**Book Proposal**

Proposed Title and Subtitle

**Preaching Pious and Learned Rulership in Medieval Islam:**

**Ibn al-Jawzī Ameliorative Political Thought**

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Book Pitch

During the late Abbasid period (c. 1000–1258), Baghdad became the main arena of conflict between the Abbasid caliphs and the Seljuq sultans, exacerbating sectarian strife in the city. While scholarship has explored the political ideas of jurists and theologians in response to these socio-political developments, it has overlooked the contributions of preachers, who enjoyed wider popular appeal. This book reassesses Islamic political thought during this period by examining the political discourses of the twelfth-century scholar and preacher Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201). Through an intertextual analysis of his writings, it argues that although Ibn al-Jawzī insists on piety and knowledge as the hallmarks of ideal rulership, he does so in an “ameliorative” fashion that calls for a mediatory, moderate, pragmatic, and affective approach to the moral reform of rulers. His ameliorative approach to politics prioritizes preachers, rather than jurists and theologians, as the thinkers best suited to tame the arbitrary nature of power using their rhetorical skills. By calling attention to Ibn al-Jawzī’s emphasis on emotions and eloquence, this book incorporates the “affective turn” of the humanities into the study of medieval Islamic political thought.

Key Features of Book

* New assessment of Islamic political thought during the late Abbasid period.
* Examination of the relationship between political thought, rhetoric, and emotions in the works of an important but neglected thinker.
* Interdisciplinary approach to Islamic political thought that analyzes political writings, sermons, polemics, historical chronicles, and biographies.

Keywords

Islamic political thought; Ibn al-Jawzī; Abbasid caliphate; Muslim religious scholars; Islamic preaching; Islamic history.

The Book’s Aims and Contributions to Scholarship

During the tumultuous twelfth century, a revitalized Abbasid caliphate competed with various Muslim dynasties jockeying for supremacy in the Islamic Middle East. During this period, Baghdad became the primary site of conflict between the Abbasid caliphs and the Seljuq sultans as both sides competed to exert control over the city. The militarized rule of the Seljuqs involved heavy taxation and punitive measures that bore harshly on the populace. Meanwhile, sectarian tensions flared not only between Sunnis and Shīʿa, but also among the different schools of thought within Sunnism itself. These tensions were exacerbated by the fact that the Abbasids and the Seljuqs allied themselves with scholars of rival theological persuasions. From this hotbed of interconnected socio-political and religious developments, several questions emerge: What political ideals did medieval Muslim religious scholars uphold amidst insecurity and the clash between rival powers? In what ways did they express their political ideas? What notions circulated at the time regarding the best responses to unjust rule?

This monograph addresses these questions by examining the long-neglected political thought of Ibn al-Jawzī, a twelfth-century Ḥanbalī scholar and hortatory preacher (*wāʿiẓ*)who lived in Baghdad and enjoyed close ties with the caliphal court. This neglect is largely due to a longstanding scholarly construction of the history of Islamic political thought as a narrative of decline fueled by Muslim thinkers who legitimized the principle of “might is right” and made concessions to harsh political realities. According to this argument, the gradual decline of Islamic political thought began in the late Abbasid period with the rapid rise and fall of political elites and the social insecurities generated by militarized regimes. This narrative yields only a partial picture of Islamic political thought and overlooks the existence of other approaches that did not necessarily endorse political realism for the sake of preserving order. While studies have emerged in recent years that challenge this view, they privilege political writings in the juridico-theological tradition and place disproportionate weight on the role of dialectical reasoning in medieval Muslim political thinking. As a result, other clusters of political thought, including contributions by preachers, are overlooked.

As an intervention in scholarly debates over the history of Islamic political thought, this book makes two related arguments. First, it argues that Ibn al-Jawzī’s political thought displayed a marked emphasis on piety and religious knowledge as the hallmarks of ideal Islamic rule. Rooted in his personal asceticism and insistence that knowledge of the Sharīʿa remains paramount in guiding believers toward God, Ibn al-Jawzī’s emphasis on piety and knowledge departed from the dominant political discourses of his time that stressed the ruler’s ability to maintain order regardless of his morals. Second, the book argues that Ibn al-Jawzī pursued his political ideals in an “ameliorative” manner, namely through an approach that was educative, mediatory, moderate, and pragmatic in relation to power and authority. This approach struck a middle ground between the radical political doctrines of the Khārijīs on one hand and the realist political thought of the jurists and theologians on the other. For Ibn al-Jawzī, ameliorative politics was best represented by the scholar-preacher who used homiletic and rhetorical tools to appeal to a ruler’s passions in order to guide him toward pious and just rule.

This book makes four contributions to studies in Islamic history and culture. First, it adds to an emerging body of scholarly works that look beyond *realpolitik* in their readings of the history of Islamic political thought. It shows that in light of social and political disorder, legitimization of the powers that be was not the only solution to which scholars had recourse. Rather than interpreting the trajectory of Islamic political thought as a series of realist thinkers who made concessions to legitimize raw power, this study takes the position that thinkers still found space to preserve their commitment to pious and just rule while responding to socio-political circumstances that fell short of the ideal. However, this book departs from recent works in this vein by shifting the focus away from jurists and theologians. Instead, it shows what Islamic political discourse would have looked like from the perspective of a preacher whose ideas reached a much wider audience. This new assessment of Islamic political thought situates the political ideas of the jurists and theologians among several other clusters of political discourse in Islamic history, and considers competing approaches to power among medieval Muslim scholars.

Second, this work expands the source base for the study of premodern Islamic political thought. By examining the political ideas of a scholar whose career revolved around hortatory preaching, it showcases the preacher’s exhortative and homiletic mode of persuasion rather than the scholastic bent of the juridical and theological genres. Furthermore, through an intertextual reading of Ibn al-Jawzī’s preaching manuals, collections of sermons, mirrors for princes, polemics, chronicles, and biographies, it also brings attention to the question of how Muslim thinkers employed diverse discursive strategies and genres to express their political ideas.

Third, since this book centers on a preacher who capitalized on the power of the passions to promote righteous rule, it highlights the need to incorporate the “affective turn” of the humanities into the study of Islamic political thought. In recent decades, scholarship on Western political thought has increasingly stressed the intricate relationship between politics, rhetoric, and the passions, especially in Greco-Roman and Renaissance humanist political discourses. This monograph contributes to these conversations by introducing a medieval Muslim perspective. In the case of Ibn al-Jawzī, rhetoric was primarily channeled through the act of preaching, informed by a tactical awareness of human passions as a means of moving and persuading audiences with a view toward their thoughts and actions.

Finally, this study of Ibn al-Jawzī’s political thought sheds light on the shifting social dynamics between rulers, scholars, and the populace in medieval Islamic societies. The twelfth century witnessed the rise of scholar-preachers in cities such as Baghdad and Damascus. Maintaining close yet cautious relationships with the ruling circles and possessing the ability to mobilize large masses of people, these preachers came to function as mediators between rulers and subjects. In Baghdad, moreover, preachers of Ashʿarī theological persuasion dispatched by the Seljuqs often provoked the traditionalist Ḥanbalī scholars who inclined toward the Abbasids. Traces of these socio-political developments can be detected in Ibn al-Jawzī’s political discourses, which bear the imprint of a famed preacher’s attempts to navigate the tumultuous politics of his time.

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***Introduction***

This chapter introduces the book’s arguments, scope, and significance. It first provides an overview of current scholarship on Islamic political thought. It then outlines how this work addresses existing gaps and sparks new approaches in the field. Finally, it discusses the sources to be examined, followed by an outline of the chapters.

***Part I: Historical and Intellectual Background***

This part provides a sketch of Ibn al-Jawzī’s historical and intellectual background which will frame the discussion of his political thought in subsequent parts of the book.

***Chapter 1: Politics, Society, and Intellectual Life in Late Abbasid Baghdad***

This chapter outlines the historical developments in Baghdad during Ibn al-Jawzī’s time. It focuses on the Abbasid-Seljuq rivalry, the harsh nature of Seljuq rule in Baghdad, and the scholarly rivalries and sectarian strife that plagued Baghdad throughout the twelfth century.

***Chapter 2: The Life and Times of Ibn al-Jawzī***

This chapter homes in on Ibn al-Jawzī’s life and intellectual accomplishments, especially in the field of hortatory preaching. It also focuses on his relationship with the caliphal court and ruling circles in Baghdad. The final sections of the chapter are devoted to the scholarly rivalries in his later life and how they impacted his scholarly legacy.

***Chapter 3: Key Concepts in Medieval Islamic Political Thought***

This chapter maps the ideological context for Ibn al-Jawzī’s political thought by discussing various clusters of Islamic political discourse before and during his time. Particular attention is paid to issues such as the qualifications of an ideal ruler, the means through which a ruler is appointed, the relationship between rulers and scholars, and the legality of rebellion.

***Part II: Conceptualizing Ideal Islamic Rulership***

Next, the book investigates Ibn al-Jawzī’s notion of ideal Islamic rulership by considering how the moral and ethical principles espoused in his writings and sermons carry into his political thought.

***Chapter 4: Moral and Ethical Themes in Ibn al-Jawzī’s Writings***

This chapter sets the stage by presenting some common moral and ethical themes in Ibn al-Jawzī’s writings, ranging from preaching manuals and sermon collections to his *Ṣayd al-khāṭir* (“The Hunt for Fleeting Thoughts”), a book containing his reflections on a variety of religious and non-religious subjects. It argues that such themes include asceticism, repentance, the fear of God, abandonment of worldly vanities, reflection on death and the afterlife, and the importance of religious knowledge—all of which I label as “homiletic virtues.”

***Chapter 5: Modeling Piety and Knowledge: Ibn al-Jawzī’s Biographies of Rulers***

Turning to Ibn al-Jawzī’s political thought, this chapter discusses how the moral and ethical themes outlined in the previous chapter translate to the political realm. It does so by examining Ibn al-Jawzī’s biographies of various Muslim rulers—ranging from caliphs to sultans and emirs—as a form of political discourse. It argues that although these biographies contain reports and anecdotes that showcase the royal virtues of justice and generosity, there is a heavier emphasis on reports that highlight a given ruler’s “homiletic virtues,” particularly his asceticism, devotion to the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*, and public and private acts of piety.

***Part III: An Ameliorative Approach to Politics***

This part addresses how Ibn al-Jawzī thinks his ideal form of Islamic rulership can be achieved. It illustrates his “ameliorative” approach by delving into his educative, mediatory, moderate, and pragmatic approach to power and authority.

***Chapters 6: Envisioning a Learned Polity: Ibn al-Jawzī’s Reassessment of Ruler-Scholar Relations***

This chapter examines Ibn al-Jawzī’s views on ruler-scholar relations. It argues that in contrast to other thinkers who view political power as inherently corrupt and thus advised against associating with rulers, he urges truly pious scholars to assume a greater role in guiding rulers toward a more just, pious, and learned form of rulership. This view reflects his close relationship with the Abbasid caliph al-Mustaḍīʾ (r. 1170–1180), who rigorously patronized Ḥanbalī scholars and institutions.

***Chapter 7: Talaṭṭuf (Tact) as a Mode of Political Engagement***

This chapter treats Ibn al-Jawzī’s proposed strategies for admonishing rulers, especially tyrants. Compared to the scholastic and disputative discourses of jurists and theologians, he deems the preacher’s rhetorical and homiletic tools to be more effective in appealing to the ruler’s moral and emotional sensitivities. Such tools, encapsulated by the term *talaṭṭuf* (tact), include the mixing of admonition with praise, the use of biographies of past rulers as didactic models of ideal rulership, and an emphasis on eschatological themes to induce the fear of God. This chapter also analyzes how *talaṭṭuf* is put into action in his sermons and writings to al-Mustaḍīʾ.

***Chapter 8: The Cursing of Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya: Debating Rebellion***

This chapter examines Ibn al-Jawzī’s views on rebellion against a sinful and unjust ruler, using his treatment of al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī’s rebellion against the Umayyad caliph Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya as a case study. It argues that despite the aversion to rebellion in the Ḥanbalī political tradition, Ibn al-Jawzī adopts a juristically prudent approach that allows him to justify Ḥusayn’s actions against Yazīd without overtly condoning the act of rebellion. Ibn al-Jawzī’s cautious treatment of rebellion is owing partly to the increased surveillance of scholars during the caliphate of al-Nāṣir (r. 1180–1225).[[1]](#footnote-1)

***Conclusion***

The conclusion draws the book to a close by reviewing its arguments and highlighting the ways in which Ibn al-Jawzī’s political discourses point to new directions in the study of Islamic political thought. It also charts avenues for comparative work on the Islamic world and other premodern societies with regard to the relationship between politics, rhetoric, and emotions.

Intended Readership

I envision multiple audiences for this book. Its main audience will be scholars and students of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies, especially those who focus on Islamic political thought, medieval Islamic and Middle Eastern history, Islamic intellectual history, the Abbasid caliphate, and Muslim sermon studies. Scholars and students working on comparative political thought as well as the relationship between politics, preaching, and emotions in other non-Islamic contexts will constitute a related transregional and interdisciplinary audience.

In addition to the scholarly audiences mentioned above, I anticipate this book to be used in university courses. It can be assigned in undergraduate survey courses on Islam and politics, Islamic history, and Middle Eastern history, as well as upper-level undergraduate courses on Islamic political thought and Islamic intellectual history. It can serve as a core text for more focused graduate courses on Islamic political thought, Islamic history, and Arabic-Islamic literature and rhetoric. Divinity school and religious studies courses exploring the intersection of religion and politics can also assign this book as a case study.

Given the surge of public interest in Islamic political thought in recent years, I expect some non-academic readership for the book among readers who are interested in Islam and politics and in the medieval Islamic Middle East. Ibn al-Jawzī’s reputation as a renowned preacher and religious scholar in the Middle East today will also ensure a substantial readership for this book in the region among academics and non-academics. In recognition of these points, I will endeavor to make the book accessible and engaging for a wider audience while maintaining its scholarly rigor.

Recent Comparable Books and Fit within the Series

* Akhtar, Ali Humayun. *Philosophers, Sufis, and Caliphs: Politics and Authority from Cordoba to Cairo and Baghdad*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
* Anjum, Ovamir. *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
* Hassan, Mona. *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
* Jones. Linda G. *The Power of Oratory in the Medieval Muslim World*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
* Qutbuddin, Tahera. *Arabic Oration: Art and Function*. Leiden: Brill, 2019.
* Siddiqui, Sohaira Z. M. *Law and Politics under the Abbasids: An Intellectual Portrait of al-Juwayni*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Aside from being in conversation with recent works on medieval Islamic political thought and Islamic preaching, this monograph also complements and extends the Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization series’s strength in these fields, in particular the books by Anjum, Jones, and Siddiqui listed above.

My book is in dialogue with monographs by Anjum, Hassan, and Siddiqui to reframe the history of Islamic political thought as an ongoing process of refinement and adjustment in Muslim political thinking, rather than as a decline toward the legitimization of brute power. But while Anjum and Hassan focus on the post-Abbasid, Mamluk period of Islamic history (1258–1517), this book joins Siddiqui’s monograph in examining the political thought of the late Abbasid period (c. 1000–1258). It centers on a thinker who lived one century after the time period on which Siddiqui focuses, providing a fuller picture of late Abbasid political thought.

This work fits in with the series’s recent publications which pursue an interdisciplinary approach to Islamic political thought. Both Anjum’s and Siddiqui’s books uncover the legal and theological underpinnings of a given thinker’s political thought, showing the interconnected trends between legal, theological, and political discourses. In doing so, they paint a more comprehensive intellectual portrait of their respective thinkers. I adopt a similar interdisciplinary approach in my study of Ibn al-Jawzī. But unlike Anjum and Siddiqui, who focus on writings in the juridico-theological tradition, I shift the attention to a discursive tradition that revolves around preaching and homiletics. I also tap into a more diverse set of genres—such as preaching manuals, advice literature, collections of sermons, chronicles, and biographies—to reconstruct Ibn al-Jawzī’s political ideas.

In exploring Ibn al-Jawzī’s treatment of the relationship between rulers and scholars, my monograph is in conversation with Akhtar’s book which addresses this relationship with regard to jurists, theologians, and Sufis. I add a preacher’s perspective to this picture and take Akhtar’s approach one step further to examine how the fluid dynamics underpinning ruler-scholar relations impacted political thinking.

Finally, this book builds on recent works by Jones and Qutbuddin in drawing more attention to the role of preaching and oratory in medieval Muslim societies, but with a greater focus on the ways in which preaching relates to political power. In addition, I also consider the role of preaching in Muslim political thinking, a topic not treated in either work.

Book Length

Approximately 80,000 to 90,000 words (about 300 pages), including acknowledgements, footnotes and bibliography.

Research and Writing Schedule

This book emerges from my Ph.D. dissertation, which I defended at Harvard University. Since my defense, I have researched new material from sources which the dissertation did not take into account. I have also explored how frameworks from the “affective turn” and the study of emotions can be applied to the study of medieval Islamic political thought. Therefore, I will be making significant revisions to the project, and the book manuscript will differ quite substantially from the dissertation. For instance, Chapter 4 is entirely new. Chapter 5, which in the dissertation only examined biographies of the Abbasid caliphs, will now be expanded to consider biographies of other rulers such as the Umayyad caliphs, the Buyid emirs, and the Seljuq sultans. Chapters 1 and 2 were part of my dissertation’s introduction, but they will be written as standalone chapters to provide readers with more contextual information.

I expect to complete the book manuscript by December 2024, in time for my tenure review in 2026–2027. Thus far, I have completed drafts of Chapters 2 and 6. My writing schedule for the remaining chapters is as follows:

Fall 2021: Chapter 1

Spring 2022: Chapter 3

Fall 2022: Chapter 4

Spring 2023: Chapter 5

Fall 2023: Chapters 7 and 8

Spring 2024: Introduction and Conclusion

Fall 2024: Finalize manuscript

December 2024: Delivery of manuscript to publishing press

To relieve myself of teaching duties and to devote more time to research and writing, I plan to apply for a research fellowship for the 2023–2024 academic year. I will also use this academic year to consult manuscripts in Istanbul, Cairo, and London. In addition, I will be offered one semester of research leave in Fall 2024, which would allow me more time to finalize the book manuscript before submission to the press.

1. Parts of this chapter have been published as a journal article: “Ibn al-Jawzī and the Cursing of Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya: A Debate on Rebellion and Legitimate Rulership,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 139/3 (2019): 631–646. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)