Piety, Ethics, and Politics in the Friday Sermon of Islam

Annual Lecture Series featuring

Prof. Tahera Qutbuddin

Professor of Arabic Literature and Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago

Organized & Moderated by Dr. Souad T. Ali, CAIS Founding Chair

Monday, October 17th, 2022, at 6 PM
on Zoom https://asu.zoom.us/j/3813141796

The Friday sermon that is an intrinsic part of Muslim ritual across the globe today has a long history rooted in the first Friday sermon delivered by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, and more broadly in the multifunctional orations of the early Islamic world. Across the mosques, homes, battlefields, and open town spaces of the Middle East in the 7th and 8th centuries AD, religion, politics, and aesthetics coalesced in the richly artistic public performance of spontaneous Arabic oration (khutba). Exquisite in rhetorical craftsmanship, interactive speeches and sermons by Muhammad, ‘Ali, and other political and military early Muslim leaders were also the major vehicle of policymaking and persuasion, and the primary conduit for dissemination of ethical, legal, and religious teachings. Drawing on ten years of research for her recently published book, Arabic Oration: Art and Function (Brill, Handbook of Oriental Studies series, 2019), Qutbuddin will discuss the Prophet Muhammad’s first Friday sermon, and sermons by early Muslim political and military leaders, to explore their major themes of piety and ethics, in intersection with their religio-political goals. She will also offer remarks on echoes of this heritage, and divergences from it, in Friday sermons of the contemporary Muslim world.

Tahera Qutbuddin is Professor of Arabic Literature and Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago. Her research focuses on intersections of the literary, the religious, and the political in classical Arabic poetry and prose. Her latest monograph is Arabic Oration: Art and Function (Brill, 2019), in which she presents a comprehensive theory of this preeminent genre in its foundational oral period, 7th-8th centuries AD, and discusses its continuing influence on contemporary Muslim sermons. Earlier, she published a book on the Fatimid da’i Mu’ayyad Shirazi (Brill, 2005), and two edition-translations of ethical sayings by Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali (NYU Press, 2013, 2016). Her research articles address topics related to Qur’an exegesis and style; women of the Prophet’s family; Fatimid and Tayyibi (Da’udi Bohra) Shi’i doctrine, history, and literature; and Arabic in India.


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