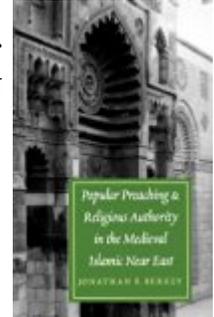


Jonathan P. Berkey. *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001. xii + 143 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-98126-0.



Reviewed by Omid Safi

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Speaking in Authority: Preaching and Religious Discourse in Medieval Nile-to-Oxus

Readers will appreciate this text because it will remind us of the way in which our textual biases have served to limit our understanding of medieval societies. Most medieval historians, this reviewer included, are primarily textualists. Even when we recognize the limitations of texts and seek to augment the textual focus by bringing in a whole host of material culture, most of us perpetuate a view of medieval Islamic society that emerges from the texts of the court culture and the `ulama circles. The great historian Roy Mottahedeh once proclaimed: "Ulamalogy is a noble science--at least we have to think so, because it is almost all the Islamic social history we will ever have."

More recently, scholars have begun to expand this admittedly limited lens on the pre-modern world by recognizing that the category of the `Ulama is in fact a heterogeneous group comprised of a whole host of groups with various levels of learning, professional income, and involvement in the process of transmission of knowledge. Fur-

thermore, this expansion has been aided by the insights of the incomparable Peter Brown, who has done so much to problematize the "high culture, low culture" dichotomy. Accordingly, the field of medieval Islamic history is now blessed with historians who are applying multiple lenses to the variegated phenomenon of pre-modern social history.

Jonathan Berkey's insightful and concise book fits in exactly here. In this very readable text, he highlights the importance of the various classes of popular preachers (waiz, pl. wuaz) and storytellers (Qass, pl. Qussas) in pre-modern Islamic society. In highlighting a group whose primary means of transmitting religious knowledge was oral and not textual, he adds an important dimension to our understanding of pre-modern society. It goes without saying that the very process of writing was sacred in medieval Islamdom. However, when one remembers the limited rate of literacy in these societies, it becomes all the more clear that those story-tellers and popular preachers most likely reached a much wider portion of the society than the voluminous texts written by

the `ulama and court scribes. That fact alone makes the production of the Qussas a phenomenon worthy of study and analysis. In terms of the time period, Berkey focuses on the crucial and still understudied period that Marshall G. S. Hodgson identified as the "Middle Period" (1000-1500 C.E.). The geographic region is largely that of the "Near East," although one wishes that the focus of the study on Arabic speaking regions was expanded to include the Persian region as well. It is far too easy to criticize any study for what it does not include, and that is perhaps an unfair approach. In this case, however, one would have readily welcomed Berkey's insightful discussion of the oral story-telling in the Iranian context which has grown up around Firdawsi's masterful *Shah-nameh*.

Berkey offers intriguing evidence to demonstrate that some of the traditional roles of the Qussas were absorbed by the Sufis and the Khatibs. Certainly towards the Middle Period, many Sufi masters do engage in extended oral story telling--which are, of course, only preserved through having been written down. Here one can point to Abu Sa'id Abi al-Khayr's "Asrar Al-Tawhid," or the "Fawa'id al-Fu'ad of Nizam al-Din Awliya." In both cases the collection of stories and anecdotes are written down by disciples, rather than the saintly figures themselves. But the very structure of many of the anecdotes and the heuristic fashion in which they are used are not dissimilar to the techniques of the qussas of previous generations. The very intertwining of Sufi discourse with that of the qussas is certainly one of the important contributions of this book. Although again, one can point out that a significant amount of Sufi story telling took place in Persian, and it would have been wonderful to include that as well.

Berkey also points out how the entire tradition of qussas and *wu'az* also comes under attack by familiar figures such as Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200). He also brings to light important, hitherto unstudied, manuscripts that highlight the social signifi-

cance of oral teaching and preaching, including that of a collection known as "Rawd al-fa'iq fi al-mawa'iz wa al-raqa'iq" ("The Splendid Garden of Sermons and Edifying Tales").

Some of the most intriguing suggestions of the book deal with the very concept of "popular religion," and here Berkey builds on the insights of Peter Brown as well as historians of Islamdom such as Ahmet Karamustafa. It is these insights that are likely to be of particular interest to many. Surely the question of who has the authority to transmit religious knowledge in oral or textual fashion is a hotly contested one in medieval (and modern) Islamic societies, and this remains an important question for historians to explore.

The book is a well researched and valuable one, which is recommended both to research libraries and to students of Islamic history. Some will notice the brevity of the book, a scant ninety-six pages of text in addition to notes and bibliography. This, sadly; it is a sign of the state of publishing in this field that most publishers eschew longer scholarly monographs on medieval Islam, instead focusing on contemporary manifestations of "terrorism," "fundamentalism," and other marketable titles that dot the best-seller list of Amazon.com's Islam offerings (headed by Bernard Lewis and joined by his army of Islamophobes). Many of the most venerable academic publishers have stopped publishing works on pre-modern Islamic history. A scholar of Berkey's rank deserves to have more than ninety-six pages of text to make his very insightful commentary on medieval Islamic society, and one would hope that more publishers would take seriously the importance and relevance of the pre-modern history of the Muslim world.

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