

ISLĀM AL-KĀFIR FĪ HĀL AL-KHUṬBA:
CONCERNING THE CONVERSION OF “INFIDELS” TO ISLAM
DURING THE MUSLIM FRIDAY SERMON IN MAMLUK EGYPT¹

ISLĀM AL-KĀFIR FĪ HĀL AL-JUṬBA:
SOBRE LA CONVERSIÓN DE LOS “INFIELES” AL ISLAM
DURANTE EL SERMÓN DEL VIERNES EN EL EGIPTO MAMELUKO

LINDA G. JONES
Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Abstract: Ibn al-Ḥājj al-‘Abdarī a Maliki jurist in Mamluk Cairo, denounced a religious “innovation” (*bid’a*) that had apparently become current in fourteenth-century Egypt: “Infidels” would interrupt the Muslim Friday sermon in order to profess or reiterate their conversion to Islam before the entire congregation. Ibn al-Ḥājj urged preachers not to tolerate such interruptions under any circumstances, a posture that seems at odd with Mamluk policy of inducing such conversions especially among the Coptic community. The Maliki jurist’s legal arguments furnish new insights into the hitherto unexplored role of the Friday liturgical sermon in the conversion to Islam. This article will explain the legal basis of Ibn al-Ḥājj’s opposition to this practice, propose some explanations for the motivations behind the would-be convert’s interruption of the sermon, and relate this phenomenon to the historical context of tense Muslim-Christian relations in fourteenth-century Mamluk Egypt.

Keywords: Friday *khutba*; preaching and conversion; Ibn al-Ḥājj al-‘Abdarī; Mamluks; Mamluk Egypt; *bid’a* (religious innovation); conversion to Islam; Muslim-Christian relations.

Resumen: Ibn al-Ḥāyy al-‘Abdarī, un jurista malikí en el Cairo mameluco, denunció una “innovación religiosa” (*bid’a*) que se extendió en el Egipto del siglo XIV. Los “infieles” interrumpían el sermón del viernes, aparentemente, para proclamar o reiterar su conversión al Islam ante la congregación. Ibn al-Ḥāyy instó a los predicadores a no tolerar dichas interrupciones bajo ninguna circunstancia –postura que parece contradecir a la política impuesta por los mamelucos de forzar la conversión de los infieles, sobre todo de los procedentes de la comunidad copta. Los argumentos legales de Ibn al-Ḥāyy arrojan nueva luz sobre el papel, hasta entonces ignorado por los estudiosos, del sermón del viernes en la conversión al islam. El artículo analiza las bases jurídicas de la oposición manifestada por Ibn al-Ḥāyy hacia esta práctica, explica los posibles motivos que indujeron a los conversos a interrumpir el sermón islámico y relaciona este fenómeno con el contexto histórico de las tensas relaciones entre musulmanes y cristianos en el Egipto mameluco.

Palabras clave: *jutba* del viernes; Ibn al-Ḥāyy al-‘Abdarī; mamelucos; Egipto mameluco; *bid’a* (innovaciones religiosas); conversión al islam; relaciones entre musulmanes y cristianos.

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SUMMARY

1. Introduction.– 2. A review of the scholarly literature on preaching and conversion to Islam.– 3. The strange case of the conversion of the “infidel” during the Friday sermon.– 4. Islamic legal procedures concerning the conversion to Islam.– 5. The Friday *khuṭba*: piety or spectacle? Toward an understanding of the motivations of the convert.– 6. The fourteenth-century: the age of conversions in Mamluk Egypt.– 7. Concluding remarks.– 8. Bibliography.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ibn al-Ḥājj al-‘Abdarī (d. 1334), a Maliki jurist resident in Mamluk Cairo, denounced a practice that had apparently become current in Egypt whereby an “infidel” would interrupt the Muslim Friday sermon (*khuṭbat al-jum‘a*) in order to profess his conversion to Islam before the entire congregation. For Ibn al-Ḥājj this was an intolerable “innovation” (*bid‘a*) from established custom that no preacher should allow. The reasons for Ibn al-Ḥājj’s objections to this practice will be examined in detail in what follows. It should be noted here at the outset that this statement, buried among the countless deeds that the Maliki jurist condemned in his compendium on innovations in Islamic ritual practices², provides a rare glimpse of the relationship between Islamic preaching and the conversion of “infidels” to Islam under the Mamluks.

The significance of Ibn al-Ḥājj’s testimony resides in the fact that while scholars of the Mamluk period agree that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries witnessed a pronounced increase in the documented cases of conversions, especially of Coptic Christians to Islam, these authors invariably speak of forced conversions under the threat of death, physical violence, or social pressures stemming from institutionalized forms of humiliation³. Their works say nothing about conversions that may have resulted directly or indirectly from Islamic preaching. Admittedly, as we shall see in the forthcoming discussion, Ibn al-Ḥājj does not portray the conversion of the “infidel” to Islam as a direct response to the preaching of the liturgical preacher (*khaṭīb*). Rather, he tells us that these conversions are taking place *fī ḥāl al-khuṭba*, that is, “during the sermon” while the preacher is speaking. Nevertheless, Ibn al-Ḥājj furnishes evidence directly linking conversion to Islam to the preaching event and this is important because in so doing, he provides us with another mode of explaining the phenomenon beyond the classic coercion thesis advocated by scholars such as Donald P. Little, Nehemia Levtzion, or Ira Lapidus⁴.

For all that, by labeling these incidences as “innovations”, Ibn al-Ḥājj makes clear his disapproval of the conversions occurring under these circumstances. The purpose of this article is to explain the nature of Ibn al-Ḥājj’s objections to the conversion of “infidels” during the Friday sermon from a legal perspective, to propose some explanation for the motivations behind the would-be convert’s interruption of the *khuṭba*, and to relate this phenomenon to the historical context of fourteenth-century Mamluk Egypt, a period characterized by social tensions involving religious minorities, the Mamluk authorities, and the larger Muslim

² Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal al-shar‘ al-sharīf*.

³ See, for example, D.P. Little, *Coptic Conversion to Islam*; N. Levtzion, *The Conversion of Egypt*; I. Lapidus, *The Conversion of Egypt to Islam*; R. Irwin, *The Early Mamluk Sultanate*. This thesis of coercion posed by earlier scholars has been challenged and nuanced in the more recent scholarship, as will be discussed in greater detail in Part 3, below.

⁴ See note 3, above.

population. In particular, there is evidence to suggest that converts were capable of exploiting the Islamic legal exigency of voluntary conversion to their advantage by staging public conversions to Islam and then publicly reverting to their former religion, at least in the case of the Coptic Christians of Egypt. I would argue that the “infidel’s” public confession of his conversion to Islam during the Friday *khuṭba* was a response to the pressures exerted by the Mamluks and the ‘*ulamā*’ upon religious minorities, particularly the Coptic Christians, to convert to Islam during this period. I further hypothesize that the discrepancy manifested in Ibn al-Ḥājj’s text between the alleged motives of the neophyte for interrupting the sermon and Ibn al-Ḥājj’s interpretation of these motives reflects Muslim anxieties about the sincerity of the wave of conversions of Coptic Christians to Islam during this century.

The interpretation of Ibn al-Ḥājj’s text requires a two-fold process. In the first place, the text must be examined in light of Muslim jurisprudence on the subject of the conversion to Islam in order to understand the legal bases of his argument. Given that Ibn al-Ḥājj was a Maliki jurist, I consulted the relevant Maliki legislation on this topic, highlighting al-Umawī’s *Kitāb al-Wathā’iq*, as an example. Secondly, I draw upon the existing scholarship on the situation of religious minorities under the Mamluks in order to gain insights into the possible historical and socio-political circumstances that induced “infidels” to publicly display their conversion to Islam and into the reasons for Muslim suspicion of such conversions. Before proceeding to analyze Ibn al-Ḥājj’s text in greater depth, a brief word is in order concerning the problems surrounding the scholarship on preaching and conversion in Islam.

2. A REVIEW OF THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON PREACHING AND CONVERSION TO ISLAM

The use of preaching as an instrument of religious conversion in the Christian tradition is well known and has been the subject of numerous investigations. Robert I. Burns characterized the thirteenth century as the “dream of conversion” due to the flourishing of preaching campaigns of the mendicant friars aimed at converting Muslims in the Iberian peninsula and North Africa⁵. Various scholars have studied the royal licenses that the Crown of Aragon granted to mendicant preachers in the fourteenth century to proselytize Jews and Muslims living under Christian rule in the peninsula⁶. As is well known, the energetic and deliberately polemical content of the sermons of the famed Dominican preacher St. Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419) as well as other contemporary orators, among them the Franciscan mendicant Pere dez Quo and Mestre Nicolau Grau, often resulted in pogroms against those communities⁷.

⁵ R.I. Burns, *Christian-Islamic Confrontation*.

⁶ The subject of the licenses issued to the mendicants to preach to Jewish and Saracen minorities has been treated by J. Riera i Sans, *Les licències reials per predicar*; M.T. Ferrer i Mallol, *Frontera, convivència i proselitisme*; M.D. Johnston, *Ramon Llull and the Compulsory*, pp. 5-37.

⁷ On the anti-Jewish discourse in the sermons of Vincent Ferrer, see M.A. Sánchez, *Predicació y antisemitismo*, pp. 195-203. On the preaching of Mestre Nicolau Grau, see J. Maiz Chacón, *Los judíos de Baleares*, p. 55; on Pere dez Quo, see A. Rubió i Lluch, *Documents per l’història*, p. 81. On the conversion of Jewish women to Christianity in the Crown of Aragon, see P. Tartakoff, *Jewish Women and Apostasy*.

By contrast, although conversion to Islam in the premodern period has been analyzed from many perspectives by social historians⁸, some of whom have acknowledged the role played by Sufi mystic and ascetic popular preachers in bringing new converts to Islam, no concrete details are forthcoming in the scholarly literature about the nature of preaching to non-Muslims, much less about the content of such sermons. This is because, as far as I am aware, there is no documented evidence of sermons that were targeted specifically at converting non-Muslims. The available evidence mostly furnishes fleeting glimpses of this process. One manuscript preserved in the Paris National Library⁹, contains an extract from a collection of hortatory sermons, *Rawḍ al-fā'iq fi l-mawā'iz wa l-raqā'iq*, by Shu'ayb al-Ḥurayfīsh (d. 1398), an Egyptian Sufi preacher known for his sermons on ascetic and mystical themes¹⁰. The homiletic fragment narrates the conversion of several Spanish monks to Islam at the hand of the celebrated twelfth-century Andalusī Sufi mystic and preacher, Abū Madyan Shu'ayb al-Anṣārī (d. 1198)¹¹. Although I have not been able to consult this manuscript, it is significant to point out that al-Ḥurayfīsh was also a resident of Mamluk Egypt and hence a witness to the tensions between the Muslim and Christian communities of the time. His compendium of homilies mostly contains pious exhortations, stories, exempla, and legends about Muḥammad, the scriptural prophets, and other heroes from the early period of Islamic history. The survival of an independent narrative from this collection concerning the conversion of Christian monks at the hands of a twelfth-century Sufi saint could indicate that this legend circulated independently and was held in special consideration within a historical climate in which "the dream of conversion" of Christians was being vigorously pursued by the Mamluks and the Muslim 'ulamā'.

More often one encounters generic reports of Muslim preachers who claimed to have converted scores or hundreds of unbelievers. A typical example is seen in the figure of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200), a charismatic Iraqī popular preacher and Hanbali jurist, who boasted to having personally converted to Islam more than one hundred thousand men¹². Unfortunately, Ibn al-Jawzī provides no further details as to how he managed this feat. There is nothing in his writings to suggest that he launched preaching campaigns aimed specifically at proselytizing non-Muslims. Rather, the impression one obtains from reading such works as his preaching manual, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās wa-l-mudhakkirīn* ("the book of hortatory preachers and storytellers"), or the various biographical accounts about this preacher is that his sermons, which he preached in public squares, simply attracted large crowds of people, Muslim as well as non-Muslims¹³.

⁸ The classic studies include R. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam*; N. Letvzion, *Conversion to Islam*; L. Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West*. These studies deal with the social and historical aspects of Muslim missionary activities but say nothing about the role that preaching or sermons might have played in this regard. Regarding the conversion of Coptic Christians to Islam, see M. Brett, *The Spread of Islam*; I. Lapidus, *The Conversion of Egypt*; J.R. Zaborowski, *The Coptic Martyrdom*; and T. el-Leithy, *Coptic Culture and Conversion*.

⁹ S. al-Ḥurayfīsh, *Rawḍ al-fā'iq*, Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, Manuscrits orientaux, ms. 782, n. 2, f. 64.

¹⁰ On this figure see W.M. Brinner, *The Significance of the Ḥarāfīsh*, pp. 190-215; J. Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, p. 18. For the biography of Shu'ayb al-Ḥurayfīsh, see Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Inbā' al-ghumr*, vol. IV, p. 63.

¹¹ On Abū Madyan's preaching, see V. Cornell, *The Way of Abū Madyan*.

¹² M.L. Swartz, *Ibn al-Jawzī's Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, p. 231.

¹³ For biographical notices of Ibn al-Jawzī, see Ibn Rajab, *Dhayl 'alā ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*, pp. 399-434; Ibn al-Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, pp. 28-30; and Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt al-dhahab*, pp. 29-30; and the introduction by M.L. Swartz in his *Ibn al-Jawzī's Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, esp. pp. 20-98.

Here it is important to distinguish between the homiletic tradition of so-called “popular” hortatory preaching and storytelling, which was associated mostly (although not exclusively) with ascetics and Sufi mystics, and the tradition of canonical mosque preaching (*khiṭāba*), which is enshrined in Islamic law and has a fixed place in Islamic ritual¹⁴. The textual evidence of liturgical preaching aimed at converting non-Muslims is even scarcer than that for hortatory preaching. A remarkable comment preserved in Inquisition records from late fifteenth-century Aragon reveals the measures that at least one Muslim liturgical preacher took to ensure that his message reached Christian ears. Yuçe de la Vaçía was a Mudejar preacher who, despite his disadvantaged sociopolitical circumstances, apparently harbored dreams of *proselytizing the Christians to convince them to change their religion*. The Inquisition accused Yuçe de la Vaçía of *inviting the Christians into the mosque to listen to him preach* and the records cite him as boasting that he *used to preach in the mosque with the doors wide open* in the hopes that the Christian passers-by would be enticed by his sermons¹⁵. Though short on detail, the accounts about the hortatory preachers Ibn al-Jawzī and Abū Madyan and the liturgical preacher Yuçe de la Vaçía coincide in showing the preacher taking an active role in pursuing the conversion of unbelievers to Islam.

The aforementioned statement by Ibn al-Ḥājj allows us to consider the relation between Islamic preaching and religious conversion from another perspective. The text depicts the Friday sermon as the preferred venue and occasion for “infidels” to publicly declare their conversion to Islam. Yet in contrast to the cases mentioned previously in which the preacher took the initiative in the conversion process, in the example to be analyzed here, it is the “infidel” who seeks out the preacher in order to convert before him while he is on the pulpit delivering the sermon. As we shall see in further detail in the following section, Ibn al-Ḥājj regards these unsolicited interruptions of the Friday worship as controversial from a juridical point of view. Upon first glance, the Maliki jurist’s objections might seem adverse to the policies of the Mamluk authorities who were exerting great pressure upon the Coptic population, and particularly the Coptic elites, to convert to Islam during this very period¹⁶. While I have not located in the *Madhkal* any statements by Ibn al-Ḥājj indicating that he either supported or disagreed with the Mamluk regime’s initiatives to foster the conversion of “infidels” to Islam, it is clear that he strongly opposed the circumstances in which these conversions were taking place in the midst of the Friday communal worship.

¹⁴ On the distinction between the two homiletic genres, see L.G. Jones, *The Power of Oratory*, in press; and J. Pedersen, *The Islamic Preacher*. The historiography on popular preaching is extensive in comparison with the studies devoted to the liturgical *khuṭba*. On the former, see J. Pedersen, *The Criticism of the Islamic Preacher*; M.L. Swartz, *The Rules of the Popular*, pp. 223-239; idem, *Arabic Rhetoric*, pp. 39-65; J. Berkey, *Popular Preaching*; idem, *Storytelling, Preaching*; C. Taylor, *Saints, Ziyāra, Quṣṣās*; and L.G. Jones, *Witnesses of God*. For the medieval mosque sermon, see S.D. Goitein, *The Origin and Nature*, pp. 111-125; L.G. Jones, *The Power of Oratory*; idem, *Some Methodological Considerations*; N.M. al-Maktabī, *Khaṣā’iṣ al-khuṭba wa-l-khaṭīb*; and T. Qutbuddin, *Khutba*.

¹⁵ M.J. Viguera, *Sermones aljamiados*, pp. 3-4. On the trial of Yuçe, see A. Labarta, M. García Arenal, *Algunos fragmentos aljamiados*, p. 129.

¹⁶ For background on the situation of Coptic Christians in Egypt during the Mamluk period, see C. Petry, *Copts in Late Medieval Egypt*; R. Irwin, *The Early Mamluk Sultanate*; and T. el-Leithy, *Coptic Culture and Conversion*.

3. THE STRANGE CASE OF THE CONVERSION OF THE “INFIDEL” DURING THE FRIDAY SERMON

The *Introduction to the noble law based upon the four methods (Madkhal al-shar‘ al-sharīf ‘alā l-madhāhib al-arbi‘a)* is a legal tract condemning religious innovations composed by the Egyptian Maliki jurist Ibn al-Ḥājj al-‘Abdārī¹⁷. “Innovation” (*bid‘a*, pl. *bida‘*) is a non-Quranic concept that is applied in general to anything that is novel and without precedent. In Islamic juridical terminology *bid‘a* refers to any belief or practice that does not have a precedent in the time of the Prophet Muḥammad¹⁸. Al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820), the founder of the eponymous Sunni school of law, was among the first of the Muslim jurists to distinguish between good and bad innovations. He established the principle that a deviant innovation is that which contradicts the Qur’ān, the *Sunna* or “established customs” of Muḥammad and the early Muslim community of Medina, the consensus (*ijmā‘*) of that community, or the traditions (*athār*) traced to one of Muḥammad’s Companions or Followers, while a praiseworthy innovation is that which is introduced for the welfare of the Muslims and which does not contravene any of these sources of Islamic law¹⁹.

A further development occurred in the thirteenth century when jurists such as the Shāfi‘ī *faqīh* Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām (d. 1262) and the Maliki *faqīh* al-Qarāfi (d. 1285) classified the *bida‘* according to the five legal categories of forbidden (*muḥarrama*), reprehensible (*makrūha*), neutral (*mubāḥa*), recommended (*mandūba*), and obligatory (*wājiba*)²⁰. There is evidence in the *Madkhal* that Ibn al-Ḥājj subscribed to this system of classifying innovations because there are certain *bida‘* that he deemed praiseworthy. For instance, he argued that the novelty of increasing the number of muezzins who performed the call to prayer from one to four was commendable because it had been introduced in response to the growing number of Muslims and because it occurred during Muḥammad’s lifetime and met with his approval²¹. He used similar logic to mosques, arguing that *it was a praiseworthy innovation* (“*bid‘a mustahsana*”) *because as greater numbers of people entered the mosque they would not know the direction of prayer were it not for the mihrāb*²².

Most often, however, when Ibn al-Ḥājj qualifies an act as an innovation *tout court* or when he uses the expression, “recent innovations” (*bida‘ muḥadditha*) or the analogous verbal phrases, *al-bida‘ allatī uḥdithat* or *al-bida‘ allatī aḥdathūhā* (“the innovations that were introduced recently” or “that they introduced recently”), his position is condemnatory. Invariably, he calls for these acts to be censured, avoided, or forbidden. Ibn al-Ḥājj counted his brief section “On the conversion of the infidel to Islam during the [Friday] sermon” (*faṣl fī islām al-kāfir fī ḥāl al-khuṭba*) among the categories of such innovations that should be reproved and forbidden. It is also worth noting that this segment forms part of a larger chapter discussing the *things that the prayer-leader (who is also the khaṭīb) should avoid and the recent innovations introduced by the preachers, muezzins, or other mosque personnel in the mosques on*

¹⁷ Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal al-shar‘ al-sharīf*. For a brief biography of Ibn al-Ḥājj, see F.S. Colby, *The Rhetoric of Innovative Tradition*, p. 34.

¹⁸ On the concept of *bid‘a*, see J. Robson, *Bid‘a*, p. 1199a; M. Fierro, *Kitāb al-Bida‘*, pp. 92-93; and J. Berkey, *Tradition, Innovation*.

¹⁹ J. Robson, *Bid‘a*, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p. 1199; M. Fierro, *Kitāb al-Bida‘*, p. 95.

²⁰ M. Fierro, *Kitāb al-Bid‘a*, p. 95.

²¹ See A. al-Wansharīsī, *Kitāb al-Mi‘yār*, vol. II, p. 473, who cites Ibn al-Ḥājj to justify his opinion.

²² Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, vol. II, p. 272.

Fridays. The censurable innovations of the preachers that he mentions immediately prior to the discussion of the conversion of the infidel include wearing black clothing or bearing black symbols while delivering the *khuṭba*²³, grasping the liturgical sword or staff in his left hand upon ascending the pulpit, when the established practice (*al-sunna*) is to use the right hand²⁴, striking each step of the pulpit with the sword or staff as he ascends²⁵, covering the pulpit with prayer rugs for the Friday sermon, and having the ruler sit upon the pulpit while the *khaṭīb* is pronouncing the sermon²⁶. Ibn al-Ḥājj vigorously denounced all of these innovations not only because they had no precedent in the deeds of the Prophet, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the Companions, or the pious forefathers²⁷, but also because they exhibited signs of ostentation (*jahr*), affectation (*taṣannu'*), and hypocrisy (*niḡāq*) in one's piety. In his opinion, the truly pious *khaṭīb* should adopt "a state of humility and humbleness" (*ḥāl al-khushū' wa-tadarru'*) precisely because these are the affective states that he should induce in his audience²⁸. Bearing these antecedents in mind, let us now consider the details of the passage in question:

And it is incumbent upon [the *khaṭīb*] to avoid the innovation (*al-bid'a*) that some of them commit [whereby] the infidel (*al-kāfir*) comes before the *khaṭīb* and converts to Islam in his presence on a day other than a Friday, and then returns [the subsequent Friday], coming before the *khaṭīb* again while he is on the pulpit to profess his conversion in front of the congregation, and the *khaṭīb* interrupts his *khuṭba* because of this. And this causes a tumult in the mosque, which is far removed from such things. Since [the infidel] had already converted previously, [the *khaṭīb*] is not permitted to interrupt the prescribed order of the *khuṭba* on account of this since he (the convert) was already a Muslim. Hence there is no justification for his renewing his conversion to Islam at that time in order to make his conversion conspicuously known (*li-yashtahira islāmahu*) among the Muslims so that they would recognize him for this and he would not return to his previous state of infidelity prior to his conversion²⁹.

An analysis of Ibn al-Ḥājj's argument reveals a number of grounds for his objections to the public conversion of infidels during the *khuṭba*. First of all, it was a gratuitous gesture since we are told that the individual had already come before the *khaṭīb* previously and converted to Islam. This means, as Ibn al-Ḥājj indicates, that the person was *already* a Muslim. Second, it follows that the convert was committing an innovation in Islamic law by reiterating his conversion in public since the law calls for no such second order conversion whether in public or private. As we shall see in the following section, Maliki law merely stipulates that an individual who has converted under duress has up to three days to recant his or her conversion without incurring a legal penalty.

Third, Ibn al-Ḥājj particularly condemned the convert's interruption of the Friday *khuṭba* in order to profess his conversion. He decried the scandal and

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 266.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 267.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 268.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 271.

tumult produced by the infidel's conduct because it disturbed the solemn and tranquil atmosphere that should reign in the mosque at all times since the mosque is a sacred space and a house of prayer. Indeed, this seems to have been a general concern of the Maliki jurist, judging from Ibn al-Ḥājj's repeated complaints that "nowadays" one could hardly hear the sermon due to the ruckus and the din caused by the people's untoward behaviour in the mosques³⁰.

Moreover, Ibn al-Ḥājj especially condemned the convert for deliberately choosing the time of the Friday *khutba* in order to make his conversion conspicuously known among the Muslims. As J.C. Vadet and other scholars have observed, Ibn al-Ḥājj's legal reasoning was heavily influenced by the famed Ashari theologian al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) concept of *niyya* or "intention"³¹. Al-Ghazālī maintained that *an act of worship consists of two parts: the first is the attitude of the body, the second the intention of the heart, but it is the second that is the most important*. That is, the underlying intention of an act determines whether it is a sincere and authentic display of piety or mere hypocrisy (*nifāq*)³². Time and again we see Ibn al-Ḥājj applying the principle of *niyya* explicitly or implicitly to his justifications for condemning conspicuous and gratuitous ritual acts that he deems to be motivated by selfish desires (e.g., to draw attention to the self, to inflate the ego) or by personal gain rather than by true sentiments of piety and a sincere yearning to draw nearer to God. According to this logic, the infidel's deliberate interruption of the *khutba* in order to make his conversion conspicuously known comes under the category of what Ibn al-Ḥājj criticized as *jahr* or ostentation in one's piety.

Ibn al-Ḥājj provided other examples of *jahr* in his complaints about the innovations taking place in the mosque not only during the Friday communal worship but also on other festival occasions, particularly the two canonical feasts and the celebrations throughout the month of Ramadan. For instance, he reproved those who wilfully drew attention to themselves by uttering aloud the blessing upon the Prophet Muḥammad upon entering and exiting the mosque³³. Above all, he singled out for criticism those who used the occasion of the liturgical sermon to make a show of their piety. Such was the case of the Mamluk rulers who would ascend the pulpit along with the *khaṭīb* during the two canonical festivals and remain sitting there while he delivered the sermon. Ibn al-Ḥājj further complained that on these feast days *the entire pulpit would become filled up with the muezzins and others pressing up against [the khaṭīb and each other]*³⁴. This constituted an innovation because there was no legal precedent from the time of Muḥammad or the first four caliphs for anyone to be on the pulpit other than the *khaṭīb* during the delivery of the *khutba*. In order to discourage such unseemly spectacles of ostentatious piety, Ibn al-Ḥājj urged preachers to strive to shorten their sermons on these holidays, saying that prolonging the *khutba* on the two feast days was *even more reprehensible than [so doing] on Fridays*. The Maliki jurist's reasoning is somewhat hyperbolic considering that whereas there are explicit

³⁰ For example, Ibn al-Ḥājj disagreed with the position of the Shafī'i jurists of Egypt who permitted the audience to respond audibly to the *khaṭīb* during the sermon. He countered that the proper conduct was to respond "secretly to oneself (*sirran fī nafsihi*)" and he regretted that "nowadays" the noise in the mosque from people shouting during the *khutba* was such that "the *khaṭīb* could no longer be heard above their uproar criticized". See Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal* vol. II, pp. 269 and 223. For the same reason, he objected to the custom of applauding during the sermon. *Ibidem*, p. 223.

³¹ J.C. Vadet, *Ibn al-Ḥādīdj*, p. 779b. See A.Ḥ. al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazali on Intention*.

³² Cited in Vadet, *Ibn al-Ḥādīdj*.

³³ Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal* vol. II, pp. 234-235.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 287.

directives in Islamic law to keep the *khutba* short and lengthen the ritual prayer during the Friday communal worship³⁵, there are no similar statements indicating the duration of the *khutba* on the two canonical festivals or other occasions³⁶. In a similar vein, Ibn al-Ḥājj objected to the neophyte's interruption of the Friday *khutba* in order to publicly renew his conversion to Islam because it was motivated by a self-interested desire to make a spectacle of his new status as a Muslim.

Furthermore, it is significant that Ibn al-Ḥājj's criticisms did not apply only to those persons who had previously converted to Islam. For he went on to add that,

If we considered that he had converted to Islam right now (*al-āna*), then the *khaṭīb* must order him to leave the mosque and likewise he should order whoever from the among Muslims accompanied him to leave with him in order that he cleanse himself ritually (*ḥaṭā yaghtasila*) since he is in a state of major ritual impurity.

His legal opinion was that the convert must perform the major ritual cleansing (*ghuṣl*) for the sake of Islam and that the fulfilment of the minor ablution (*wuḍū'*) alone before performing the ritual prayer would be insufficient³⁷. Here we see that the fourth reason for Ibn al-Ḥājj's objections to this innovation also concerns the conduct of the preacher. As indicated in the passage cited above, Ibn al-Ḥājj insisted that *the [khaṭīb] is not permitted to interrupt the prescribed order of the khutba on account of [the infidel's conversion]*. This implies rather that the *khaṭīb* should continue with his oration and then lead the communal prayers as normal. In sum, it would seem then that Ibn al-Ḥājj takes the position that the *khaṭīb* should not interrupt the flow of the Friday ritual in order to accommodate the conversion of infidels to Islam under any circumstances.

It may be noted in passing that Ibn al-Ḥājj's judgment that the appropriate conduct of the *khaṭīb* in such circumstances is to avoid interrupting the *khutba* for the sake of the unbeliever's conversion contrasts with the opinion of his near

³⁵ For instance according to *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, vol. IV, *The Book of Prayer (Kitāb al-Ṣalāt)*, chapter 159, n. 1889: "I have heard the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) as saying: The lengthening of prayer by a man and the shortness of the sermon [are] the sign of his understanding (of faith). So lengthen the prayer and shorten the sermon, for there is charm (in precise) expression".

³⁶ Precisely for this reason some '*ulamā'* and Muslim rhetoricians posited that the other sub-genres of the *khutba* could be longer. In his anthology of Arabic prose, the twelfth-century Andalusī belletrist Abū l-Qāsim al-Kalā'ī cited the well-known *ḥadīth* tradition, "The Messenger of God imposed upon us brevity in the sermon and prolixity in prayer", yet he deduced that this condition did not apply to the other liturgical sermons: "As for the other types of *khutab*, perhaps prolixity is what is required of them, although there is no legal prescription for this. One could put forth the report about Qays b. Kharija and his oration [which lasted] virtually from sunrise until sunset". See A.Q. al-Kalā'ī, *Iḥkām san'at al-kalām*, p. 167. The Cordoban rhetorician Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi (d. 940) classified *khutbas* according to two broad sub-genres: "long ones and short ones", citing the marriage *khutba* as a typical example of the former. Surviving manuscripts of sermons for the two canonical festivals and marriage orations are considerably more extensive in length than the typical Friday *khutbas*. See L.G. Jones, *The Power of Oratory* (in press); Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, *al-Iqd al-farīd*, vol. IV, p. 54.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 223. Here Ibn al-Ḥājj is aware that his opinion dissents from the opinion "of some" that the minor ablution alone would be sufficient. While the condition of being an infidel renders one impure according to Islamic law, it is worth recalling that Muslims may also become impure and be required to perform the major cleansing. Ibn Qāsim quotes Malik b. Anas as saying that the Christian who converts to Islam, the Muslim who has fainted and come to, and the Muslim woman who is menstruating must all perform the major ablution before they can perform the ritual prayer. Ibn Rushd, *Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-taḥṣīl*, vol. II, pp. 165-167, cited in A. Fernández, *Cuestiones legales*, p. 456. On the performance of *wuḍū'*, see M. Katz, *The study of Islamic ritual*, pp. 106-145.

contemporary, Ibn al-‘Aṭṭār, a Shafī‘i scholar and preacher residing in Mamluk Syria. Ibn al-‘Aṭṭār not only argued that the *khaṭīb* must indeed interrupt the Friday *khuṭba* if an unbeliever comes before while he is on the pulpit and expresses the desire to convert to Islam; he upped the ante by warning that the preacher who failed to do so placed himself in danger of committing the sin of unbelief by aiding and abetting the individual to remain in his state of infidelity³⁸. Ibn al-‘Aṭṭār’s opinion, preserved in his manual for liturgical preachers, provides independent corroboration that the same phenomenon that Ibn al-Ḥājj described of “infidels” interrupting the Friday sermon to convert to Islam was occurring simultaneously in other regions of the Mamluk state.

Juridical complaints regarding the proper response of the *khaṭīb* to such interruptions of the Friday sermon could stem from the tensions surrounding the convert’s status as a free agent, insofar as, theoretically at least, Islamic law emphasizes the voluntary nature of conversion³⁹. The problem, according to Ibn al-Ḥājj, is that the convert who interrupts the Friday *khuṭba* in order to publicly renew and advertize his conversion consciously exceeds the boundaries of what the law requires to validate his conversion for his own personal benefit. A concomitant difficulty not mentioned by Ibn al-Ḥājj but which also must be considered is the possibility that the Friday sermon could be used as forum in which the neophyte could publicly recant his conversion, alleging coercion. Potentially, then, the latitude that the Law accords to convert poses problems for the receptor community and its principal representatives, in this case, the *khaṭīb*.

4. ISLAMIC LEGAL PROCEDURES CONCERNING THE CONVERSION TO ISLAM

In order to more fully understand the rationale behind Ibn al-Ḥājj’s objections, a word is in order about the Maliki legal prescriptions concerning the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. To begin with, in the text described above, we have seen that Ibn al-Ḥājj began by arguing that the infidel’s public conversion during the Friday sermon was unnecessary because the individual had already professed his acceptance of Islam before the *khaṭīb* in private on an earlier date. This first act of conversion in the presence of the *khaṭīb* prior to the Friday prayer echoes the established procedures according to Maliki law. The scholar Montserrat Abumalham has studied notary forms from medieval Andalus, which were used in the process of conversion. The neophyte was required to sign such a form in the presence of valid witnesses and a Muslim authority⁴⁰. Of particular relevance is the emphasis that Maliki law places on the voluntary and self-conscious nature of the conversion experience. A model of an affidavit for the conversion of a Jew to Islam provides a typical example⁴¹:

The convert, So-and-so (son of So-and-so), being of sound mind and body, firmly resolved in his mind, and having complete mental faculties and juridical capacity, hereby testifies (...) that he abandons the Jewish religion, rejecting it, and embraces Islam of his own free will. He knows that God Almighty and Sublime admits no other religion nor derives

³⁸ Ibn al-‘Aṭṭār, *Adab al-khaṭīb*, p. 144.

³⁹ Here I am deliberately leaving aside the situation of forced conversion, which has a different dynamic and is irrelevant to the analysis of the texts under discussion.

⁴⁰ M. Abumalham, *La conversión según formularios*, pp. 73-75, 77.

⁴¹ The text, *Kitāb al-Waḥā‘iq wa-l-sijillāt*, a collection of notary forms by Muḥammad al-Umawī, a 10th century Cordoban Maliki jurist, has been edited by P. Chalmeta and F. Corriente.

satisfaction from any other religion, and that this one, Islam, abrogates all previous laws. [The convert] bears witness that there is no god but God, who has no partners, and that Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him salvation, is His servant and Messenger and the last of the prophets, and that Moses and Ezra, along with the other prophets, are His servants and messengers. He also bears witness that in the eyes of God the only religion is Islam. He has performed the major ritual cleansing (*ghusl*) in order to embrace Islam, the ritual prayer, and the minor ablution. He accepts all the laws of Islam and its pillars (...) in their totality⁴².

The statement pertaining to the official in whose presence the conversion takes place likewise verifies that the conversion was carried out “voluntarily” (*tā’i’an*), “willfully” (*āminan*), “without coercion” (*ghayr mukrihan*), “without fear” (*wa-lā mutakhawwifan amran*), and “without the expectation of any compensation” (*wa-lā mutawaqqa’ shay’an*). The final paragraph testifies that the convert *has acknowledged having understood everything completely and has accepted all his obligations*⁴³.

Several observations may be drawn from a reading of this conversion form. All three sections of the testament address the voluntary nature of conversion. The candidate manifests the sincerity of his testimony by confirming that he is “of sound mind and body” (*fi ṣiḥḥatin min ‘aqlihi wa-badanihi*), “firmly resolved in his mind” (*thabātan dhihnihi*), “willing” (*raghbatan fi-hi*), and “juridically capacitated” (*jawāzan amrihi*) to renounce his former religion and embrace Islam in its totality⁴⁴. Both the convert and the presiding official must testify that the convert has “completely understood” and “accepted” the implications of his actions. The convert is thus conscious of and responsible for his conversion. It is also noteworthy that after the neophyte professes the creed of submission to Islam and testifies that it is *the only religion in the eyes of God*, he concludes with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for having “inspired him” in his conversion (*wa-ḥamida Allāh ‘alā mā alhamahu ilayhi min-hu*)⁴⁵. The prayer constitutes a further proof of the sincerity of the convert, declares his allegiance to the new religion, and sanctifies his conversion by qualifying it as a product of divine inspiration.

Although the conversion contract demands that the neophyte perform the ritual prayers in their prescribed moments⁴⁶, there is no requirement or expectation that the conversion itself had to be timed to coincide with any specific occasion, such as the Friday communal worship. At the heart of Ibn al-Ḥājj’s complaint about infidels interrupting the Friday *khuṭba*, whether to gratuitously renew or to profess their conversion, is the suspicion that they are moved by a premeditated desire to strategically time the event to cause the maximum impact among the Muslim community. Hence his insistence that “there is no justification” for the individual to convert to Islam *at that time in order to make his conversion conspicuously known* (*li-yashtahira islāmahu*) *among the Muslims so that they would recognize him for this*. The reasons for his suspicions become clearer bearing in mind that the Friday sermon formed an integral part of the obligatory Friday communal worship, and thus the convert would have been assured the presence of a critical mass of the Muslim

⁴² M. Abumalham, *La conversión*, pp. 72-73; al-Umawī, *Kitāb al-Wathā’iq*, pp. 309-310. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for making the Arabic text available to me.

⁴³ M. Abumalham, *La conversión*; M. al-Umawī, *Kitāb al-Wathā’iq*, pp. 309-310.

⁴⁴ M. al-Umawī, *Kitāb al-Wathā’iq*, p. 309.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ M. Abumalham, *La conversión*, p. 76.

community⁴⁷. As will be recalled from the discussion in the previous section, most of the innovations taking place in the mosques of Egypt that evinced what Ibn al-Ḥājj called *jahr* (ostentation), *taṣannu'* (affectation), and *nifāq* (hypocrisy) in one's piety occurred during the Friday communal worship or other communal festivals⁴⁸. Seen in this light, the neophyte's conduct constitutes a subversive and immoral act because he disrupted the Friday *khuṭba* in the quest to conspicuously publicize his conversion⁴⁹.

5. THE FRIDAY *KHUṬBA*: PIETY OR SPECTACLE? TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE MOTIVATIONS OF THE CONVERT

Up until now our attention has focused on Ibn al-Ḥājj's assessment of the would-be convert's motivations. At this point one must attempt to explain what motivated these incidences from the perspective of the convert. What could have prompted non-Muslims to interrupt the Friday *khuṭba* in order to profess their conversion to Islam? Ibn al-Ḥājj's point is well taken: if an unbeliever had already come before the *khaṭīb* to convert to Islam in private, what would inspire him or her to return and interrupt the sermon on Friday in order to publicize the conversion? While we obviously cannot know the convert's true aims based upon Ibn al-Ḥājj's skewed judgment, one phrase in the Maliki jurist's text seems to provide a clue. Ibn al-Ḥājj further accused the convert of seeking to publicize that *he would not return to his previous state of infidelity prior to his conversion*. As noted, Maliki law accords the convert who apostasies up to three days to repent without incurring the penalty of apostasy. The law further recognizes that an individual might formally convert but subsequently claim to have been coerced, in which case his conversion could be rendered legally invalid⁵⁰. Hence the convert's public reaffirmation of his conversion in the mosque on Friday during the *khuṭba* before the entire community could have been a strategy to forestall accusations of apostasy or suspicions of insincerity or lack of conviction. Yet in so doing, the neophyte conferred a novel purpose upon the *khuṭba* by making it a showcase to prove the sincerity of his conversion to Islam, and it is this novel intention to which Ibn al-Ḥājj objects.

Another possible answer, at least in the case of Christian converts, might be an attempt to emulate the customs of the Coptic Church regarding baptism. Coptic ecclesiastical legislation stipulates that the baptism ritual take place publicly in church because it is through this rite that the individual is formally incorporated into the body of Christ, which is composed of all the members of the Christian community. Moreover, the central act of baptism is the full immersion of the neophyte in the consecrated water of the baptismal font, which is located in the church. It is also preferable that the ritual be conducted immediately prior to Mass, so that the candidate may subsequently receive communion. The Coptic Church adheres to the doctrine forbidding rebaptism, based upon the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creedal statement, *We confess one baptism for the remission of sins*, and the Apostolic Canon 47, which stipulates that a bishop or presbyter who knowingly rebaptizes someone who was rightfully received baptism

⁴⁷ Juridically the Friday *khuṭba* falls under the category of a "collective duty" (*fard kifa'ī*) as opposed to an "individual duty" (*fard 'ayn*), meaning that a sufficient number of adult males of the community must attend in order to comply with the exigencies of the law.

⁴⁸ Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, vol. II, pp. 268-269 and 287.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 267-269, among others.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

should be deposed⁵¹. This would suggest that Ibn al-Ḥājj's "infidel" –assuming that he was a Copt– was not substituting a Coptic custom for a Muslim one in seeking to repeat his conversion. It is more plausible to assume that a Coptic convert might consider the profession of the Muslim faith before the congregation during the Friday *khutba* to be necessary not in order to make the conversion into a public spectacle, but rather because this was the normative procedure in the Coptic Christian tradition. Specifically, the convert might have regarded this gesture as analogous to the Christian practice of performing the baptism immediately before the Mass, given that the *khutba* immediately precedes the Friday ritual prayer, a ritual whose central place in Islamic practice is analogous to the Christian Mass.

Still another parallel might be found in a post-baptismal rite unique to the Coptic Church known as the *loosening of the girdle* in which, among other things, the priest says prayers of thanksgiving and absolution, recites certain biblical passages (1 Corinthians 10, 1-4; Psalms 32, 1-2; Matthew 3, 1-6), and again immerses the newly baptized person in water, along with his girdle and baptismal clothing, which are subsequently disposed of in the sea. This ritual likewise takes place publicly in the church and the congregation even participates by singing Psalm 150 prior to the immersion of the neophyte⁵². It is true that the ritual *loosening of the girdle* occurs eight days after the baptism, while Ibn al-Ḥājj implied that the infidel went to the mosque to reconfirm his conversion on the first Friday following his private conversion before the *khaṭīb*. Nevertheless, it is possible that the traditional post-baptismal custom of the *loosening of the girdle* might have served as a model for a Coptic convert to Islam to go to the mosque to publicly proclaim his conversion after having converted before the preacher in private.

Finally, there may indeed have been a subversive intention underlying the infidel's actions, whether in the deliberate interruption of the *khutba* or in the act of repeating his conversion. As we have seen, the Coptic Church forbids the rebaptism of persons if the original baptism was properly administered. In such cases, to repeat the baptismal ceremony would be considered an act of sacrilege on the part of both the presiding priest as well as the neophyte. Hence rather than confirm the conversion, the infidel's true purpose in interrupting the Muslim Friday *khutba* in order to reiterate the alleged embracing of Islam may have been to *undermine* his conversion for the benefit of the Coptic community. The intention, in this case, would be to ease the way toward a subsequent reversion to Coptic Christianity. Alternatively, it is also possible that non-Muslims felt compelled by political and social circumstances to publicize their conversion to Islam during the *prime-time* of the Friday *khutba* in order to assuage the doubts and suspicions of the Muslim authorities and the wider community regarding their true motives for converting. The irony here, as we shall see in the following section, is that these doubts and suspicions arose and, in fact, were engendered by the pressures on the part of the Mamluk regime and the religious establishment to coerce the Coptic Christians to convert to Islam⁵³.

6. THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY: THE AGE OF CONVERSIONS

The fourteenth century was a difficult period for relations among the Mamluk regime, the larger Muslim population, and the minority populations of Christians and

⁵¹ Cited in Archbishop Basilios, *Baptism*, pp. 336a-339a.

⁵² Archbishop Basilios, *Baptism, Liturgy*, pp. 339a-342b.

⁵³ D.P. Little, *Coptic Conversion to Islam*, pp. 552-569.

Jews⁵⁴. In its worst manifestation, a wave of violence between Christian and Muslim communities resulted in the destruction of numerous churches and the conversion of many others into mosques⁵⁵. There is some evidence that the destruction or confiscation of churches and monasteries was meted out as punishment for subversive acts on the part of the Coptic community that challenged the preeminent status of Islam and the Muslims with respect to the *dhimmīs*. In one incident, which took place in 1378, some decades after the death of Ibn al-Ḥājj, a Coptic church was demolished because the congregation stubbornly persisted in ringing the church bells during the delivery of the Friday *khuṭba* in order to drown out the sound of the preacher's voice⁵⁶. Scholars generally agree that during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Mamluk regime perpetuated or tolerated the use of violence and persecution aimed especially at Coptic elites in order to intimidate them into converting to Islam. The Mamluks believed that these conversions would encourage the broader Coptic population of Egypt to follow their example⁵⁷. Elites were targeted in particular in order to curtail the power and influence that Christian officers of the state had gained under previous regimes dating from the Fatimid period onward⁵⁸.

The reasons for the deteriorating situation of religious minorities under the Mamluks are well known and need only be summarized here. First of all, it is generally agreed that the brutality of the Crusaders during the thirteenth century had hardened the position of the Muslim rulers and the populace against the Christians in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine⁵⁹. Whether founded or not, the then ruling Ayyubids accused the Oriental Christians were colluding with the Franks. As a result, many Coptic churches and monasteries were destroyed. For example, according to Jason Zaborowsky, the early years of the reign of Saladin (r. 1169-1189) were characterized by harsh reprisals against this community. In addition to the aforementioned destruction of religious edifices, crosses were removed from church cupolas, Coptic religious processions were banned, and Copts were restricted to riding donkeys rather than horses⁶⁰. As reflected in the Coptic and Ayyubid sources, the political situation of the Copts gradually improved under Saladin's reign as the Copts distanced themselves theologically from the Frankish Roman Catholics and sided with Saladin in repulsing the Crusader threat, going as far as to assert that *God aided Salāḥ al-Dīn (Saladin) in granting him victory and triumph over the enemies of his religion and his state*⁶¹.

Nevertheless, Muslim suspicions against the Coptic community were not definitively quashed. Further violent reprisals occurred during the sieges of Damietta in 1219 and of Fustat in 1242⁶². These same accusations of collusion between the Egyptian Copts and the Franks re-emerged after the Mamluks seized power in 1250.

⁵⁴ T. el-Leithy, *Coptic Culture*; K. Stilt, *Islamic Law in Action*.

⁵⁵ K. Stilt, *Islamic Law in Action*, pp. 111-113.

⁵⁶ J. Berkey, *The Muhtasibs of Cairo under the Mamluks*, p. 262, citing A. al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-ma'rifa duwwal al-mulūk*, Cairo, Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyah, 1972, vol. III, pp. 340-341.

⁵⁷ D.P. Little, *Coptic Converts to Islam*, pp. 153-161; L.S. Northrup, *Muslim-Christian Relations*; C. Petry, *Copts in Late Medieval Egypt*, pp. 613a-635b; and T.G. Wilfong, *The Non-Muslim Communities*, p. 184.

⁵⁸ J. Berkey, *Mamluk Religious Policy*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ For a fuller account of the complexities of Muslim-Christian relations during the Ayyubid period, see J. Zaborowsky, *Coptic Martyrdom*.

⁶⁰ J. Zaborowsky, *Coptic Martyrdom*, p. 164.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, pp.168-169.

⁶² C. Hillenbrand, *The Crusaders*, p. 414.

One contemporary Mamluk authority testified that he personally heard that the Copts had written to the Frankish Christians bragging that they need not attack the Muslims since they (i.e., the Copts) *are ourselves fighting them night and day, we are taking their possessions and attacking their women, we are running their country and weakening their soldiers*⁶³. Tāqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442), the famed Egyptian historian, further accused the Copts of sabotaging the land tenure system (*iqṭā'*), which was the basis of the revenues to finance the army⁶⁴. The fact that the deterioration of the position of the Coptic Christians worsened during the Mamluk period, even after the capture of Acre and the defeat of the last Crusader foothold in the Holy Land in 1291, lends further credence to the influence of the Crusades in the persecution of Oriental Christians under Mamluk rule⁶⁵.

Secondly, one must look to the origins of the Mamluks to understand the historical context of the increased pressures placed upon religious minorities to convert to Islam. As a caste of foreign slave soldiers of mostly Circassian descent, the Mamluk rulers needed to consolidate their leadership among the Muslim populace once they overthrew the last Abbasid caliph in Egypt in 1249/1250 and sought to govern in their own name. Although their spectacular defeat over the Mongol armies in 1250 lent them political legitimacy, the basis for the caliphate did not rest upon military might alone. Donald P. Little, R. Stephen Humphreys, Jonathan P. Berkey and others have shown that the Mamluks reinvented themselves as the patrons of Sunni Islam, supporting religious and legal institutions, as well as providing generous pious endowments (*awqāf*) for the support of Sufi mystic lodges, the upkeep of the shrines of saints associated with “popular” forms of Sunni religiosity, and the building and maintenance of mosques⁶⁶.

A concomitant of the Mamluks’ ardent defence and patronage of Sunni institutions was the reinforcement of Islamic legislation with respect to the treatment of religious minorities regarding matters such as the sumptuary laws and the reduction of the holding of court positions by non-Muslims. For example, the Mamluk historian al-Maqrīzī records that in 1301, the Mamluk regime issued a decree requiring religious minorities to be distinguished by the color and size of their turbans: the Samaritans should wear red, the Jews should wear yellow, and the Christians should wear blue⁶⁷. The size of the turbans of non-Muslims also had to be significantly smaller than that of the Muslims⁶⁸. Subsequent decrees issued in 1354, 1401, and 1419 aimed at Jewish and Christian women ordered them to wear one white shoe and one black shoe⁶⁹ and prohibited them from using the public baths with Muslim women⁷⁰.

Such discriminatory policies helped foster a climate encouraging the Copts to convert to Islam. And yet, as Carl Petry and Tamer el-Leithy have pointed out, conversion to Islam in and of itself did not suffice to assuage the misgivings Muslims

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 417.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 417. For a general overview of the system of *iqṭā'*, see C. Cahen, *Iḳṭā'*, pp. 1088a-1091b. With respect to the Mamluks, see I. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, pp. 292-293; R. Irwin, *Mamluks and Crusaders*; and A. Levanoni, *Rank and File*, pp.17-31.

⁶⁵ C. Hillenbrand, *The Crusaders*.

⁶⁶ D.P. Little, *Religion under the Mamluks*, pp.165-181; R.S. Humphreys, *The Expressive Intent*, pp. 69-117; and J. Berkey, *Mamluk Religious Policy*.

⁶⁷ C. Hillenbrand, *The Crusaders*, p. 415.

⁶⁸ N. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, pp. 273-274; N. Stillman, *The Non-Muslim Communities*, p. 209.

⁶⁹ C. Hillenbrand, *The Crusaders*, p. 415.

⁷⁰ N. Stillman, *The Non-Muslim Communities*, p. 209.

harbored toward this collective. Arabic biographical dictionaries from the Mamluk period abound with entries dedicated to Muslims of Coptic origin who despite having been born Muslim or even having fathers and grandfathers who had converted to Islam, were nevertheless referred to systematically in the literature as “the Copt” (al-Qibṭī)⁷¹. The labelling of these Muslims with epithets such as “the Copt” or “the convert” long after their conversion to Islam had taken place shows the difficulties of assimilation and acceptance experience by members of the Coptic community. Petry neatly summarizes the prejudices and suspicions Muslims harbored against the Copts: *They were routinely depicted as having a natural aptitude for accounting and administration, but also as having an inclination toward treachery, dishonesty, guile, and, above all, spiritual ambiguity*⁷². The alleged penchant of the Copts toward *treachery, dishonesty, and guile* fuelled the general perception among the Muslims that their conversion to Islam was insincere and motivated by self-interests to improve their status within society or, worse still, to place themselves in a better position to compete with or inflict harm among the Muslim community and its rulers. Petry further observes that:

Several writers of the Mamluk era claimed that a Muslim of Coptic descent was potentially a false Muslim. Even worse, he was suspected of converting to the majority faith, admittedly often under duress, in order to aggrandize his own position at the expense of his “genuine” Muslim colleagues. Indeed, such a person was frequently accused of converting in order to blaspheme against Islam and to lead true believers astray. Such a false Muslim was always, it was alleged, on the verge of retrogressing to Christian practices⁷³.

A prime example of this mistrust on the part of the Muslims is seen in the statement of the abovementioned Mamluk governor who accused the Copts of sabotaging the land tenure system. Tellingly, he went on to warn that *the enemy is in your state; it is the Christians. Do not trust those who convert to Islam: Even if they do, it is for another reason. Their faith is hidden in their hearts like fire in ashes*⁷⁴. Given the generalized nature of the negative sentiments and suspicions toward Muslim converts of Coptic descent, it is likely that the Maliki jurist Ibn al-Ḥājj was aware of these stereotypes and perhaps even shared them. Certainly his consideration of the “infidel’s” interrupting the Friday *khuṭba* as a manifestation of *jahr* (ostentation in piety) tallies with the general Muslim views summarized by Petry regarding the accusations that Copts were converting to Islam *in order to aggrandize [their] own position*.

Such Muslim resentment and suspicion toward Coptic converts to Islam were further enhanced by the large number of appointments of people from this collective to serve in positions in the Mamluk government. Carl Petry’s exhaustive survey of biographical dictionaries from the Mamluk era reveals that Muslims of Coptic origin engaged in relatively important financial, fiscal, and secretarial activities and served as military, court, and executive officers⁷⁵. It is true that they were mostly barred from appointment to the highest positions in these sectors of the administration and were

⁷¹ C. Petry, *Copts in Late Medieval Egypt*, p. 2/618b.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 1/618a.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ C. Hillenbrand, *The Crusaders*, p. 417.

⁷⁵ C. Petry, *Copts in Late Medieval Egypt*, pp. 1-4/618a-619b.

banned from access to offices in charge of the welfare of the Islamic community as well as from participating in the religious establishment as jurists, judges, and so forth. Nevertheless, many were able to amass considerable fortunes and enjoyed the protection and patronage of the Mamluk regime oftentimes over the express objections of the *'ulamā'*⁷⁶. Nor must one forget that it was precisely in the fourteenth century when the Mamluk regime responded to the growing resentment toward religious minorities among the *'ulama'* and the wider populace and ordered various purges of non-Muslims from the administration. Wertmuller, citing Yaacov Lev, believes that such policies encouraged the wave of mass conversions to Islam among the Coptic community during this century⁷⁷ and, I would add, increased the suspicions on the part of the Muslim community that these conversions were opportunistic and insincere. Again, it is reasonable to suppose that as a jurist Ibn al-Ḥājj would have been aware of this situation as well.

Additionally, one must be cautious not to exaggerate the impact of the discriminatory legislation against religious minorities or converts to Islam. It is important to observe, as Marina Rustow and Tamer el-Leithy recently have argued, that the *dhimmīs* were capable of appealing to Muslim rulers and judges (*qādīs*) both to settle internal disputes within their communities and also to improve their situation with respect to the Muslim majority⁷⁸. Of special significance are the findings of Tamer el-Leithy's study on Coptic conversion to Islam. Exploring the issue from the perspective of the Christian community and employing Christian as well as Muslim legal and religious sources, el-Leithy found that many Coptic converts to Islam likewise harbored doubts about the authenticity of their conversion, doubts that were exacerbated by Muslim reluctance to accept them as real Muslims. As proof he also refers to the evidence from contemporary Mamluk Arabic biographical dictionaries, citing the often pejorative use of nicknames such as "the Copt" or "the convert" when referring to Muslims of Coptic ancestry⁷⁹.

Even more significantly, el-Leithy demonstrates how Coptic converts were able to *work the system to their advantage*, that is, to manipulate the laws on Islam regarding conversion so as not to prejudice their Coptic relatives or their property. Such was the case concerning what el-Leithy refers to as *the single generation conversion ruse*, which allowed *individual converts* [to maintain] *their progeny as non-Muslims while remaining within the framework of Islamic law*⁸⁰. Although Islamic legislation on conversion varies among the Sunni legal schools, the law regulates the conditions under which the conversion of one individual will or will not affect the status and inheritance rights of other members of the household. For instance, under the Mamluks immediate family members of a convert were not legally obligated to also convert to Islam. It is interesting to note in this regard that a hadith preserved by al-Bukhārī indicates that the minor child of an individual who converted to Islam must follow the parent, whether father or mother, in embracing the new religion⁸¹. Yet

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 2/618b.

⁷⁷ K.J. Wertmuller, *Coptic Identity*, p. 76; Y. Lev, *Persecutions and Conversion*, pp. 73-91.

⁷⁸ M. Rustow, *At the Limits*, pp. 133-159; T. el-Leithy, *Coptic Culture*.

⁷⁹ T. el-Leithy, *Coptic Culture*. El-Leithy discusses this in part two of his dissertation, where he argues that epithets such as "the Copt", which biographers applied to Muslims of Coptic origin, "constitute a discursive response" to the converts' practices of resistance against Muslim rejection or suspicion of their conversions. I have not been able to consult el-Leithy's dissertation, but rather the abstract provided by the online institution, ProQuest.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ Cited in Y. Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion*, p. 113.

as Islamic law developed, juridical opinions were divided over whether the children of converts could inherit their parent's property if they had not converted to Islam. There are legal precedents that deny the children the right to inherit unless they also convert, precedents that allow them to inherit while remaining in their traditional religion, and still other precedents that allow them to inherit only on the condition that they convert to Islam, otherwise the inheritance must go to the Muslim community⁸². The possibility that a Muslim Copt might not be able to pass on his inheritance to the Coptic members of his or her household could have been a strong incentive for the reversion to Christianity.

El-Leithy identified a veritable "culture" of conversion and reversion to Christianity during the Mamluk era, illustrating that many individuals purposefully converted and reverted publicly with the intent of attaining martyrdom at the hands of the Muslim authorities. This practice gained sufficient fame to warrant the creation of a new Coptic ritual, *the Rite of the Jar*, to celebrate the apostate's return to the Christian community⁸³. Jason Zaborowsky furnishes additional evidence that many Coptic Christian elites reacted against the pressures to convert and assimilate into Islamic culture by first converting and then denying having done so. Under Islamic law this constitutes apostasy and Zaborowsky shows that the sultans took the initiative in actively pursuing and punishing those culpable. He identifies of a *pattern of action* whereby the sultan would first attempt to bribe the apostate to reconvert to Islam, the apostate would then resist and insist upon dying as a Christian. The sultan would then offer the apostate choice of life in enforced exile if only he would pronounce the Islamic testimony of faith (*shahāda*), which would be followed by further resistance by apostate. The latter would finally be executed by beheading and his body hung in public. Finally, members of the Coptic community would go to recover the body. Zaborowsky posits that this pattern, which characterizes Coptic martyrdom narratives from the thirteenth century onward, also reflects Ayyubid policies⁸⁴.

The salient point is that the evidence that Muslim Copts purposefully transformed their conversion and apostasy into a public spectacle in defiance of Islamic law and the sensibilities of the Muslim community brings us back to the complaints articulated by Ibn al-Ḥājj at the beginning of this article. Although it cannot be shown that Ibn al-Ḥājj was aware of the public reversions to Coptic Christianity, his criticism that the "infidel" elected the time of the Friday *khuṭba* in order to make his conversion conspicuously known among the Muslims so that they would recognize him for this and he would not return to his previous state of infidelity prior to his conversion⁸⁵ accords with el-Leithy and al-Zaborowsky's findings. Indeed, it is tempting to see in the converts' interruption of the sermon in order to insist that they would *not* return to "the previous state of infidelity" an allusion to a strategy invented by sincere converts to distance themselves from the public apostasies being staged by certain Muslim Copts yearning for the glory of Christian martyrdom.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

⁸³ K.J. Werthmuller, *Coptic Identity*, p. 78. For a fuller discussion of this rite, see J. Zaborowsky, *Coptic Martyrdom*, pp. 184-185; and especially L.S.B. MacCoul, *The Rite of the Jar*.

⁸⁴ J. Zaborowsky, *Coptic Martyrdom*, p. 179.

⁸⁵ Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, vol. II, p. 271.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The long-time Muslim suspicions regarding the sincerity and opportunism of Muslims of Coptic descent, coupled with the disturbing spate of public reversions to Christianity throughout the Mamluk period provide the most plausible context for the religious innovation whereby “infidels” would deliberately interrupt the Friday sermon in order to either profess or reaffirm their conversion to Islam. Although numerous scholars have treated the topic of Coptic conversion to Islam in recent years, virtually nothing has been said about the role of the preaching event in the Islamization process. Ibn al-Ḥājj’s testimony provides unexpected insights into the relationship between the Friday sermon and the conversions taking place in fourteenth-century Mamluk Egypt. Ironically, however, the scenario that the Maliki jurist describes is far removed from that of spontaneous conversions in response to the rousing sermons of a charismatic *khaṭīb*, much less that of a concerted preaching campaign orchestrated by the Mamluk regime. And yet, the Friday *khutba*, given its central role in Muslim worship and the assurance of the mass attendance of the community by virtue of its status as a collective obligation (*fard kifāya*), served as the ideal venue and occasion for the convert to “make conspicuous” his conversion to Islam, whether in an attempt to prove his sincerity in this regard or, on the contrary, to recant his conversion and stage a stunning reversion to his original religion. The juridical objections offered by Ibn al-Ḥājj to such interruptions under any circumstances were motivated not only by the desire to guarantee the solemnity of a key Islamic ritual. The foregoing discussion of the historical context in which these conversions were taking place, a context characterized, on the one hand, by the social and political pressures that Coptic Christians faced to convert and assimilate into Muslim culture and, on the other hand, by their resistance to such pressures, also offers sufficient grounds for deducing that these factors influenced Ibn al-Ḥājj in seeking to safeguard the *khutba* from being manipulated by would-be converts for their own self-interests. While not denying the real dangers Coptic Christians faced in being forced to choose between conversion and social disgrace, violence, or even death, the case under study has demonstrated that converts could also exercise agency in the conversion process and even use Islamic legislation in this regard to their advantage. Perhaps what Ibn al-Ḥājj feared most was the (relative) empowerment of the convert.

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