

**Sohaib Sultan. *An American Muslim Guide to the Art and Life of Preaching*. Revised by Martin Nguyen. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023.**

Reviewed by Abdul Muhaymin Priester, III\*

Chaplain Sohaib Sultan (d. 2021), may Allah have mercy upon him, was the Muslim Life coordinator and chaplain at Princeton University for thirteen years before his passing. He graduated from the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly Hartford Theological Seminary) with an MA in Islamic studies and a graduate certificate in Islamic chaplaincy. This book, the updated and final result of his graduate thesis, is not just a scholarly work but rather a labor of love and a personal gift to preachers.

*An American Muslim Guide to the Art and Life of Preaching* (2023), Chaplain Sohaib's revised thesis, has been brought to us with the help of his friend and coauthor, Dr. Martin Nguyen. In it, they delve meaningfully into the art of homiletics. The book is meticulously structured into five chapters, each of which serves a distinct purpose, with a foreword, an introduction, a conclusion, an afterword, and an appendix that contains the *ad'iyā'* (supplications) of the female members of the community he served during his time at Princeton.

Nguyen's foreword highlights the book's purpose alongside the history of how they worked to bring it to fruition. He also delves into the *theology of the spoken word*, which highlights the value and longing we, as humans, have for and place in beautiful speech. In addition, he focuses on the Prophet's ﷺ Farewell Sermon and the poignant reminder it served in relation to the passing of Chaplain Sohaib, as well as its connection to the book's subject matter and serving of human spiritual and emotional needs.

The book's introduction focuses on two topics: the *khutba* (Friday sermon) and the *khaṭīb* (speaker who gives the sermon). Chaplain Sohaib sets the tone for discussing the need for meaningful and effective preaching from committed and qualified *khaṭībs*. We have all experienced sermons that brought out an assortment of emotions—and for some, the emotions were mostly negative, with these sermons not allowing us to find the encouragement and peace we would expect to receive during our weekly worship. Chaplain Sohaib highlights five areas where the community's general criticism typically centers around the sermon's quality: a) irrelevant content, (b) impractical or extreme advice, (c) divisive, unnecessarily insensitive, and outright offensive language, (d) *khutbas* that lack organization, and (e) the *khaṭīb* being distracting due to demeanor, style, or gestures (p. 5).

In the section outlining the book's layout, he shares his six primary sources: the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, classical Islamic texts on the art of preaching, modern Muslim guides on the art of preaching, Christian works on homiletics, and his own vocational experience (pp.

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1–9). While some may object to his use of Christian writings on homiletics, Chaplain Sohaib shares that the universality of the practical method of preaching itself has “jewels of wisdom” (p. 8) that transcend religious affiliation.

Chapter 1 discusses the purpose of preaching and highlights its different types. He starts by noting the importance of language and the preacher’s duty to ask himself about the roles and purposes (*maqāṣid*) of preaching. In this, he shares a very relevant point about the need to ask “what Islamic preaching in the twenty-first century means and entails” while emphasizing the *jumu‘a khuṭba* (p. 12).

The author then presents his formulations of the various types of preaching based on their audiences and circumstances: spiritual, teaching, counseling, and social. He describes spiritual preaching as “inspiring awe of God, love for good works, and attention to the Hereafter” (p. 12). A very relevant reflection he shares is his view that this type of preaching is at the heart of Islamic preaching in America today:

The reality of the situation is that we live in an age of skepticism and relativism in which we are expected to question and doubt everything, including our central beliefs and core values. Furthermore, American Muslims live in a religiously diverse society in which many religious beliefs and practices invite questions from fellow friends, neighbors, coworkers, and classmates. As such, it is as important for the American khaṭīb to educate and inform as it is to inspire and exhort. (p. 15)

Chaplain Sohaib describes teaching-preaching as “teaching and guiding people to the way of Islam,” building on the need to “teach people about the inner and outer aspects of the religion and guiding them to the way of truth” (p. 16). He defines counseling preaching as “healing hearts and giving sincere advice” (p. 19). The objective and tone of these types of sermons are designed to heal human hearts or offer nurturing advice. Chaplain Sohaib highlights two famous ḥadīth: *al-dīn al-naṣīḥa* (the religion is sincere advice) (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 55a) and “you will not have (complete) faith until you want for your brother what you want for yourself” (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 13).

The chapter ends with his thoughts on social preaching, which he describes as “calling to social goodness, peace, and justice” (pg. 21). He shares how this type of preaching is not discussed in classical Islamic books but is commonly dealt with in more contemporary ones. On reflection, thinking about how we separate the different spheres of life and human interaction in more recent times, it makes sense that there is no specific mention of these issues in the classical texts. It would have been interesting if the author had looked at places where the Prophet ﷺ discussed matters we classify as social issues and see what the classical texts and commentaries said about them in comparison to how they are discussed today. I believe this would have added additional depth to the topic.

Chapter 2, which I consider one of the most critical chapters, is on the preacher’s life and character. Whether we cook food, drink water, or put things in storage, a pot, cup, or container, whatever we use to facilitate achieving our goal must be clean and free from defects, even more so for the one who conveys the message of Allah ﷻ and His Rasūl ﷺ. Chaplain Sohaib provides an excellent quote from Shaykh Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), highlighting the reality of a preacher’s life:

Only the learned man (‘ālim) who is firmly rooted in all the branches of knowledge should narrate stories (yaquṣṣu) [or preach], for he will be asked to discourse in each of these fields. The jurisconsult (faqīh) is scarcely even questioned about matters relating to the science of tradition when he conducts a course in law, nor is the expert in tradition (muḥaddith) very often asked about matters relating to law. The preacher (wā‘iz), on the other hand, is questioned concerning every field of knowledge. For this reason it is necessary to be a perfectly learned man... All of the preceding qualifications, however, hinge upon fear (taqwā) of God, for the impact of [the preacher’s] words will be in direct relation to his fear of God. One of the pious men of old once said: “Whenever exhortation issues from the heart of an upright man it makes an impression on the hearts of those who hear it. This proves that his intention is pure, for when his intention is pure God causes the people to respond to him and eradicates from his heart any desire for their wealth. (p. 26)

After that, he discusses the characteristics that the preacher must possess, such as truthfulness (*ṣidq*), courage (*shajā‘a*), wisdom (*ḥikma*), patience (*ṣabr*), compassion and love (*rahma wa mawadda*), humility (*tawāḍu‘*), and modesty (*ḥayā‘*). These beautiful qualities we all make an effort to possess, but those who call us to Allah and His Rasūl ﷺ and remind us of our duty in this life and our judgment in the next should make an extra effort to exude these characteristics.

In Chapter 3, which is the longest one, Chaplain Sohaib, may Allah have mercy on him, goes through the steps required to prepare and deliver a good sermon. As with all things we seek to master, public speaking and writing have steps we should mimic for us to function at the level of other highly effective communicators. In the closing section, he shares a good reminder that the steps that go into preparing the weekly sermon should be an ongoing process which repeats itself at the beginning of each week. While life and circumstances often cause us to get sidetracked during the week, we should consistently work to be in a constant state of writing and reflection when we are responsible for delivering the *khutba* each week.

Chapter 4 highlights the mindset and logistics of delivering the sermon. In these pages, Chaplain Sohaib covers some obvious but crucial points that would allow our sermons to have the most meaningful impact. He covers such subjects as preparing to preach with spiritual confidence, turning the written word into spoken art, preaching with style, overcoming obstacles to good preaching, ethics of the pulpit, and the evaluation process. I found the sections on spiritual confidence, ethics of the pulpit, and the evaluation process to be the most thoughtful and vital topics he covered. Far too often, a *khaṭīb* may fall short in understanding how to act on these areas of concern, and Chaplain Sohaib does an excellent job of sharing points of great benefit.

Chapter 5, the final part of Chaplain Sohaib’s work, is the one that most people will have the greatest hesitation towards or the largest number of questions about, as he covers the matter of women and the *jumu‘a* prayer. This is the lightest chapter in terms of the amount of content, but the subject’s gravity makes it very profound. The value and importance of women cannot be quantified or qualified; it is beyond measure. However,

when addressing the issue of how and when women interact with the prayer and prayer spaces, we must do our best not to minimize or remove their bodies or voices. Chaplain Sohaib goes through how he worked to address all of the relevant arguments and concerns surrounding women having some active participation in the *jumu'a* prayer. His solution was to allow them to make *du'ā* after *jumu'a* publicly in front of the congregation. While I believe that the solution implemented by Chaplain Sohaib was a novel approach, it also carries the question of whether this was the most ideal or appropriate solution to addressing the petitioners' and the community's needs.

While his final decision safeguarded the actual prayer, some of his discussion regarding the arguments and wants of segments of the American Muslim community need to be addressed point by point to allow for a holistic response to the wants, needs, and expectations of American Muslims. His conclusion covers ways to move forward by cultivating the preaching skills of promising and experienced preachers and by developing both the right resources *and* the mindset of thinking globally and acting locally.

Nguyen shares some moving final thoughts on his friend and coauthor that give the book a fitting ending of closing where it started: paying homage to his beloved friend. The poignancy of these closing reflections bring us back to how Chaplain Sohaib's choice of words in his first chapter reminds us of the power of speech when he said,

Speech allows human beings to communicate with one another in the most sophisticated, complex, and intelligible of ways. Indeed, the ability to articulate our ideas and experiences is nothing other than a divine gift of the highest magnitude. As God, exalted is He, says in Sūrat al-Raḥmān, "The Merciful One, who taught the Qur'an, created the human being, and taught them intelligent speech." (Q. 55:1–4) (p. 11)

An excellent complement to the book was the appendix, where Chaplain Sohaib shares the actual *ad'iyā* (supplications) of his congregation's women after the *jumu'a* prayer.

This book is a beautiful contribution to the art of preaching from a revered, missed, and beloved man of God. It serves as an excellent reference for our religious leaders to cultivate and beautify the speech of humans to present the speech of our Most Glorious and Generous Lord, *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā*.