Book Review

Luke B. Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir: Non-Muslim State Officials in Premodern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), xiv + 361 pp. ISBN 978-1-1087-2174-5. Price: £90/$120 (cloth) and £24.99/$32.99 (paperback).

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Although there has been a considerable amount of scholarship devoted to the many dynasties, caliphs, emirs, and sultans who exercised dominion throughout the Islamic world in the medieval and early modern eras, until recently, comparatively little attention has been paid to the officials tasked with governing and administering these states. Recent approaches to the topic have attempted to think carefully about the importance of the production of documents and administration,[1] archives and historical writing,[2] connections and competition at royal courts,[3] the nexus between rulers and religious authority,[4] and the emergence of particular discourses of kingship and sovereignty,[5]

1. Marina Rustow, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), and Petra M. Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

2. Fozia Bora, *Writing History in the Medieval Islamic World: The Value of Chronicles as Archives* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).

3. Emma J. Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Samuel England, *Medieval Empires and the Culture of Competition: Literary Duels at Islamic and Christian Courts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), and İlker Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

4. Hüseyin Yılmaz, *Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), and John P. Turner, *Inquisition in Early Islam: The Competition for Religious and Political Authority in the Abbasid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

5. Christopher Markiewicz, *The Crisis of Kingship in Late Medieval Islam: Persian Emigres and the Making of Ottoman Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

while shedding light on the status, function, and self-perceptions of military and administrative elites.[6] With *Friends of the Emir: Non-Muslim State Officials in Premodern Islamic Thought*, Luke B. Yarbrough contributes to this growing body of scholarship by closely examining the Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, and other non-Muslim officials whose employment occasioned energetic discussions among Muslim scholars and rulers. This masterfully written and well-argued book reveals those discussions for the first time in all their diversity, drawing on unexplored medieval sources in the realms of law, history, poetry, *adab*, administration, and polemic. It traces the discourse on non-Muslim officials from its emergence in the Umayyad era (661–750) through medieval Iraq, Syria, Spain, and Egypt to its apex in the Mamluk period (1250–1517). Yarbrough compellingly demonstrates that for all the diversity among premodern Muslim thinkers on the topic of non-Muslim officials, their writings constituted not a disjointed miscellany but a "continuously evolving prescriptive discourse, characterized by numerous recurrent structures, themes, topoi, and schemata, as well as by pervasive and overt intertextuality" (p. 4). Far from being an intrinsic part of Islam, Yarbrough convincingly argues, views about non-Muslim state officials were devised, transmitted, and elaborated at moments of intense competition between Muslim and non-Muslim learned elites. This focus upon competition, professional rivalry, and the "ubiquitous pursuit of resources" makes *Friends of the Emir* a particularly important intervention by prompting scholars to rethink notions of sovereignty, cultural polemics, and the practice of politics in the medieval Islamic world. Yarbrough's considered and nuanced approach to the subject provides a productive framework for scholars seeking to look beyond sharp dichotomies between "normative discourses" and "historical realities" in their approach to the premodern world.

The book is divided into three broad sections: "Beginnings" (chapters 1–4), "Elaboration" (chapters 5–6), and "Efflorescence and Comparisons" (chapters 7–9). Chapter 1 ("An Introduction to the Prescriptive Discourse Surrounding Non-Muslim State Officials") establishes the historical, methodological, and theoretical background for the study. The chapter provides a useful historiographical overview of works written in English, French, and Arabic about the question of non-Muslim officials, demonstrating that much of the scholarship has been rooted in ahistorical assumptions that posit a dichotomy between textual prescription and historical practice. The remainder of the chapter outlines Yarbrough's own methodological and theoretical approach. It is here that he provides a critical explanation of his interpretive choices, particularly the development and utilization of the concept of "valued resources," which is heavily indebted to social theory (particularly the writings of Pierre Bourdieu), in order to demonstrate the utility of thinking carefully about "resources" and "capital" as ways of

6. Jo van Steenbergen (ed.), *Trajectories of State Formation across Fifteenth-Century Islamic West-Asia: Eurasian Parallels, Connections and Divergences* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), and Maaike van Berkel and Jeroen Duindam (eds.), *Prince, Pen, and Sword: Eurasian Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

evaluating the practices of historical actors and their motivations. One of the most valuable contributions of the book is its exploration of the ways in which exclusionary behavior, including the articulation and dissemination of particular discourses about non-Muslim officials, constituted a discursive tool in the ubiquitous pursuit of resources. While rejecting the notion that these discourses constituted a smokescreen for sociopolitical motives, Yarbrough demonstrates that many medieval Muslims who shaped the discourse about non-Muslim officials wrote to achieve specific personal ends, which included both worldly renown and ultimate salvation.

Chapter 2 ("Preludes to the Discourse: Non-Muslim Officials and Late Ancient Antecedents") presents a synchronic study of non-Muslim officials and the reasons for their employment while surveying late antique discourses around dissenting officials, particularly surviving writings on non-Christian officials in the Eastern Roman Empire and non-Zoroastrian officials in the Sasanian Empire. The chapter carefully defines the various categories, terms, and interpretive frameworks employed throughout the book, delineating how and why the study of the prescriptive discourse about non-Muslim officials can shed important light on premodern Islamic politics and society. In the first part of the chapter, Yarbrough argues that non-Muslim officials were ubiquitous in the administration of premodern Islamic states, primarily in a bureaucratic capacity. He stresses that their continued employment, despite considerable opposition, was due to a number of factors, including various combinations of dependence, loyalty, special competencies, and lower cost in both material and symbolic terms. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to a survey of several late-ancient antecedents to the discourse, not necessarily as part of an argument about the degree to which these antecedents influenced the emergence of Muslim prescriptive discourses but in order to explore the similar dynamics at play within the Eastern Roman and Sasanian Empires. Yarbrough demonstrates that in the late Roman Empire, a number of imperial laws restricted or prohibited the employment of officials who dissented from Christian orthodoxy, while in the Sasanian Empire, non-Zoroastrian officials were sometimes viewed as problematic because their elevation destabilized the hierarchies that structured Sasanian society. The chapter illustrates the importance of considering the emergence of Islamic polities against the backdrop of the world of late antiquity while serving as a useful comparative study of the three empires (Sasanian, Roman, and early Islamic).

Chapter 3 ("The Beginnings of the Discourse to 236/851") introduces the oldest stratum of the discourse proper, which encompasses a wide range of sources and consists largely of parabolic stories about early caliphs and their putative statements about non-Muslim officials. The chapter argues that these stories should be interpreted as instruments of competition and were composed in various settings long after the events that they purportedly describe. According to Yarbrough, the narrators of these stories used them to challenge rivals for social, material, and political resources. This chapter, which brings together several

case studies, demonstrates the historical value of parables as a window into the normative imaginations of Muslims during the first two centuries of Islamic history. It convincingly argues that the earliest elements of the Islamic prescriptive discourse concerning non-Muslim officials did not rest on pre-Islamic foundations but originated in second/eighth- and third/ninth-century Iraq, as literate Muslim elites produced and propagated disapproving parables that were ascribed to revered early authorities, specifically the caliphs ʿUmar I and ʿUmar II. The chapter demonstrates Yarbrough's command of the early Islamic source material and context and illustrates the utility of his larger theory of "valued resources" for thinking about the emergence of Islamic prescriptive discourses about non-Muslim officials. In addition to showing that the most important proof texts emerged in a particular time and place, Yarbrough traces how the discourse was shaped by specific individuals, circumstances, and concerns.

Chapter 4 ("The Discourse Comes of Age: The Edicts of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil") provides a translation, contextualization, and detailed analysis of the principal prescript (*tawqīʿ*) of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–47/847–61), which Yarbrough dates to 236/851. The chapter locates the edict within al-Mutawakkil's broader strategy to secure his rule and stave off challenges to his legitimacy by rewarding the detractors of non-Muslim officials. Al-Mutawakkil was the first caliph for whose sweeping directive against non-Muslim officials we have plentiful and solid evidence, and Yarbrough's contextualization and analysis of this document illustrates the manner in which the discourse was effectively mobilized by the state itself to articulate a change in policy. Beyond providing an instructive case study of the intersection of prescriptive discourse and notions of sovereignty in the premodern Islamic world, this chapter underscores that the articulation and deployment of the prescriptive discourse concerning non-Muslim officials needs to be situated within the broader context of intra-Muslim competition and rivalry.

The next section of the book traces the continued development of the prescriptive discourse about non-Muslim officials by studying its two major aspects: juristic and literary. Chapter 5 ("Juristic Aspects of the Discourse") illustrates the discourse's blossoming into a minor theme in juristic works of many kinds and demonstrates that these discussions were more historically embedded and more diverse than has been previously recognized. The chapter examines this diversity while observing the development of Muslim juristic writings on the issue, an investigation that encompasses Sunni jurisprudence as well as Ibāḍī and Shiʿi juristic thought. Yarbrough shows that the juristic writings were motivated not only by contemporaneous historical factors but also by the desire to uphold the established positions of the authors' own juristic traditions and to regulate non-Muslim officials within the coherent prescriptive systems that those systems aspired to create. In addition to cataloging and evaluating the various aspects of the juristic strands of the prescriptive discourse, this chapter is particularly valuable for its contextualization and analysis of the writings of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) on the issue of non-Muslim

officials, particularly his argument (in the *Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya*) that permitted a non-Muslim to be appointed an executive vizier (*wazīr al-tanfīdh*). Throughout the chapter, Yarbrough highlights how Muslim jurists developed diverse rationales for limiting, discouraging, or prohibiting the employment of non-Muslim officials; how these rationales were frequently repeated and developed during moments of tension with states or non-Muslim elites; and how jurists sought, above all, to mediate between their *madhhab* traditions and contemporary exigencies.

Chapter 6 ("Literary Aspects of the Discourse") examines the role of rivalry and defamation across various genres of literature (*adab*), and in premodern Islamic political life more generally, before turning to diverse literary representations of non-Muslim officials. The chapter points out that some of these literary texts shared materials and themes with juristic strands of the discourse. It also sheds important light on the ways in which particular rhetorical practices—especially in the genre of counsel literature (*naṣīḥa*)—formed part of a larger set of competitive practices deployed by elites in pursuit of scarce resources. A work of *adab*—whether a chronicle, a biography, a compendium of entertaining stories, or a mirror for princes—could deliver a prescription as forcefully as a handbook of substantive law could. The chapter confirms the importance of the various genres of *adab* for illuminating both the prescriptive discourse, in particular, and premodern Islamic society and politics, in general.

Following this exploration of literary sources, chapter 7 ("The Discourse at Its Apogee: The Independent Counsel Works") focuses on a small cluster of works that were written in the central Islamic lands, from Iraq to Egypt, between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries, and that were dedicated entirely to the issue of non-Muslim officials. The chapter introduces these works, their authors, and the circumstances of their composition, situates them within a long literary tradition, and offers a historical account of the flowering of the prescriptive discourses that they contain. As Yarbrough masterfully demonstrates, these works combined numerous earlier elements of the discourse—including exegetical, literary, juristic, and historical strands—with components hitherto outside it to produce distinctive polemical amalgams. One of the most interesting and insightful of these works, ʿUthmān b. Ibrāhīm al-Nābulusī's *Tajrīd sayf al-himma*, has been recently translated and annotated by Yarbrough.[7] The chapter shows how such books were fashioned by Muslim learned elites as tools of competition in their own pursuit of resources that were increasingly mediated by the Ayyubid and Mamluk states. Yarbrough also positions these works within a larger social and political context that was characterized by extended conflict among Muslims, non-Muslims, and the state in Egypt; as such, Yarbrough argues, they were both products of, and contributors to, that larger climate of conflict.

7. ʿUthmān b. Ibrāhīm al-Nābulusī, *The Sword of Ambition: Bureaucratic Rivalry in Medieval Egypt*, trans. Luke B. Yarbrough (New York: New York University Press, Library of Arabic Literature, 2016).

Chapter 8 ("The Discourse in Wider Perspective: Comparisons and Conclusions"), which is among the most ambitious parts of the book, looks beyond Islamic history to medieval Latin Christendom, particularly Arpad Hungary, and Yuan China in order to think comparatively about the prescriptive discourse. Before pursuing this comparative study, however, Yarbrough summarizes his own arguments about the Islamic prescriptive discourse concerning non-Muslim officials. According to Yarbrough, the four key factors that explain the discourse's flourishing in some historical settings and its faltering in others are "(1) ideological communal diversity in which intercommunal rivalry for prestige has a zero-sum dimension; (2) direct competition for scarce resources among literate elites who belong to distinct ideological communities; (3) existing exclusionary discourses within those communities; and (4) access to ruling elites who would be expected to sympathize with expressions of discontent" (p. 263). Yarbrough finds all four of his criteria—ideological diversity, direct competition for scarce resources, traditions of exclusionary rhetoric, and the receptivity of ruling elites—present in Arpad Hungary, but he nonetheless determines the Latin Christian discourse to be substantially different in both form and substance. Examining the case of Yuan China, Yarbrough concludes that no exclusionary discourse surrounding outsider-officials as such was generated, despite the existence of ostensibly similar circumstances. Although each of the three cases had distinctive features, the chapter argues that the Islamic discourse is unrivaled in its thematic and intertextual continuity and coherence, its sophistication, and its sheer magnitude. As a possible explanation, Yarbrough offers the peculiar evolving relationship between "postclassical" Islamic state power and authority, which he contrasts with the persistent salience of exclusive communal affiliation that was shared by rulers and learned elites in the case of China, and the separation of moral authority and political power in the case of late medieval Europe. While the reader may take issue with some of Yarbrough's particular choices and broader conclusions in this chapter, his comparative approach is to be commended for its integration of the Islamic world into a larger conversation about the interplay between prescriptive discourses, notions of sovereignty, and practices of politics across late medieval Eurasia. The book concludes with chapter 9 ("Afterword: The Discourse to the Nineteenth Century"), which provides some observations on the afterlives of the prescriptive discourse in the nineteenth-century Middle East, indicating the ways in which it survived in attenuated form under the Ottomans.

Friends of the Emir is a groundbreaking work. Its original and innovative approach to the topic of non-Muslim officials in premodern Islamic states is underpinned by a robust theoretical and methodological framework; command of a vast array of sources across regions, time periods, languages, and genres; and a commitment to both interdisciplinarity and comparative approaches. The book paves the way for a nuanced understanding of governance in the medieval Islamic world that seeks to encompass normative juristic discourses, theories of sovereignty, and the practice of politics. Yarbrough has produced a remarkable account of the emergence and

dissemination of prescriptive discourses about non-Muslim officials at the fraught nexus of Islamic authority, textual production, state power, and communal difference. By demonstrating that the prescriptive discourse was the contingent, cumulative creation of particular historical actors rather than an ahistorical, indelible feature of Islam, *Friends of the Emir* reorients our view of how non-Muslims participated in premodern Islamic politics. Yarbrough's most significant contribution is to historicize the surviving textual evidence of that prescriptive discourse by situating it not within understandings of "*dhimmī* law" or "Islamic legal norms" but within the dynamic social, political, and ideological context of professional rivalry and competition over resources. The development and notion of valued resources, which historicizes and contextualizes the emergence of prescriptive discourses, serves to reintegrate Islamic history into broader conversations about the transformation of society and politics across premodern Eurasia.

Even though there is much that is laudable about the book in terms of its comprehensiveness, originality, and interdisciplinary approach, this reviewer was hoping to learn more about the different ways in which women and gender figured in the larger discourses about non-Muslim officials. Since exclusionary discourses directed against female counsel and intimates—whose number would have included a significant proportion of non-Muslims, especially in the royal courts—were also widespread during this period, it would have been useful for the author to have engaged more directly with this question. The book would also have been strengthened by an elaboration on the notion of "friendship" as articulated and discussed within the prescriptive discourse concerning non-Muslim officials in the premodern Islamic world. Yarbrough indicates that "direct service to rulers . . . frequently assumed a personal rather than official quality" (p. 29), but a more elaborate discussion of this distinction would have been helpful, especially as it would have underscored the importance of personal access to and intimate bonds of affinity with the ruler as yet another "valued resource" to be pursued. Indeed, the very title of the book, *Friends of the Emir*, alludes to the importance of the personal bonds between the king and his subordinates, which led this reviewer to expect a sustained discussion of the implications of friendship, bonds of obligation, and intimacy within a royal context. Although there is already an extensive body of literature on this question in the case of Latin Christendom, it awaits further exploration in the context of the medieval Islamic world.

These are minor quibbles with an otherwise comprehensive and pathbreaking book, which will provoke numerous conversations among scholars of history, literature, and Islamic studies. *Friends of the Emir* is an original piece of scholarship that is thoroughly researched and beautifully written. It will be useful for anyone seeking to think critically about the relationship between Muslim learned elites and state power, the historical development of prescriptive thought, and the manner in which discourses of sovereignty and political practice were deeply intertwined in the medieval Islamic world.