Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (eds.)


This impressive volume consisting of an introduction and 13 papers on the intellectual thought and legacy of the Mamluk-Damascene polymath, jurist, traditionalist and acutely polemic theologian Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), is a significant indication of the thriving nature of ‘Taymiyyan’ studies in Western academia. Majid Fakhry, in his magisterial and highly influential opus, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, portrayed Ibn Taymiyya as central to ensuring the victory of the medieval neo-Ḥanbalī traditionalists over the schools of scholastic theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafa*) within the Islamic intellectual milieu. Fakhry, akin to the authoritative interpretations of Goldizher, Makdisi et al. maintained that Ibn Taymiyya had accomplished this feat by adopting firstly, a literalist approach to the Qurʾān and the Sunna, and secondly, the implementation of an inflexible antagonist polemic against the usage and primacy of reason (*ʿaql*) in its relationship with revelation (*naql*). Consequently, this volume attempts to facilitate the revision of *inter alia*, the above mentioned image of Ibn Taymiyya *via* a meticulous elaboration of his epistemological, theological, heresiographical, ethico-legal and socio-political positions from several of his principal oeuvres.

The volume is divided into six thematic sections related to: Biography; Theology; Hermeneutics; Law; Shiʿi and Christian Polemics; and Legacy. Caterina Bori’s paper on the biographical aspects of Ibn Taymiyya’s intellectual life opens the volume and focuses on his intellectual circle (*jamāʿatuhu*). Bori emphasises several important themes which hitherto have been overlooked. Bori argues that Ibn Taymiyya *contra* to how he is generally perceived, was not the undisputed archetype of the traditionalist or even the Ḥanbali community due to his indifferent approach to the authoritative legal hierarchical structures, approval of several controversial legal positions, and his excessive usage and reconciliation of reason with revelatory scripture in theological discussions (pp. 34f.). Consequently, Ibn Taymiyya was actually a charismatic leader of a small ‘radical’ circle of legally diverse scholars (p. 43) which was a minority influence and was rejected by the majority of traditional intellectual milieus.

The theology section consists of three papers. The first paper by Jon Hoover analyses Ibn Taymiyya’s theological position on God’s perfection *via* a discussion of his ‘voluntary attributes’. Hoover demonstrates that Ibn Taymiyya’s theological approach was not anti-rational but rather he was “an apologist for the coherence and rationality of the theological data found in the tradition” (p. 74), which Hoover refers to as “a kind of philosophical theology” (p. 56).
Subsequently, the paper establishes that Ibn Taymiyya’s rejection of the concept of God’s perfection as developed and proffered by the Ash’arīs was not due to any antagonism against the rational nature of their specific arguments. On the contrary: Ibn Taymiyya argued using reason in conjunction with revelation in preference for his own alternative conception and interpretation of God’s perfection. The other two papers in the section discuss Ibn Taymiyya’s harmonisation of reason and revelation by providing a more nuanced and intricate elaboration on the relationship, the nature of the synthesis and limits of this endeavour.

Mehmet Sait Özervarli in his paper refers to Ibn Taymiyya’s theological approach as ‘Qur’ānic rationalism’. Ibn Taymiyya disagreed with the Ash’arīs over their adoption of al-qānūn al-kullī, which conferred on reason the epistemic authority over revelatory knowledge in cases of conflict (p. 84). Thus, the literal meaning of the revelatory sources would be metaphorically re-interpreted via ta’wil in order to reconcile it with reason. Ibn Taymiyya’s ‘Qur’ānic rationalism’ in contrast insisted that reason could never contradict revelation, thus, the apparent contradiction alluded to by the Ash’arīs was based on an inconsistent and inappropriate form of rationalism that was not quintessentially Qur’ānic or Sunnaic in nature. In the final paper of the section, Racha el-Omari analyses Ibn Taymiyya’s ‘Theology of the Sunna’, which was his attempt to justify his ‘Qur’ānic rationalism’ over the Ash’arī principle of al-qānūn al-kullī by appealing to the authority of the salaf. El-Omari demonstrates that Ibn Taymiyya uses the salaf, firstly, to legitimise his opposition to the conflicting theological interpretations, and secondly, to reinforce and identify his own interpretations as representing the authentic ‘Sunna’.

Ibn Taymiyya’s radical and innovative hermeneutical approach to the exegesis (tafsīr) of the Qur’ān is analysed in the first of the two contributions to the hermeneutics section by Walid Saleh’s study of Ibn Taymiyya’s Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr. Saleh concisely describes Ibn Taymiyya’s radical approach as “it claims to take tafsir back to its roots in the salaf [...] effectively binding the divine word with the prophetic word in ways that had never been seen before in the Sunni tradition” (p. 148). Ibn Taymiyya used his salaf-centric hermeneutical approach to re-emphasise the supremacy of the ‘Sunna’ in Qur’ānic exegesis, and concurrently to exclude and invalidate the authority of non-Sunnaic hermeneutical approaches; for instance, theological, philosophical, philosophical and mystical. Livnat Holtzman in her paper elaborates on Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s (d. 751/1350) hermeneutical approach in explaining the relationship between fitra and al-qadrā’ wa-l-qadar. Holtzman argues that Ibn Taymiyya’s adherence to the salaf was neither rigid nor absolute, and the concepts of the fitra and al-qadrā’ wa-l-qadar were instances