Book Review

Ibn Taymiyyah's Ethics: The Social Factor

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Except for the works of the French scholar Henri Laoust and a recent study by Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1976), very few studies of the thought of Ibn Taimiya have appeared in English. Makari's work is therefore a welcome addition to this meager list. Its main contribution lies in dispelling some of the misunderstanding that has all along bedevilled a true appraisal of the thought of the Hanbalite doctor.

It is unfortunate that some bright and bold spirits of Islam, such as the celebrated Hanbali doctor and theologian Ibn Taimiya, have remained misunderstood not only in the West but also among the Muslims themselves. A good part of the musunderstanding stems no doubt from the fact that for most of his life Ibn Taimiya managed to remain a quite controversial figure.

A substantial part of the misunderstanding results from the close association of his name with the Wahhabi movement which erupted violently toward the end of the eighteenth century. Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabi movement, was certainly influenced by Ibn Taimiya and his writings, especially in his bitter denunciation of the Sufi rituals, tomb worship, and the cult of saints, and no less in his moral and puritanical activism. In their scrupulous observance of the word of the Qur'an and the *sunna*, indeed both Ibn Taimiya and the Wahhabis resemble each other closely. Just as Ibn Taimiya had led bands of people in raids against the local taverns and shrines, the Wahhabis in their time, too, razed tombs and sacked the holy cities.

A distinction must be made, however, between the two. While the Wahhabis represent a religio-political movement, Ibn Taimiya was concerned, mainly, with reforming Islam and with reinculcating a positive attitude toward this world. He never condemned Sufism per se; rather, his criticism was directed against what he defined as inadmissible deviations in doctrine, ritual, and morals. He has, moreover, left behind a vast legacy of writing. A close scrutiny of his works reveals him as a man of unrelenting intellectual conviction. He used his uncommon erudition to criticize and reject most of the commonly

accepted interpretations of Islamic doctrines because in his view they could not be supported by the standards of the Qur'an and the *sunna*. He not only rejected the unquestioning acceptance of authority (*taqlid*) but he also fearlessly criticized almost all sects of Islam, including even the orthodox Ash' arites. He denounced the latter's theology because it amounted to upholding predestinarianism. He was a *mujtahid* in the absolute sense of the word.

Ibn Taimiya lived during a tumultuous time. He devoted the major part of his life to giving legal opinions (*fatawa*), most of which pertained to social conduct and institutions. Thus, it is evident that he was concerned with social change and that his entire system of thought was socially oriented. The question, however, arises: what was his program for reforming the Muslim society? It would seem that his program − inspired as it was mainly by the spirit of Hanbalism, a doctrine of conciliation between various Islamic schools in conformity with the teachings of the Qur'an and the *sunna* − lay, basically, in so reformulating the concept of the *shari'a* that it would include both the spiritual truth (*haqiqa*) of the Sufis as well as the rational truth (*aql*) of the philosophers, the theologians, and the jurists. By reinstating the doctrine of purposiveness of the Divine Will, he no doubt sought to reorient Muslim theology, but his proposed reform, as Fazlur Rahman has pointed out in his *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 13-42, is not entirely free of certain limitations. And yet his influence on the Islamic reform movements, especially the Sunni ones, has remained pervasive.

The book under review is the author's 1975 dissertation written under the direction of Professor Ismail R. al-Faruqi at Temple University. It is divided into four parts: the framework; the doctrinal context for a system of ethics; the social ethic of Ibn Taimiya; and summary and conclusion. The first part provides the reader with the socio-political setting during the seventh/thirteenth century and also with a brief outline of Ibn Taimiya's life.

The second part deals with God and His nature, revelation, and the problem of determinism and free will − all of which provide Ibn Taimiya's ethic with its doctrinal context. This section could be called "meta-ethics" wherein the meaning and nature of the normative element in Ibn Taimiya's action and thought are analyzed. The basic Islamic doctrine of the unity of God (*tawhid*) is important in this respect. God, according to Ibn Taimiya, is unique and transcendent. He does not share his sovereignty with any of His creatures. His nature must not be confused with that of any other being. The demands of His laws are just and reasonable. His laws, moreover, do not depend upon the intervention or the intercession of other powers.

The third part, the focus of the dissertation, highlights Ibn Taimiya's jurisprudence, social ideology, socio-political theory, and politico-economic ethic. It could be called "normative ethics." Here Ibn Taimiya's criteria for

justifying rules and judgements of what he considered right and wrong and good and bad are appraised. Ibn Taimiya stressed that the conduct and social interaction of the Muslims must be firmly based on the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* and that the ethical counterpart of that theological doctrine was the unity and uniqueness of the Islamic community.

It is obvious therefore that his ethics was influenced by his theological doctrine. He held firm convictions on the unity and uniqueness of God, on the call of His Prophet, and the mission of the Islamic community. To him both were intertwined because God had revealed His Will in the Qur'an. His emphasis on the solidarity of the Muslim community therefore raises a number of questions, especially about his socio-political theory. Finally, the author sums up Ibn Taimiya's contribution and his own findings.

If there is any fault in this book, it is the author's unrestrained admiration of a personality which also deserves some radical criticism. For instance, the author fails to analyze Ibn Taimiya's program of reforming Islam by *Tajdid* (revival). Strangely enough, he defines the "problem" as the need to demonstrate that "Islamic modernism" goes further back than the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 and that it begins, properly, with Ibn Taimiya in the thirteenth century.

Frequent lapses in the transliteration of Arabic terms have been noted. Some of the most obvious ones are: read *kaysaniyyah* for *kisaniyyah* (p. 18, line 34); *Nusayriyyah* for *Nasiriyyah* (p. 18, line 35); *al-Shahrastani* for *al-Shahrustani* (p. 68, line 21); and *Shu ubiyyah* for *Sh ubbiyyah* (p. 113, line 10). Some of the Qur'anic verses are also misspelled. For example, the Qur'anic verses on p. 58, line 36, and p. 164, line 11 should be corrected to read, respectively, as: *wa-la yattakhidha ba duna ba dan*, and *wa-innahu la-dhikrun laka wa-li-qawmika*. The Qur'anic reference cited on p. 215, n. 9 should also be corrected to read III:110.

The usefulness of the present work would be enhanced by an updated bibliography and addition of an index.

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