This book represents the authors’ endeavor to explain and analyze what they call the “Islamic Political Theology”. It is also a posthumous publication for one of the editors (Massimo Campanini), to whom memory the book is dedicated. This is an admirable effort because the topic is of absolute interest. The outcome however does not completely deliver the expectations.

Political Theology is a field with great epistemological potential: for the study of the relation between Islam and politics, in particular. This could be in fact a methodological tool of analysis for enquiring on the political dimension proper to Islam and its effects on the contemporary politics. What is also particularly interesting is that the Islamic political theology has “the substantial character of a praxis-oriented thought in Muslim/Islamic tradition” (p. 9). The Islamic political theology should therefore undercover what is ‘political’ within what is ‘theological’ (or more generally religious); at the condition however to consider Islam as a ‘secular religion’, as the authors remind us.

Massimo Campanini, one of the editors, has regularly dealt with the topic of Islam and politics during his long career. It was therefore legitimate to expect from the book the culmination of this long reflection. The reader familiar with Campanini’s works will find indeed in this volume all the typical themes of the latter’s approach to the topic. In the introduction, for example, the two editors stress out that Islam is not a ‘theocratic’ religion, in the sense that the divine directly rules, like in medieval Christianity (p. 2-4). In the Islamic political theological tradition — as in the siyāsat al-šarīʿah (the politics within the frame of the Law) — God rules through the Law (šariʿah). As also in Ghazali’s thinking, the sultan (the secular) and the ʿulamāʾ (religious) are two different powers and in a parallel, functional relation to each other (p. 6-7).

The authors explain that the political theological foundational moment in Islam is the fitnah, the internal strive the community (ummah) went through after the assassination of the third Caliph ʿUthmān. In this conflict, the political and the religious became intertwined, and the political theology emerged as a consequence of the historical experience of the Umma after the death of their Prophet (p. 6). The outcome of the fitnah determined the separation of the religious from the political and the development of the mulk (kingship) in the shape of the Umayyad polity. It was a separation that was elaborated in the following centuries and was put into a coherent political theological frame regulating the relation between the two spheres.

As in opposition to Augustinism, the ‘political’ in Islamic tradition does not have a negative connotation, however. During the time of the prophet,
the ‘political’ was an expression of the religious: the two spheres were later (10th and 11th century) to be separated for the sake of the unity of the community. It was the prize to pay for the stabilization of the Muslim polity. A realist and quietist theory of power prevailed indeed; yet, the community remained (at least in theory) the source of political and religious legitimation. The Quranic principle of “commanding good and forbidding wrong” allowed the individual pious Muslim to be responsible in front of the community and its religion. There was a tension between the right of obedience to the ruler — for the sake of peace — and the civic right/duty of the individual to protect religion. This tension was even greater because revivalist movements — in the name of šarīʿah — could claim the right to contest the upper society and the rulers all together. The authors emphasize that the Islamic political theology is constructed on a “retrospective utopia”, whose base is fiqh (jurisprudence) more than theology, orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. The government of God (ḥakimiyah) is realized through the application of the Law (šarīʿah) whose interpretation must follow the tradition of the prophet and his companions, raised to the degree of paradigmatic Muslims.

This political theology is ‘utopian’ in that it is based on the image of the ideal community of the first century of Islam where allegedly the human action coincided with God’s will. It is also the result of the awareness of the break between the idealized past and the historical present. It remains as a model to potentially follow although difficult to realize in practice. This particular feature of the Islamic political theology — realist and utopian at the same time — is a key element the book should have dealt with. The ‘utopian’ created in fact the theoretical (yet practical) ground for revivalist movements to imagine a different social order, and therefore to potentially become revolutionary. This political theological ‘idealism’ was beyond the thought of an important author, Taqī ad-Dīn Ibn Taymiyyah, that the book however ignored. This is a surprise for a work on “the Islamic political theology”, especially for editors that claimed in the introduction to acknowledge the importance of the dialectic between theory and praxis. Ibn Taymiyyah political theology provides in fact all the intellectual frame for Islamic activism in contemporary times. Massimo Campanini and Marco di Donato have in their career put together the study of Islamic political theory with that of the Arab-Islamic contemporary politics (the first of the two editors, in particular); and that was his originality. This last book should have been therefore more challenging, an analytical step forward.

The ten chapters composing the volume follow on the path of Campanini’s intellectual interests that he has pursued all along his carrier and the reader of the latter’s previous works will be familiar with most of them. Some of the
themes are: the political theology in the thought of al-Fārābī (Catarina Belo, chapter 1); Mohammed Abduh’s theology (Margherita Picchi, chapter 5); contemporary revolutionary political theology (Massimo Campanini, chapter 3); Islamic political theology in the Iranian context (Ahmad Bostani, chapter 9). The topics of the chapters are interesting by themselves. Put together as they are in the volume, however, do not contribute to new insights.

In conclusion, this is a book that presents the Islamic political theology from “the complexity of approaches Muslim thinkers developed throughout the centuries” (p. 9). Thus, the contribution of the several authors focused each on a particular interesting aspect. This work does not deliver, however, in its most challenging promise: to be an inquiry on the ‘political’ as a praxis deriving from the faith. In particular, Campanini had argued in his previous books on Islam and politics (1999, 2008, 2019) that Islam as an ideology is a practical action (a political praxis). There is unfortunately not a development of this idea and the book appears as one more of the several works on Islamic political thought. The book would have certainly gained of interest and originality, it had proposed a perspective on the realist vs idealist dialectic. As it would have helped to solve the issue of the apparent contradiction of a political theological frame conservative and revolutionary at the same time. This would have been a great contribution to the understanding of the Islamic politics and a demonstration of the usefulness of Political theology as an epistemological critical tool for understanding contemporary Muslim societies.

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