Abḥāth, 2016), pp. 193-245; Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, (trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori), (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 85-100; Yūsuf al-ʿIsh, *Dūr al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya al-ʿĀmma wa-Shibh al-ʿĀmma li-Bilād al-ʿIrāq wa-l-Shām wa-Miṣr fī al-ʿAṣr al-Wasiṭ*, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Muʿāṣir, 1991), pp. 41-96; Ḥaydar Qāsim al-Tamīmī, *Bayt al-Ḥikma al-ʿAbbāsī wa-Dawruhu fī Ẓuhūr Marākiz al-Ḥikma fī al-ʿĀlam al-Islāmī*, (vol. 1), (Amman: Dār Zahrān, 2011), p. 41; Khaḍir Aḥmad ʿAṭallah, *Bayt al-Ḥikma fī ʿAṣr al-ʿAbasiyyīn*, (1st ed.), (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, 1989), p. 33; Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009); idem, "Bayt al-Hikmah," in Kalin, Ibrahim (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Science, and Technology in Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jim Al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave us the Renaissance*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

39 Ḍīf, *Tārīkh al-Adab,* (vol. 3), pp. 105-109; On Intellectual conflicts on Islamic sciences, and their effect see Abu Alhaija and Mahamid, "The Impact," pp. 542-560; Farhad Daftary (ed.), *Intellectual Traditions in Islam*, (London-New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2001).

40 On the victory of the advocates of the science of transmission (*al-naqliyya*) over the rational sciences (*al-ʿaqliyya*) and the revival of the Sunna and religious sciences, see Abu Alhaija and Mahamid, "The Impact," pp. 552-555; ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAzzām, *Saladin: The Triumph of the Sunni Revival*, (Mecca: Islamic Texts Society, 2014); Jonathan Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 189-202.

41 See Yossef Rapoport, "Legal Diversity in the Age of Taqlid: The Four Chief Qadis Under the Mamluks," *Islamic Law and Society*, 10 (2), (2003), pp. 210-228; Jorgen S. Nielsen, "Sultan al-Ẓāhir Baybars and the Appointment of Four Chief Qāḍīs, 663/1265," *Studia Islamica* 60 (1984), pp. 167-176; Hatim M. Mahamid, "Religious Policy of the Mamluk Sultan Baybars (1260–1277 AC)," *Religions* 14, no. 11: 1384, (2023). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111384

42 The custom, which was before this order, obliged the Shafiʿi judge to be present in these meetings in the citadel. See Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, (vol. 2), p. 29.

43 Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm,* (vol. 14), pp. 38-39.

44 See Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, (vol. 5), pp. 24-25. Mauder's research presented detailed and extensive descriptions of learning and the transmission of knowledge and religious life at the Mamluk Sultan al-Ghawrī's Court by holding of councils and assemblies, see Mauder, *In the Sultan's Salon*, Chapters 4 and 5.

45 See Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Maqrizī, *al-Khiṭaṭ al-Maqrīziyya*, (vol. 2), (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1997), pp. 350, 353.

46 See for example such spectacular assemblies and ceremonies during the month of Ramadan held by the Mamluk Sultan Qāytbāy. At one of these celebrations on the bank of the Nile River in Cairo, all the readers of the Qur'an and the preachers of Cairo were invited. Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, (vol. 3), p. 11.

47 Aḥmad bin ʿAlī al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-Aʿashā fī Ṣināʿat al-Inshā*, (vol. 3), (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1987), p. 576; Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Khiṭaṭ*, (vol. 2), p. 305; Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, (vol. 3), pp. 38, 53, 108, 130, 200, 216. It is important to mention that this tradition of reviving the birthday of the Prophet (*ʿĪd al-Mawlid*) is still celebrated in Muslim world to this day.

48 See Atta Muhammad, *The Public Sphere during the Later Abbasid Caliphate (1000-1258 CE): The Role of Sufism.* (Ph.D. Dissertation: The University of Leeds, 2020); Daphna Ephrat, "The shaykh, the physical setting and the holy site: the Diffusion of the Qadiri Path in late Medieval Palestine," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 19/1 (January 2009), pp. 1-20; idem, *Sufi Masters and the Creation of Saintly Spheres*

in Medieval Syria, (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2021), pp. 83-100; Mahamid, *Waqf*, pp. 193-223; Donald Little, "The Nature of Khanqahs, Ribats, and Zawiyas under the Mamluks," in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, (eds., Wael Hallaq and Donald P. Little), (Leiden, Brill, 1991), pp. 91-105.

49 See Stephennie Mulder, *The Shrines of the 'Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi`is, and the Architecture of Coexistence*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Stephen Wilson (ed), *Introduction to Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). On the expansion of operation in the public sphere and the community that affected by the Sufi leader (*Shaykh*), see Ephrat, *Sufi Masters*, pp. 63-80. On the Ribāṭ as an institution of the "Public Sphere", see Muhammad, *The Public Sphere,* pp. 156-210.

50 See Nathan Hofer, *The Popularisation of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt, 1173-1325,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 100-108; Daphna Ephrat and Hatim Mahamid, "The Creation of Sufi Spheres in Medieval Damascus (mid-6th/12th to mid-8th/14th centuries)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 25 / issue 02, (2015), pp. 16-19. See also Christopher C. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous Ziyara and the Veneration of Saints in Late Medieval Egypt*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 67-127; Ephrat, *Sufi Masters*, pp. 101-114, 115-134; Eric Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie sous les Derniers Mamlouks et les Premi`eres Ottomans: Orientations Spirituelles et Enjeux Culturels*, (Damascus: Institut français d'études arabes de Damas, 1995), pp. 216-217. On Sufi tombs as sacred sites for pilgrimage in Baghdad during the later Abbasid caliphate, see Muhammad, *The Public Sphere*, pp. 235-236.

51 See Mulder, *The Shrines*, pp. 186-266.

52 On the organization of the *dhikr* circles (*halaqat al-dhikr*) of the Sufi orders, see Mahamid, *Waqf*, pp. 222-223. See also the example of the development of Sufism in the public sphere in Islamic regions, especially in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq between the fifth and tenth centuries/eleventh to sixteenth centuries: Ephrat and Mahamid, "The Creation," pp. 189–208; Little, "The Nature," pp. 93-96; Makdisi, *The Rise*, pp. 20-22, 33-34. On Sufi shaykhs' roles in the public sphere as teachers, preachers, ascetics and charitable shaykhs of the *ṭarīqa*, see Muhammad, *The Public Sphere,* pp. 225-246

53 Al-Nuʿaymī, *al-Dāris*, (vol. 2), pp. 197-199; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, (vol. 13), pp. 173-174; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Tārīkh,* (vol. 2), p. 495. On the role of the Sufis in Syria and Egypt in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, their activity in the public sphere, and their relations with the rulers and the strengthening of their position among the popular community see Mahamid, *Waqf*, pp. 201-214. On Sufis' relations with the ruling authorities and their contribution to the "Public Sphere," see Muhammad, *The Public Sphere,* pp. 211-246.

54 See the descriptive text of this meeting, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad bin Ibrāhīm al-Qurashī al-Jazarī, *al-Mukhtār min Tārīkh Ibn al-Ǧazarī*, (Beirut, 1988), pp. 265-266; Shaykh ʿAlī al-Qaṭnānī (d. 1346), of the Sufi order *al-Rifāʿiyya* in Damascus, also had many followers among the upper class of the city. See Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Tārīkh*, (vol. 2), p. 495; See also the meeting held by the Mamluk Sultan al-Muʾayyad in 818/1415, mentioned above. Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm*, (vol. 14), pp. 38-39.

55 Al-Nuʿaymī, *al-Dāris*, (vol. 2), pp. 219-221; ʿAlī bin Yūsuf al-Buṣrawī, *Tārīkh al-Buṣrawī*, (Damascus: Dār al- Maʾamūn li-l-Turāth, 1988), p. 186.

56 See as an example, the meeting of the renowned '*ulamā'* in Damascus in 901/1495, in which they argued about whether to issue a fatwa to prohibit the use of drums. See al-Nuʿaymī, *al-Dāris*, (vol. 2), p. 219; al-Buṣrawī, *Tārīkh*, p. 186. Shams al-Dīn Ibn Ṭūlūn criticized the using of music and drums by the Sufis and even forbade it. See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Tashyīd al-Ikhtiyār li-Taḥrīm al-Ṭabl wa-l-Mizmār*, (Ṭanta, Dār al- Ṣaḥāba li-l-Turāth, 1993).