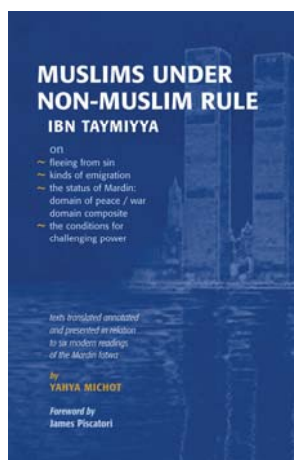




Yahya Michot. *Ibn Taymiyya: Muslims under non-Muslim Rule*
Foreword by James Piscatori. 208 pp. paperback. 13.8 x 21.3 cm. Price
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The *9/11 Commission Report* (ch. 12, p. 362) explicitly names Ibn Taymiyya as the well-spring of Islamist militancy, and particularly its al-Qaeda brand. It says we 'cannot bargain or negotiate' with this militancy because 'there is no common ground on which to begin a dialogue'. To label Ibn Taymiyya 'extremist' is, as this book shows, grossly unjust. But the man has been dead 699 years. Why care about his image now?

Wronging Ibn Taymiyya is part of the intellectual failure that may yet drive tolerable civilizational differences towards war. Some Islamist militants do see politics (also persons) as simply 'good' or 'evil', as 'with us or against us'. But Ibn Taymiyya does not deal in such

mechanical distinctions. Readers can judge that themselves from his own words in his extensive reflections on how Muslims should act when under the power or direct rule of misbelievers or unbelievers.

Mardin, a city at that time on the civilizational fence, fell into Mongol hands. Ibn Taymiyya was asked about its status: war or peace? His clear refusal of war and qualified acceptance of peace takes account of the ground realities, of the outcomes of different actions and of non-action. His stance is thus both morally and politically intelligible, and so one *can* 'begin a dialogue'.

Among the modern misreadings of the Mardin fatwa are those by 'Abd Allāh Yusuf 'Azzām (who inspired the assassins of Anwar Sadat, and was a mentor and then companion of Usāma bin Lādin), and Shaykh 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Jarbu^c, author of widely circulated apologia for 9/11. At the core of the misreading is an assumption that Muslims as Muslims must live under an 'Islamic government' or an 'Islamic political system', and if 'government' or 'system' cannot be characterized as 'Islamic', then they should not live at peace under it. Michot convincingly shows that, whatever else one may say for or against it, this approach is certainly not one that can be derived from the arguments of Ibn Taymiyya or, more generally, from the norms of the orthodox (Sunni) Islamic tradition.

This book is not a journalistic intervention in the 'war on terror'. It is a rigorously referenced study through which Michot does his academic duty to check the incompetence of recent professional scholarship on Ibn Taymiyya. Nevertheless, it does also carry a burden of relevance for current events. If 'Islamist terror' really is as unthinking as it is made out to be, outdoing it in atrocities will not defeat its appeal. But a better grasp of traditional Islam might do so. These texts of Ibn Taymiyya show a Muslim thinker, deeply attuned to Qur'an and Sunna, working his way through the tangle of ideals and realities of his age: the hero of a jihad against foreign invaders (Tatars), he urged only honest speech against domestic abuse of power and forbade violence or revolt. A detailed chronology of his life, presented as an appendix to this book, confirms that the man practised what he preached. For his own outspokenness, Ibn Taymiyya was incarcerated; at one stage (to prevent public disorder) he even volunteered for gaol, and bore his imprisonment with patience until death released him.

Yahya Michot, one of the Western world's leading authorities on Ibn Taymiyya and Avicenna, lectures in the theology faculty, University of Oxford, and is a fellow of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies.

Important reading for all people concerned to enable dialogue and peaceful coexistence with Muslims. This book is the first to present medieval religious rulings (fatwas) alongside modern ones on the same question: *What should Muslims do when subject to non-Muslim power?* Readers will be able to judge for themselves how far the modern militants depart from the classical majority position. For Ibn Taymiyya, Islam is a moral/religious framework, not a political identity. There is no duty to quit or fight any regime so long as Muslims are able to fulfil the basic rites of their faith. Muslims have a duty to confront and criticize wrongdoing regimes but must do so without resorting to violence or sedition; then persevere through the consequences (persecution, imprisonment or worse) with patience. Resort to arms is clearly justified to defend one's homeland from invading foreign enemies.

The book makes its case without condemning anyone or—after the manner of certain politicians—lecturing Muslims about what they better believe. It is set out as a scholarly correction to Muslim and non-Muslim misreading of Ibn Taymiyya. In achieving that it makes it possible to imagine, in the present, a Muslim political activism dissociated from random acts of violence.

This book will be an important resource for teachers/students of the overlaps between religion, politics, identity and culture in Political Science, Religious Studies/Theology, Middle East/ Islamic Studies, International Relations, Counter-Terrorism.