Eric Stensland

Ibn Taymiyya has become an unavoidable name in the study of modern Islamic thought. This 13th century thinker spent most of his life in Damascus, where he gained a reputation for being a radical thinker. Despite the consistent resistance he faced from intellectuals, the charismatic Ibn Taymiyya nonetheless had a great deal of popular support. He was an ardent opponent of the Mongols, who had invaded Syria, as well as an opponent of religious practices to which he objected. His support from the locals of Damascus was shown when thousands turned out for his funeral.

However, after his death he quickly faded and was relegated to obscurity for generations. It was not until the last couple hundred years that Ibn Taymiyya’s legacy has changed from one of irrelevance to a champion of Islamic tradition. The popular image of Ibn Taymiyya today has been largely defined by those who use his writings to justify acts of violence. Ibn Taymiyya and His Times is a volume of individual articles that questions if this popular image of Ibn Taymiyya, and what we have come to think we know of him, is truly accurate.

This volume of articles, Ibn Taymiyya and His Times, is from the Oxford University Press series, Studies in Islamic Philosophy. It is a compilation of twelve articles about Ibn Taymiyya by twelve different scholars. The articles, except one by Yossef Rapoport, were originally prepared for a conference entitled “Ibn Taymiyya and His Times.” The conference was sponsored by Michael Cook at Princeton University in April of 2005 and was designed to confront the issue that scholars have only looked at individual facets of Ibn Taymiyya, never undertaking a comprehensive synthesis of this medieval thinker nor his “life and times.” His rise to prominence from near total obscurity has thrust him to the forefront of any discussion of Islamic studies. In many ways, this volume is a scholarly response to the use of some of Ibn Taymiyya's writings by groups who are not traditional academics, as well as an evaluation of how faithful his current image is to the actual man.

The volume begins with a thorough introduction. The first article by Caterina Bori examines Ibn Taymiyya’s circle of followers. The group is revealed to be exclusive, small, radical, and not solely Hanbali. Bori also discusses the reasons why Ibn Taymiyya was criticized by most of his contemporaries, including traditionalists. Overall, Bori concludes that Ibn Taymiyya is not the good representative of medieval Hanbalism that many scholars portray him to be. The article nicely sets up the remainder of the volume, by showing how obscure and forgotten he was during his life and the centuries after his death, as well as how his doctrine of using both rationality and traditional religious sciences led him to be ostracized by traditionalists.

One significant issue explored in the collection is whether there was a common approach Ibn Taymiyya applied to all the topics on which he wrote. In other words, was there a “Taymiyyan” approach that is common throughout all his writings? The articles argue that Ibn Taymiyya believed that reason and revelation were unable to contradict each other. For example, one writer, M. Sait Özervarlı, states that Ibn
Taymiyya entered the theological discussion on God’s voluntary attributes with arguments grounded in both reason and his reading of the Qur’an. The volume also describes how Ibn Taymiyya viewed and used the ideas of earlier Muslims, including the *salaf*. The focus of Ibn Taymiyya’s argument is not to accept what the *salaf* believed, but rather to use those beliefs as a way to support his own reason-based conclusions. For example, Yossef Rapport, also one of the editors, argues that his reference to the *salaf* was only one aspect of Ibn Taymiyya’s legal thought process. Further, a common argument though all of the volume is that Ibn Taymiyya was a pragmatist. One scholar, Mona Hassan, illustrates his pragmatism by discussing how Ibn Taymiyya longed for a return to the ideal Caliphate, yet argued that Muslims of his day should participate in the less than ideal governments. This approach shows a realistic and somewhat moderate side.

The collection includes a discussion of Ibn Taymiyya’s legacy. Another author, Khaled el-Rouayheb, builds upon Caterina Bori’s article with a discussion of how Ibn Taymiyya was almost entirely ignored for five centuries. Once rediscovered in more recent times, the fact that for centuries he was irrelevant has been ignored. This legacy modification is also shown by how Islamist fundamentalists cite Ibn Taymiyya’s works frequently as justification for their acts of violence. Raquel Ukeles, in her article, argues that he was not an uncompromising zealot, but usually criticized practices, not motives. For example, while he recognized the pious intent of those who celebrated the Prophet’s birthday, he simply wanted this piety redirected towards an acceptable religious practice. Hassan also discusses how Ibn Taymiyya in his often cited fatwa states it is acceptable to kill the Mongols, because they are only nominally Muslim, and argued for supporting the imperfect Mamluk dynasty. Hassan illustrates how the reading of Ibn Taymiyya by Islamist groups is a completely selective reading. In fact, Hassan describes how leading Muslims, including the Grand Mufti of Egypt, criticize the extremist reading of Ibn Taymiyya.

In terms of how Ibn Taymiyya dealt with other religions, this collection argues that proper historical context is required to understand his inter-faith writings. Pieces by Tariq al-Jamil and David Thomas discuss Ibn Taymiyya’s writings on Shi‘ism and Christianity respectively. In the case of the Shi‘a, al-Jamil argues that Ibn Taymiyya’s writings cannot be taken out of their proper historical context. There was a fear of rising Shi‘i influence over Muslim scholars and governments at the time, a fear that al-Jamil argues is present in Ibn Taymiyya’s writings. Thomas argues that when Ibn Taymiyya writes regarding Christianity, he also is comparing Muslim practices he deems errant to the obviously errant Christians, to support his view that the practices are indeed errant. Thus, the works on Christians, if read in proper context, are as much about Muslims as Christians. The volume concludes that his pragmatism means his works must be read in a wide variety of contexts.

*Ibn Taymiyya and his Times* presents a different view of Ibn Taymiyya than prevails in the popular imagination. He has a rational and pragmatic side, making him far from a champion of traditionalism. The different pieces work well together, creating multiple threads found in most of the articles. The articles should help open multiple discussions on Ibn Taymiyya, including his use of rationality and his legacy. This work has set the stage for further scholarly inquiry into the life of this once obscure, now wildly popular thinker’s complicated legacy.

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