

## Introduction

When Donald Little wrote his influential article on “Religion under the Mamluks” in 1983, his focus was on the religious beliefs and practices of the Mamluks themselves. Little comes to the conclusion that “out of religious conviction and personal piety in some instances but also with an acute sense of their own welfare,” they strove “to keep diverse religious forces in Egypt and Syria in a state of equilibrium.”<sup>1</sup> Since then great progress has been made, as Emil Homerin’s detailed, comprehensive survey of the study of Islam in the Mamluk period demonstrates.<sup>2</sup> The ulama are now seen as a heterogeneous group exhibiting a wide range of religious opinions. Furthermore, Sufism as well as what could be called popular religion have attracted much interest in the last few years. Homerin thus summarizes that “a two-tier model of religion with a high faith of a literate elite above the vulgar superstitions of the masses is an inaccurate and misleading description of religion in the Mamluk period.” Rather, “a wide array of regional and cultural interpretation and expression” of Islam could be found.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that recent study of religion in the Mamluk period has produced a quite nuanced and differentiated picture of Muslim society. However, Homerin was well aware of the fact that “in Mamluk domains, religion had three major instantiations: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed the Mamluk state as other states in the eastern Mediterranean was characterized by its multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. Only an interdisciplinary approach will make it possible to illustrate the complexity of its social reality.<sup>5</sup> The study of Sufism has already helped to widen Mamluk studies to include non-Muslim communities.<sup>6</sup> However, one of the best examples for a new cross-cultural approach is Tamer El-Leithy’s still unpublished dissertation on Coptic culture and conversion in Mamluk Cairo. Using legal documents in addition to other sources, El-Leithy reconstructs everyday social practices and settlement patterns of converts and their families which quite often maintained their Christian faith.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, it is the goal of this theme issue of *Mamlūk Studies Review* to bring

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<sup>1</sup> Donald P. Little, “Religion under the Mamluks,” *Muslim World* 73 (1983): 181.

<sup>2</sup> Th. Emil Homerin, “The Study of Islam in the Mamluk Domain,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 1-30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Johannes Pahlitzsch, “Mediators Between East and West: Christians Under Mamluk Rule,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 31-47.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard McGregor’s contribution to this volume with further references.

<sup>7</sup> Tamer El-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293–1524 A.D.,” 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2005).



together scholars working on Islamic history and scholars interested in the history of oriental Christian or Jewish communities as a first step for interdisciplinary research on religion and religious culture in the Mamluk period. For the Muslim part of the society, Jonathan Berkey examines in his article on “Mamluk Religious Policy” the complex and nuanced relationship between religious and political authority. The most consistent feature of what could be called the religious policy of the Mamluks was the cultivation of a symbiotic relationship of the Mamluks with the ulama. Besides defending Syria and Egypt against the Mongols, the Mamluks’ main service to Islam consisted, according to Berkey, in embracing the active and munificent support of the religious establishment which in exchange validated the Mamluk regime.

While Berkey’s paper deals mainly with the Mamluks, Daniella Talmon-Heller studies how the ulama, the ones who possess *‘ilm* (knowledge of the religious sciences) secured power and prestige under the Ayyubids and Mamluks. It seems that the mastery of religious knowledge implied also the authority to mediate and intercede (*shafā‘ah*), and the capacity to bestow spiritual and material blessing (*barakah*), at times through the manifestation and manipulation of metaphysical power (*karamāt*). Muslim sainthood was obviously not reserved to Sufism.

One of the most influential as well as controversial religious scholars of the Mamluk period was Ibn Taymīyah. However, without students who were engaged in activities of copying, abridging, and commenting on his work, he would not have achieved the prominent position he still has today for many Muslims. Caterina Bori studies the process of the formation of a circle of students and the transmission of Ibn Taymīyah’s writings. Actually, by the time of his death the status of Ibn Taymīyah was more problematic and less consolidated than we are accustomed to considering it. So it is thanks to the action of a few determined students that his work was preserved and disseminated.

Ibn Taymīyah was a fervent advocate of his idea of Islam. However, to use the terms “orthodox” and “heretic” in this context is problematic. Richard McGregor points out that these terms have their roots in European intellectual history. For Islam it seems more appropriate to use the term “orthodox” as a historically determined qualifier indicating a position of relative dominance, rather than for signifying a supposedly unchanging and ahistorical core of doctrinal commitments. Especially with regard to Sufism these categories are of little analytical value.

Ibn Taymīyah also participated in the theological debate with an unknown Christian writer from Cyprus who sent his apologetic treatise to Ibn Taymīyah and his contemporary Muḥammad Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī at the beginning of the fourteenth century. This provoked both Muslim scholars to write long and disparaging replies which constitute the most substantial correspondence in the history of Christian-Muslim relations. David Thomas presents the Christian



text and al-Dimashqī's answer and analyzes the very different attitudes towards the respective opponent. While al-Dimashqī seems more concerned to appeal to Muslims and was not engaged on any deep level with the Christian treatise, the Christian author obviously hoped to start a serious debate in which his arguments were weighed dispassionately.

Contact between Christians and Muslims in the realm of art is studied by Lucy-Anne Hunt in her article on an illuminated Arab gospel book from the Coptic Museum in Cairo. The large size of the book and its pristine state indicates that it was intended to impress. Maybe one of its purposes was also to dissuade those who may have been tempted to convert to Islam. Its style of decoration points to a discourse representing Arab Christian culture within, and sensitive to, its Islamic environment.

The last contribution deals with the relations of the Jews with the ruling elite. Marina Rustow questions the stereotypical view of the Jews as passive victims of an oppressive Mamluk regime. Indeed this picture is based in many cases on the impression given by Muslim and Jewish sources, which both for different reasons tend to present the events as coming about on the initiative of the Muslims—be it the sultan and his amirs or the qadi—while in reality the Jews manipulated them to serve their own political aims.

Certainly the articles collected in this issue do not cover all aspects of the religious life of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Mamluk period. Papers on the Coptic community, the Syrian Orthodox church or other Christian communities, as well as articles on Jewish religious beliefs and practices at the time would have been welcome. What is particularly missing are further studies on the relationship of Muslims with Christians from the Islamicists' side. There is a certain danger in seeing the society of Mamluk Egypt and Syria almost exclusively as an Islamic entity. The influence as well as the numbers of the non-Muslim communities might have declined from the thirteenth century on, but still these groups must be taken into account as important factors of social life under the Mamluks despite the partial view of the sources that were written in their majority by the ulama.

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