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*Political Thought in the Mamluk Period:
The Unnecessary Caliphate*

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This book examines the history of political thought in the late Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods. Through an analysis of the concerns and solutions developed by five theorists of Muslim law (Badr al-Dīn b. Jamā‘a, Ibn Talḥa, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī, the anonymous author of *al-Misbāḥ* and *Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī*) in the Syrian-Egyptian region, Mohamad El-Merheb sheds light on the way in which these theorists attempted to answer the following cardinal question: how best to govern their communities? The author examines this corpus in the light of the political, religious, intellectual, social and cultural context as described in the chronicles and in earlier politico-religious treatises.

The book is divided into five parts in addition to the introduction: "Reading Islamic Political Thought", (p. 11-46); "Ibn Jama‘a's Synthesis and Praxis of Shāfi‘ī Political Thought" (p. 47-84); "Sufi Political Thought" (p. 85-121); "The Late Ayyubid and Early Mamluk Context: Ibn Talha and al-Qarafī" (p. 122-155) and "Mamluk Historiography as a Form of Political Thought" (p. 156-192).

The chapters are of roughly equal length (between 33-37 pages per chapter) and give the book a balanced structure. The chapters do not follow a chronological order and can therefore be read independently. This choice is intentional since the author wanted to highlight "the aims and concerns of authors and how they expressed them thematically and stylistically" and avoid to give "the reader a misleading impression of a causal and teleological relationship between the texts discussed in this book." (p. 9)

In addition to presenting the corpus and themes analysed in the introduction, the author answers the following central question: "what is Islamic political thought?". According to him, political thought in the late Ayyubid and early Mamluk period is the thought referring "to any discourse dealing with the origins of

a state or polity, the legitimacy of the ruler and ruling elites, the limits of their power and authority, the moderation of their exercise of power, their relations with the people they ruled, the necessary qualifications for governing, institutions of government and order, institutions and modes of dispensing justice, individual and group rights, taxation and the distribution of wealth, and the justification of war" (p. 3).

In chapter 1 (p. 11-46), the author discusses the "contextualism" methodology he has applied to interpret the political texts of the period covered by the book and the reasons for this choice. He identifies four impediments which, taken together, have had a negative impact on the field of study of the history of medieval Islamic political thought: the *longue durée* approach, the imposition of paradigms (the theory of the caliphate and the fall of Baghdad), the (false) idea of an immutable and monolithic literary genre, and the lack of published texts on the subject.

The author favours a contextualism (or contextualised approach) to the interpretation of political texts over the *longue durée* approach as adopted by Patricia Crone, Ann Lambton and Antony Black in their respective works. The *longue durée* approach necessarily leads to shortcuts in the conclusions of the analysis, which is explained by the construction of developments on a broad chronological framework. In addition, this approach tends to neglect narrow historical contexts during which political thought developed.

The contextualised interpretation of the authors and texts examined in the book consists in taking into account in the analysis the social, cultural and political contexts in which they evolved, but also in understanding their intellectual environment, their life trajectory, their experiences. Besides, contextualism allows to "retrieve the political languages within which" these authors "conducted their debates and expressed their ideas and reconstruct the prevalent discourses of their time" (p. 30). Contextualism is not a new approach, since Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock applied it to the study of the history of medieval and modern European political thought. The author explains that he has adopted the broad outlines of these two researchers' approach for the study of Mamluk Islamic political thought. However, as the author points out, the contextual approach is not the only one for analysing the literature of Islamic political thought, but it is appropriate in the context of this book, which aims to contribute to the development of this field of study (p. 34).

Chapter two (p. 47-84) is devoted to the figure of the famous Shāfi‘ī *qādī al-qudāt* Badr al-Dīn b. Jamā‘a (d. 733/1333) and his work. The author highlights

the components of *Mustanad al-ajnād fī ālāt al-jihād*, *al-Mukhtaṣar fi faḍl al-jihād* and *Tahrīr al-ahkām fi tadbīr ahl al-Islām*. The latter treatise is the ultimate manifestation and the most articulate expression of Shāfi‘ī political thought (p. 47, 84). In addition to being part of the long tradition of Shāfi‘ī thought (al-Māwardī, al-Juwainī, al-Ghazālī, to name but a few), the *Tahrīr* is in a way the receptacle of all the political experience that Badr al-Dīn b. Jamā‘a lived through during the period in which the treatise was written. It was a long and eventful experience, particularly with the many political struggles between Mamluk emirs. The various sections/themes covered, such as the concept of a threefold political authority (imam, caliph and sultan); the theory of the delegation of power in order to guarantee governance in all cases; the concern to limit power by promoting a professional judiciary and administrative body; the security, as far as possible, of the population’s interests; and the codification of the rules of war, mean that *Tahrīr* can be seen as a kind of proto-constitution or official *madhhab* of the state (p. 83).

In addition to jurists, theorists of Mamluk Islamic political thought included sufi dignitaries who made a major contribution to this theorization, as discussed in chapter 3 (p. 85-121). The influence of sufi dignitaries was already evident in the Abbasid period, particularly during the reign of Caliph al-Nāṣir (d. 622/1225), who was strongly influenced by Shihāb al-Dīn ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234). But this sufi influence on the circles of power was accentuated during the Mamluk period. In some cases, sufi dignitaries even exerted a certain influence over the Mamluk authorities and the judiciary, as shown by the various legal problems experienced by Ibn Taymiyya following his criticism of certain aspects of *taṣawwuf* and sufi dignitaries (p. 96-98). An analysis of the text entitled *Miṣbāḥ al-hidāya fi ṭarīq al-imāma* – not edited yet and conserved at the Boldeian Library – and whose author is unknown to us, confirms its contribution to Islamic political thought. This treatise is not a political treatise influenced by Sufism but rather a sufi treatise which deals distinctly with sufi political thought based on five principles, namely: a conception of the highest political authority that disregarded the caliphate and the lineage of Quraysh; upholding the rules of war; the sufi prism in political theorising; accommodating the concerns of its dedicatee, sultan Baybars; highlighting the merits of sufis over some corrupt scholars to show his treatise as a serious strain of political thought.

Chapter 4 (p. 122-155) deals with the respective treatises of Ibn Talḥa and the Mālikī scholar al-Qarāfī. It shows how these two original contributions were

decisive for the political thought produced during that period and challenges the emphasis placed by researchers on the study of the literary genres of political texts. It reveals the influence of the two authors’ social, professional and ideological contexts in shaping their innovative postulations and conceptions of the rule of law. The two authors and their respective treatises demonstrate that medieval political thinkers only dealt with concerns and ideas that were accessible to them in their empirical and intellectual world. In addition to political treatises, other texts in Mamluk historiography take the form of political thought, such as Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī’s (d. 771/1370) *Tabaqāt*, to which the fifth and final chapter is devoted.

The author takes as a case study the biography of the famous jurist and sufi, al-‘Izz b. ‘Abd al-Salām (d. 660/1262). By devoting an exhaustive biography to Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām in his *Tabaqāt*, al-Subkī commemorated and revived the Shāfi‘ī trend in political thought. Al-Subkī uses the remembrance of Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām as an archetype of the Shāfi‘ī model and a ‘place of memory’ to counter perceived threats to his *madhhab* in his time and to defend the cherished ideal of the rule of law. The biography of Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām in al-Subkī’s *Tabaqāt* should be read as a political text intended specifically for the remembrance, preservation and revival of the Shāfi‘ī political thought of the late Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. The main political themes preserved by the memory of Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām in the *Tabaqāt* are closely linked to the Shāfi‘ī conception of the rule of law (p. 159). The biography is also political because al-Subkī’s intentions in writing the text were political (dealing with political themes, promoting the Shāfi‘ī *madhhab* for the state).

The book is both erudite and enjoyable to read, despite the technical nature of the subject matter, which the author has managed to make more comprehensible thanks to his mastery of the history of medieval Islamic political thought.

The book is innovative in terms of both its subject matter and its methodology. The history of medieval Islamic political thought has suffered from a lack of work, a gap that this book undeniably fills. Mohamad El-Merheb’s study calls into question the paradigms that have been imposed on this field of study, in particular the perennial one of the need for the caliph and the caliphate as a form of government. Yet, as the examination of each of the treatises brilliantly demonstrates, the caliphate and the caliph were not of major relevance to political thinkers post 648/1258 and the disappearance of the Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad. More than that, in the process,

this thought completely ignored the institution of the caliphate or, at best, deemed it unnecessary.

The analysis, in the light of the historical-political, religious, intellectual, social and cultural context, of five political treatises by authors from the Syrian-Egyptian area of the 7th/13th - 8th/14th centuries, with different backgrounds and statuses, brings out the components of a profound theorisation and conception of political thought in the Mamluk-Bahrite period. The author skillfully analyses the content of each of the treatises in the light of the chronicles, providing a better understanding of the context in which they were produced. Particularly noteworthy is the philological aspect of the study, which attests to the author's in-depth knowledge of the corpus of medieval Islamic political thought. El-Merheb highlights certain earlier borrowings made by each of the five ulama from the long tradition of Shāfi'i political thought. They do not simply borrow material from their predecessors: they insert, reorganise, adapt and even modify it in their treatises so as to corroborate and strengthen their theorisation. In addition, the results of the examination are put into perspective with the historiography refuting, nuancing and correcting the conclusions of certain previous works related to the subject. Undoubtedly, the analysis provides many new elements and ultimately leads to a better understanding of the thinking of these authors and, in the end, of the richness and complexity of Islamic political thought in the Mamluk period.

What this book reveals is an innovative Islamic political thought focused on limiting and moderating power and conferring powers on administrative and judicial professionals in order to ensure the effective functioning of government.

Nonetheless, we would like to make a few comments. It would have been useful to use the *Tuhfat al-Turk fī mā yajib an yu'mal fī al-mulk* to shed more light on the competition mentioned between the madhhabs, particularly between Mālikī - Shāfi'i, in the section on al-Qarāfi, and between Shāfi'i - Hanafī in the section on al-Subkī.

It might therefore have been interesting to qualify Ibn Taymiyya's position on *taṣawwuf*. Wahhabi propaganda has made Ibn Taymiyya the anti-sufi figure par excellence. In reality, the theologian trained as a Hanbalī criticised certain practices of certain brotherhoods, such as *samā'*. This image of Ibn Taymiyya as anti-sufi persists despite the work of Henri Laoust and his student George Makdisi, but also, among others Thomas Homerin, Assef Qays, and more recently Carl Sharif El-Tobgui who have

refuted this hypothesis.⁽¹⁾ It should be pointed out that the author of this book in no way asserts that Ibn Taymiyya was anti-sufi. However, the account of the polemics initiated by Ibn Taymiyya against certain sufi brotherhoods and dignitaries and their legal consequences for the Damascus scholar may lead the non-specialist reader to believe that Ibn Taymiyya was a fierce opponent of Sufism as a whole. It should be added that the works of Abbès Zouache, Agnès Carayon and Mehdi Berriah on *furūsiyya*⁽²⁾ would have helped to qualify Shihāb al-Sarrāf's positions on a subject that is admittedly secondary to the book's theme (p. 59).

Finally, the book opens up a number of interesting avenues for research, but it is somewhat regrettable that there is no general conclusion, which might have set out these avenues or at least suggested some. What about the Circassian period? Who are the theorists of Circassian political thought? What kind of literature? What were the principles and methods of political theorising in the Circassian period? Is there continuity or a rupture with the Bahrite period?

(1) Henri Laoust, *Le hanbalisme sous les Mamelouks Bahrides* (658-784/1260- 1382), Paris, Geuthner, 1960, p. 35; Henri Laoust, « Le réformisme d'Ibn Taymiyya », *Islamic Studies*, 1/3 (September), 1962, p. 33; George Makdisi, « Ibn Taymiyya: A šūfi of the Qādiriya Order », *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, 1, 1973, p. 118-29; Thomas Homerin, « Ibn Taymiya's al-Šūfiyah wa-al-Fuqarā », *Arabica* 32, 1985, p. 219-244; Qays Assef, « Le soufisme et les soufis selon Ibn Taymiyya », *Bulletin d'études orientales* 60, 2012; Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation. A Study of Dar' ta'ārud al-'aql wa-l-naql*, Brill, Leiden, 2019, p. 88 fn. 32.

(2) Agnès Carayon, *La Furūsiyya des Mamlūks: une élite sociale à cheval* (1250-1517), PhD thesis, university of Provence Aix-Marseille, Aix-en-Provence, 2012 ; Agnès Carayon, « Représenter son identité, imposer son pouvoir. Les jeux guerriers des Mamelouks et la symbolique de la furūsiyya », dans Mathieu Eychenne, Stéphane Pradines and Abbès Zouache (eds.), *Guerre et paix dans le Proche-Orient médiéval (x^e-xv^e siècle)*, Ifao, Le Caire, 2019, p. 87-133; Abbès Zouache, « Une culture en partage: la furūsiyya à l'épreuve du temps », *Médiévaux* 64, 2013, p. 57-75; Mehdi Berriah, « Le cheval arabe chez les Mamelouks bahriyya entre pragmatisme, symboles et représentations (xIII^e-xIV^e siècles) », *Arabian Humanities* 8, 2017 [online <http://journals.openedition.org/cy/3398>]; Mehdi Berriah, « Représentations, sunnanisation et sacralisation de la furūsiyya à l'époque mamelouke (xIII^e-xVI^e siècle) », *Bulletin d'études orientales* 67, 2020, p. 229-246.

These few remarks in no way detract from the book's substantial contribution to the history of Mamluk Islamic political thought and of Islam in general. This book will undoubtedly become a landmark and classic in the field of the history of Mamluk Islamic political thought.

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