Policing the Prayer in Sectarian Islam: Spaces, Temporalities, Coercion (7th–15th centuries)

Workshop — Università di Napoli L'Orientale, February 27-28, 2025

The project *Faire société: modèles normatifs et hétéronomie dans les islams minoritaires* headed by Cyrille Aillet (University of Lumière Lyon-2) and funded by the French Institute of Islamology (2023-2026) is organizing together with the Università di Napoli L'Orientale the workshop entitled *Policing the Prayer in Sectarian Islam: Spaces, Temporalities, Coercion (7th-15th Centuries)* to be held on February 27 and 28, 2025 at the Università di Napoli L'Orientale. This workshop seeks to energize new research perspectives on sectarian Islam (Shīʿism and Ibāḍism) from the formative period of Islam to the 15th century.

Rationale

Ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) is a shared religious obligation and practice among Muslims. In theory, prayer is an individual act of worship (*ʿibāda*) towards God; however, it also reveals social dynamics (SERRANO-RUANO 2005). The study of normative discourse on prayer sheds light on sectarian groups and their relationship with their larger social context. The workshop *Policing the Prayer* thus seeks to study the social aspect of ritual prayer within sectarian Muslim groups and what it reveals from their relationship with political authorities and dominant Muslim groups would they be considered just or tyrannical. The workshop therefore focuses on communal prayer which excludes supplication (*duʿāʾ*) and litanies (*dhikr*, *wird*).

The workshop centers on sectarian Islam with a comparative point of view. Consequently, Muslim minorities outside the dominion of Islam (Muslims in Christendoms around the Mediterranean or in East Asia for instance) will not be considered. Shīʿism and its Ismāʿīlī, Zaydī, Imāmī branches, as well as Ibāḍism are the main focus of the project. Sunnī groups will also be considered as they did not always constitute the majority of the population, nor the orthodoxy. Indeed, Shīʿism became a major political force starting in the 10th century with the rise of the Buyids in Baghdad (945-1055) and the advent of the Fatimids in Ifrīqiya and Cairo (909-1171). Likewise, the Ibāḍī Imams of Oman (793-893) ruled over the commercial port of Ṣuḥār and its

larger territory in the Persian Gulf while the ones of Tāhart dominated a large portion of North Africa (777-909).

Sectarian groups never lived in absolute autarky. The idea of ʿAlawī, Zaydī, or Druze mountainous communities having no relationship whatsoever (economic, political, religious, social) with their environment (DE PLANHOL 1954; DE PLANHOL 1997) must be revisited (VAN STAËVEL 2014). On the one hand, well-connected sectarian clusters formed an archipelago outside the cities which had become the center of a certain orthodoxy (AILLET 2012, 2018, 2022), while, on the other hand, sectarian groups interacted with their larger environment (HALAWI 2014, 2021; PAOLI 2011, 2012). When they constituted the minority, Ibāḍīs and Shīʿa developed efficient strategies to maintain the dynamism of their group in time and space whether by passive means of resistance or active resistance. In such context, Ibāḍī and Shīʿī scholars gave importance to the notion and practice of dissimulation (*taqiyya* or *kitmān*) in legal compilations.

Through the lens of ritual prayer, the workshop aims for a constructive dialogue between specialists of sectarian movements rather than an essentialist catalog of sectarian traits. To that end, particular attention should be paid to collective strategies elaborated by sectarian groups in the medieval period. In what context did scholars, religious authorities, the state, and people frame these strategies? How did these strategies evolve through time and space? To what extent did these strategies involve/have an impact on acts of worship such as prayer? We invite participants to think about borrowings, resistances, and co-constructions between sectarian and non-sectarian groups with regard to ritual prayer according to the following points.

1. Spatialization of prayer. While archeological excavations offer scarce evidence about the organization of early Islamic cities (Kūfa, Baṣra, Fusṭāṭ, Qayrawān), written sources can shed light on urban settings and the way in which populations established and lived. The mosque was at the center of the neighborhood and the great mosque at the center of the city where worshippers were supposed to converge for the Friday communal prayer. The mosque was a space for encounters and various social interactions, as much as a space of political competition and social and religious tensions.

We invite participants to think about the various spaces of communal prayer as well as the strategies underlying the establishment of places of worship. These strategies are closely tied to the spatial distribution of religious communities. Najam Haider has for instance shown that an early Shīʿī identity emerged in Kūfa in the 2nd/8th century in competition with other religious groups; this identity centered around specific mosques and devotional spaces in the city (HAIDER 2009, 2011, 2013). Religious, tribal, social, and political competition are thus reflected in the spatial fragmentation of the city. Haider's approach could be extended to other sectarian groups and historical contexts. Additionally, did the social fragmentation between religious groups extend to the worshippers within the walls of the mosque? How did sectarian ways of prayer impact the organization of the mosque?

2. Temporality of prayer. Prayer in Islam usually follows a strict schedule. Scholars early on codified the temporality of prayer, be it the number of daily prayers (canonical or supererogatory) or the call for prayer (*adhān*). Times of worship conversely punctuated social life (DE SMET 1995) as shown by works of anthropological history for medieval Europe (SCHMITT 2001, 2016; LE GOFF 2003).

Members of sectarian groups sometimes constituted a political or religious minority and faced the hostility of the majority. In this context, they could resort to dissimulation (*taqiyya*) which scholars have codified in legal texts. Since sectarian groups relied on economic activities to maintain their existence and dynamism, they often adopted the majority way of prayer as to be integrated in the larger society. Moreover, sectarian Muslim groups – Shīʿī and Ibāḍī – were highly mobile for their involvement in commerce, long distance travel for the search of knowledge, and predication (*daʿwa*; *ḥamalat al-ʿilm*). For instance, Ibāḍīs in Oman were conducting long-distance commerce towards East Asia and East Africa and therefore have elaborated specific rules for prayer on ships starting in the 3rd/9th century (AL SALIMI 2021).

Participants are thus invited to delve into the tension between the temporality of prayer and commercial, missionaries, and scholarly activities. They are also invited to reflect on potential strategies of differentiation with regard to the temporality of prayer: competition in the call to prayer, the development of an alternative – sometimes hidden – prayer schedule to avoid the collective ones, etc.

3. The social role of the imam. Supposed to guide the believers in their daily worship practice, the imam leads the ritual prayer. Medieval sources thoroughly discuss the selection criteria of the imam since opting for an imam who was not "fit for the job" had consequences for the validity of prayer (KATZ 2013; CALDERINI 2018). The selection of an imam not only set a model of piety, but also defined the orthodoxy within the group.

Jurists have defined the imam's honorability and degree of competence and have thoroughly discussed the validity of prayers performed behind an imam supporting an "unjust" ruler or an imam who did not belong to the sectarian community. In all these matters, jurists adapted their rulings according to the social and historical context; sectarian groups and their jurists adopted diverse collective strategies ranging from clear rejection of the Other, to the adaptation to the dominant power. For example, during the Umayyad period, the topic first sparked lively debates within Ibāḍī circles in Basra, before resurfacing in later sources, either in Oman when the Abbasids took over the region, or in North Africa after the fall of the Rustamid imamate. Similarly, the development of imperial Shīʿism with the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate first in the Maghreb, then in Egypt, saw a large part of the Sunnī population falling under the political control of Ismāʿīlī authorities.

The criteria for the selection of the imam further shed light on the social role of the imam as a charismatic figure within the community. Participants are invited to reflect on the role of the imams in solving conflicts and, conversely, about the imams as source of conflict be it through social

pressure put on the holder of the imamate or the social pressure exerted by this person on the members of the group.

4. The political power and the prayer. Although prayer is, in theory, an individual act of worship towards God, the state/political power nonetheless plays a pervasive role in ritual prayer in medieval Islam. The state can first find ways of legitimation in ritual prayer, especially through the Friday prayer sermon (*khuṭba*) when the name of the ruler is proclaimed. Conversely, jurists consider the omission of the ruler's name to be an act of rebellion. Rulers also used sermons as a means of public political negotiation with local religious authorities and the population (WALKER 2012). In the most extreme cases, the mosque and communal prayer were the place and time of the outset of contests and open revolts such as the Khārijī revolts which started in Iraqi mosques in the Umayyad period. Crowd control, law-enforcement, and policing spaces of ritual prayer were of cardinal concern for the state in such a context.

The state also intervened in ritual prayer through its management of public space. The building of new mosques and the shutting down of others considered to be centers of either contests or heresy disturbed praying practices and sectarian dynamics. The *muḥtasib*'s control of public space, by forcing people to go to communal prayer, should also be taken into account (STILT 2011). The state control over communal prayer sparked additional tensions in society when political power was in the hands of sectarian groups (the Fatimids in the Maghreb and Egypt; the Buyids in Iraq).

In addition to the state, participants are invited to delve into other forms of political power (local or tribal for instance) that substituted for the state and had equally an impact on communal prayer.

Schedule and organization of the workshop

Proposals (title, 300-words abstract, and short bio) should be sent to the following e-mail box (projetfairesociete@gmail.com) before **July 15, 2024**. Proposals and papers should be written and given in English. Organizers accept submissions of well-established scholars, young researchers, as well as independent scholars. Organizers commit to selecting a group of diverse scholars and promoting, although not exclusively, young researchers (PhD students/candidates and post-docs).

   Papers will be pre-circulated to facilitate discussions. During the workshop, each participant will present the argument and methods of his/her paper for ten to fifteen minutes; each presentation will be followed by a twenty to thirty-minutes discussion. Therefore, selected participants agree to send their paper to the organizers three weeks before the event. This will foster informed discussions and help prepare the publication of the papers in a peer-reviewed journal.

   For all participants whose proposal are selected, the project *Faire Société* will provide full coverage of accommodation and travel costs, as well as the first dinner and the two lunches.

Organizers

Enki BAPTISTE, postdoc in Medieval History and Islamology (project *Faire société dans les islams minoritaires*), Lumière Lyon-2 University (CIHAM-UMR 5648); associated researcher at CEFREPA.
Athina PFEIFFER, PhD student in Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University.
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