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Book Review – The father of Islamic radicalism?

Muslims Under Non-Muslim Rule, by Yahya Michot, Oxford: Interface Publications, pp. 190, 2006, HB.

Born in 1263 in Harran (located close to Damascus) into a family of Islamic scholars and Ḥanbali jurists, Ibn Taymiyyah received his early education in Arabic and traditional Islamic sciences at home under the tutelage of his pre-eminent father. According to Yahya Michot, the author of the book under review, Ibn Taymiyyah was around seven when his family was forced to flee to Damascus due to an imminent threat of Mongol invasion.

In Damascus he studied under the guidance of some of the city's leading theologians and jurists, and was barely seventeen when Shams al-Dīn, the city's Chief Justice, granted him *ijāzah* (certification) to issue fatwa. As an omnivorous reader, he claimed to have read more than two hundred different *tafsīrs* (commentaries on the Qur'an) and became a leading authority on *tafsīr*, hadith (Prophetic traditions), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *'ilm al-kalām* (dialectic theology). He knew the Qur'an and hadith literature probably better than any other scholar of his generation so much so that his books and treatises on Islamic sciences, philosophy, logic, comparative religion and heresiography are replete with references to the Qur'an, Prophetic traditions and the sayings of the early Islamic scholars.

Ibn Taymiyyah was not only an outstanding Islamic scholar and jurist, he was also a prolific writer and critic. According to Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, the author of *Tadhkirat al-huffāẓ*, he ate little and did not marry, and remained a confirmed bachelor all his life. This enabled him to read extensively and write prolifically on a wide range of subjects. Indeed, according to some of his biographers, he authored as many as five hundred books and treatises on all aspects of Islam and also actively participated in jihad (military struggle) against the Mongol invaders. However, to understand Ibn Taymiyyah, his religious ideas and thoughts, one has to thoroughly examine the social, political and intellectual condition of his time.

He was born five years after the Mongol sack of Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate. It was a time of considerable socio-political uncertainty and upheaval as the Mongols threatened to overwhelm the entire Islamic East. Likewise, most of the prominent Islamic scholars and jurists of the time were in the service of the ruling elites and this created a culture of blind imitation (*taqlīd*) rather than promote intellectual creativity and fresh thinking. To make matters worse, the Sufis, he felt, had deviated from the original, pristine Prophetic norms and practices (*Sunnah*). Thus, living as he did at a challenging and unpredictable period in Islamic history, it is not surprising that Ibn Taymiyyah's life and thought also reflected the difficulties and contradictions of his time.

That is why it is imperative to study and explore his writings in the existential condition in which they were produced otherwise one is not only likely to misunderstand but also misinterpret them. His Mardin fatwa (which is the subject-matter of the book under review) is a good example. Mardin, as the author explains, is a Turkish town which "occupies a strikingly strategic location. It is dominated by a fortress reputed to have been unassailable, from which the view reaches deep into the vast plain of upper Mesopotamia." (p1) And although the precise date of this fatwa is not known, Ibn Taymiyyah issued it in response to a request to clarify whether Mardin was a domain of peace (*dār al-salām*) or domain of war (*dār al-ḥarb*).

In his own words, “Is [Mardin] a domain of war or of peace? It is a [city of a status] composite (*murakkab*), in which both the things signified [by those terms are to be found]. It is not in the situation of a domain of peace in which the institutions (*ahkām*) of Islam are implemented because its army (*jund*) is [composed of] Muslims. Nor is it in the situation of a domain of war, whose inhabitants are unbelievers. Rather, it constitutes a third type [of domain], in which the Muslim shall be treated as he merits, and in which the one who departs from the Way/Law of Islam shall be combated as he merits.” (p65)

Ibn Taymiyyah’s refusal to say whether Mardin was a domain of war or peace is most significant, not least because in the West he is increasingly considered to be the real inspiration behind many radical groups including al-Qa’ida.

In addition to Western writers like Gilles Kepel (*Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, Cambridge, 2002) and Malise Ruthven (*A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America*, London, 2002), the US 9/11 Commission Report identified him as an intellectual champion of contemporary Islamic radicalism/militancy. But is he the real inspiration behind these radical groups? His refusal to say whether Mardin was a land of war or peace proves, if proof was required, that his religious ideas and thoughts were far from being black and white. Indeed, according to Michot, “Crass howlers about Ibn Taymiyyah have long been in circulation – one might think as far back as the tittle-tattle about him hawked around by Ibn Baṭṭūtah. Since 9/11, however, the situation has worsened. The most ignorant untruths are reproduced apace, not only in the media but even in supposedly serious studies.” (p. 123) He then takes prominent academics and writers like N. J. Delong-Bas (Georgetown University); Bernard Haykel (New York University); Menahem Milson (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and Guy Sorman (University of Paris) to task for disseminating untruths about Ibn Taymiyyah.

If Ibn Taymiyyah is grossly misunderstood by Western scholars and writers, then many contemporary Islamists have also failed to understand and appreciate his ideas and thoughts, argues Michot. He proves his case by examining six modern Muslim readings of Ibn Taymiyyah’s Mardin fatwa; he shows how five of the six writers and activists (namely, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Salām Faraj, ‘Abdullāh Azzām, Muḥammad al-Mas‘ari, ‘Abd al-Azīz al-Jarbū‘ and Zuhayr Sālim) have singularly failed to understand the full thrust and complexity of his religious ideas and thought. A closer examination of Ibn Taymiyyah’s vast corpus of writing demonstrates, argues Michot, he was in favour of resisting foreign invaders but completely rejected internal rebellion and insurgency. So, far from being a champion of religious radicalism, he was a sophisticated and pragmatic Islamic scholar and thinker, argues Michot. If this is true, why is he so readily misunderstood and misinterpreted – both by the Western scholars as well as the Islamists?

Michot, who is a lecturer at Oxford University and prominent authority on Ibn Taymiyyah, argues both the Western scholars and the Islamists have advertently or inadvertently emphasised his political thought at the expense of his moral and ethical teachings. This has led to the increasing politicisation of his complex and sophisticated writings on Islamic moral, ethical and legal thought. This raises an interesting question, namely, were there two different Ibn Taymiyyahs, an “Islamic reactionary and jihadist” or Islamic thinker and pragmatist?

Michot has no doubt that he was a pragmatist who carefully examined the ideals and realities of his time before he authorised military action or issued a legal decree to the contrary. To him, Ibn Taymiyyah was a multi-dimensional Islamic scholar and thinker, whose writing needs to be studied and explored in their totality if one is to understand and appreciate them fully. Although I could not

agree more, it may nevertheless be possible to argue, for instance, that Ibn Taymiyyah the jurist was very different from Ibn Taymiyyah the critic. The reason for this is because his Islamic moral, ethical, legal and economic thoughts are much more polished and restrained in their tone than, for instance, his refutation of the Sufis, *falāsifah*, *mantiqīn*, *qadariyyah*, the Christians, etc. Thus, as a polemicist, he was not only uncompromising but also very dogmatic. This naturally led to his incarceration on more than one occasion, but Michot is right to say Ibn Taymiyyah bore all his trials and tribulations with great patience and dignity. He eventually died in prison in 1328.

Having said that, Yahya Michot should be congratulated for writing this book; it is a powerful and cogent defence of Ibn Taymiyyah against the charge of radicalism/militancy. Originally written in French and meticulously translated into English by Jamil Qureshi, Ibn Taymiyyah's Mardin fatwa is rigorously referenced. The author's commentary and exploration of the fatwa is both extensive and enlightening, even if at times one feels he is all too eager to give Ibn Taymiyyah the benefit of the doubt.

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