

## Introduction

When Donald Little wrote his influential article on “Religion under the Mamluks” in 1983, his focus was on the religious beliefs and practices of the Mamluks themselves. Little comes to the conclusion that “out of religious conviction and personal piety in some instances but also with an acute sense of their own welfare,” they strove “to keep diverse religious forces in Egypt and Syria in a state of equilibrium.”<sup>1</sup> Since then great progress has been made, as Emil Homerin’s detailed, comprehensive survey of the study of Islam in the Mamluk period demonstrates.<sup>2</sup> The ulama are now seen as a heterogeneous group exhibiting a wide range of religious opinions. Furthermore, Sufism as well as what could be called popular religion have attracted much interest in the last few years. Homerin thus summarizes that “a two-tier model of religion with a high faith of a literate elite above the vulgar superstitions of the masses is an inaccurate and misleading description of religion in the Mamluk period.” Rather, “a wide array of regional and cultural interpretation and expression” of Islam could be found.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that recent study of religion in the Mamluk period has produced a quite nuanced and differentiated picture of Muslim society. However, Homerin was well aware of the fact that “in Mamluk domains, religion had three major instantiations: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed the Mamluk state as other states in the eastern Mediterranean was characterized by its multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. Only an interdisciplinary approach will make it possible to illustrate the complexity of its social reality.<sup>5</sup> The study of Sufism has already helped to widen Mamluk studies to include non-Muslim communities.<sup>6</sup> However, one of the best examples for a new cross-cultural approach is Tamer El-Leithy’s still unpublished dissertation on Coptic culture and conversion in Mamluk Cairo. Using legal documents in addition to other sources, El-Leithy reconstructs everyday social practices and settlement patterns of converts and their families which quite often maintained their Christian faith.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, it is the goal of this theme issue of *Mamlūk Studies Review* to bring

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<sup>1</sup> Donald P. Little, “Religion under the Mamluks,” *Muslim World* 73 (1983): 181.

<sup>2</sup> Th. Emil Homerin, “The Study of Islam in the Mamluk Domain,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 1-30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Johannes Pahlitzsch, “Mediators Between East and West: Christians Under Mamluk Rule,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 31-47.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard McGregor’s contribution to this volume with further references.

<sup>7</sup> Tamer El-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293–1524 A.D.,” 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2005).



