

THE POLITICS OF FIṬRA
On Ibn Taymiyya's Epistemological Optimism

An Essay Review on *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment*, by Ovamir Anjum (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilisation), (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xvi + 294 pp., ISBN 978-10107-01406-0, €60.00 / \$99.00 (hb)

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The assertion that theology was the most powerful driving force in the politics of the early Muslim community seems to be an axiom that requires no proof. The birth of the various schisms in the Muslim community (*al-umma*), along with the theological debates that accompanied them, were thoroughly studied by medieval and modern scholars alike. In describing the politico-theological groups, such as the Khārijites or the Qadarites, historians of the classical period emphasized that the concepts of divine justice and human free will were keyplayers in the dramatic chain of events that led to the emergence of these political parties. Attention has also been given to the theological concepts that the caliphs, with the help of the *‘ulamā’*, promoted to stabilize their status and legitimize their rule. Thus, impactful events, such as al-Maʿmūn’s *miḥna* (between the years 833 and 847), were closely connected to the heated debates between the traditionalists and the rationalists on the concept of “the uncreated Qurʾān.” In sum, the connection of simplistic theological formulae with the inception of early political thought in Islam was always surface level; the connection between hairsplitting theological discussions and later political thought in Islam, however, was not. Ovamir Anjum’s *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment*

fills this gap. The entanglements of politics and high-level theological thought are fully revealed in Anjum's multi-layered and discursive monograph.

Well-versed in the writings of the controversial Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 C.E.) and his loyal disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350 C.E.), Anjum dives into the deepest depression of Islamic politics. Here, he traces unfamiliar theological undercurrents that molded the worldview of these thinkers, with a special emphasis on Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya articulated the most coherent opposition to the religious establishment of their times; however, the question of their attitude toward the Mamlūk political system was never fully revealed. Both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya were deeply involved in this political system – a fabric tightly woven from the intimate connections among Mamlūk officials, army officers, and local *'ulamā'*. The religious establishment and the activities of the *'ulamā'* were the target of these two scholars' harsh critiques in their legal as well as theological works. Nonetheless, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim volunteered to offer their advice on running the state to the “secular” elements of government, i.e., the Mamlūk officials. Their treatises on government (Ibn Taymiyya's *al-Siyāsa al-shar'īyya* and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's *al-Furūsiyya*) unfolded a utopian worldview in which the *'ulamā'* would take active part in the state affairs not merely by exploiting the political system for their needs but by actually navigating the system. A ruler who is a religious scholar, *'ālim*, is the ideal that these two scholars promoted.

In this book, Anjum's goal is to expose the full purport of Ibn Taymiyya's political thought, both as a revolutionary vision or an alternative to the stagnated governmental and religious institutions of his times and as a full-fledged theory with theological dimensions yet unrevealed. The political aspect of the Taymiyyan alternative is well known and discussed in previous research, starting with Henri Laoust's monumental *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taqī-d-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taimīya* from 1939. Based on Ibn Taymiyya's view of the *umma* – the ancient Muslim community – as an idealistic society characterized by activism, political involvement, and piety, Ibn Taymiyya depicts the outline of this utopian society in which the laymen are involved in the affairs of the state to the degree of deciding whom they elect as their leader. The theological dimensions of the Taymiyyan alternative, however, are much less familiar. Anjum's major achievement in this impressive book is in extracting Ibn Tay-

miyya's political thought from his theological writings, and especially his magnum opus *Dar' ta'arud al-'aql wa-l-naql* (Averting the Conflict between Reason and Revelation). Anjum offers a politically contextualized reading to this complex theological treatise, which is truly a pioneering step. Anjum confronts Ash'arite theology, which was the dominant trend among the religious elite in Mamlūk society, with Taymiyyan theology. He emphasizes that the Rāziyyan form of Ash'arite theology was a factor that contributed to the political stagnation in Mamlūk society. By doing so, he contextualizes Ibn Taymiyya's theological thought: more than a systematized refutation of Ash'arite theology, *Dar' ta'arud al-'aql wa-l-naql* is read almost as a political manifesto. Revealing the political dimension of Ibn Taymiyya's theology is the most meaningful contribution of Anjum's book. However, to reach to this point, one must first traverse 169 pages on the history of political thought in Islam.

Anjum pursues two parallel lines of inquiry: the first reveals the linkage between the classical Islamized monarchism and the Ash'arite epistemological pessimism. The second line examines Ibn Taymiyya's theological concept of *fitra* and reveals this concept's inherent place in Ibn Taymiyya's epistemological optimism along with his political thought. The book, which comprises seven massive chapters, is divided into two parts that can be read independently. The first part, entitled "the classical legacy," sketches political thought in the early Islamic period (the 7th century) and marks milestones in the development of this thought in the classical period (in this book, the classical period lies roughly between the 8th and 14th centuries). The second part of the book, enigmatically titled "the Taymiyyan intervention," confronts Ibn Taymiyya's political thought with the political order of his time. Even before I delved into this massive book, I wondered about Anjum's decision to comprehensively discuss political thought from the days of the Prophet until the Mamlūk era in a monograph that is meant to focus on Ibn Taymiyya. Throughout the reading process, I was not fully convinced that some of the topics that Anjum diligently discusses (mostly based on secondary sources) were indeed relevant. I suspect that Anjum chose to dedicate the first two chapters of his book (some 136 pages) to the politics of the first centuries of Islam because Ibn Taymiyya's political thought emerged from profound insights on the formative political events in the history of the Arabs. Perhaps Anjum's rationale is that to fully grasp Ibn Taymiyya's vision on the utopian Islamic society, one should become

familiar with the historical events from the inception of Islam until Ibn Taymiyya's time, and not be satisfied with clichés on the grandeur of the early Muslim community. Likewise, I was not entirely persuaded that the first two chapters were indeed vital to the book. On the other hand, the other topic that appears in the first part of the book, the pessimist worldview of Ash'arite *kalām*, is relevant to Ibn Taymiyya's theological thought. In the following pages, I will sketch the contours of the book and focus more on the theological and political aspects rather than the historical aspects of Anjum's discussion.

In the first chapter (pp. 37-92), Anjum describes how the ideal of a politically vibrant and egalitarian *umma* in the first century of Islam crashed due to the increasing needs of the growing empire, and how the idealistic *umma* was assimilated in the traditional society ruled by a monarch. Anjum provides an exhaustive discussion on key-concepts, such as *khalīfat Allāb* (the custodian of God's law), *ulū-l-amr* (those charged with authority), *shūrā* (consultation), and mostly *siyāsa* (politics) through milestones in the history of power of the Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd empires. This in-depth discussion paves the way for the examination of the rise of the '*ulamā*' as a political force that solidifies itself as a formidable opposition to the caliphs.

Chapter two (pp. 93-136), equally as packed as chapter one, presents a vast overview of the literature that was written by prominent Sunnī scholars from the 10th century onward, with the gradual decline of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate. Anjum argues that the Ash'arite theological discourse, rather than the juristic one, articulated a set of guiding premises about the legitimacy of the caliphate. The Ash'arite theologians perceived themselves to be the custodians of the Sunna and therefore the defenders of the caliph, who was the most conspicuous symbol of Sunnism. These theologians customarily included a chapter on the caliphate (or the imāmate) in their works of *kalām* as part of the Sunnī attack on the Mu'tazila and Shī'a. The *kalām* manuals authored by these theologians – al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013 C.E.), al-Baghdādī (d. 1037 C.E.), Abū Ya'qūb (d. 1066 C.E.), al-Juwaynī (d. 1085 C.E.), and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 C.E.), just to name a few – are mostly read in western scholarship for their chapters on speculative theology and theological polemics. Anjum, however, read their chapters on the imāmate and therefore provided a useful outline of their caliphate doctrine. In a nutshell, the Ash'arites offered a theorized justification for the notion of the rule of an omnipotent caliph with the exclusion of the community or the masses from engagement in public affairs. In

addition, in their writings, the Ashʿarites nurtured the ideal of religious life distant from any connection to the matters of the state. Furthermore, the Ashʿarites professed their disdain of politics, although they were actually part of the ruling elite embedded in the center of power. No doubt, the Ashʿarites benefitted from their involvement in the affairs of the state; however, they maintained the façade of abstaining from worldly affairs, politics included. Anjum emphasizes that their involvement in politics was exclusively for their own good, as they felt no responsibility for the masses. This attitude revealed their self-perception as intellectually superior over the traditionalistic *ʿulamāʾ*.

In the third chapter (pp. 137-169), Anjum enters the deep waters of hardcore theology to decipher the self-image of superiority that the later Ashʿarites, and especially Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209 C.E.) and his successors, advanced. Because the lion's share of Ibn Taymiyya's polemics occurred with al-Rāzī, only in the third chapter does Anjum directly address the goal of his book, which is to expose Ibn Taymiyya's political thought. Anjum goes back to the roots of the Ashʿarite self-conceit, both as the defenders of Sunnism and as the holders of esoteric knowledge accessible to a chosen few. Heavily relying on the scholarship of A. M. Goichon and Riḍwān al-Sayyid, Anjum argues that the Neoplatonic views of the philosophers were cardinal to questions of political agency and social organization. These questions in turn shaped the sense of superiority of the Ashʿarites. The Neoplatonic philosophers saw human intellect to be an essence bestowed to them from above, "[a]nd just like the intellect with respect to a human person is both an (external) essence and a function, its relationship to the society is the same, in the sense that the society is governed and constrained in its private and public life by the intellectual elite whom the Active Intellect has endowed with the right to govern...the ruler is the *ʿaql* of the society..." (pp. 146-147, a quotation translated by Anjum from Riḍwān al-Sayyid's *al-Jamāʿa wa-l-mujtamāʿ wa-l-dawla*). These ideas, which can be summarized as the supremacy of the mind (of the educated elite, of course) by means of philosophical reflection over other sources of knowledge (such as, for instance, the common sense of laymen) penetrated Sunnī *kalām* through al-Ghazālī's *Qānūn al-taʿwīl* and were systematized by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Al-Rāzī's fans among the ruling elite in Mamlūk society believed that certain knowledge cannot be obtained from the scriptural sources of revelation. Furthermore, if a contradiction exists between

reason and revelation, the conclusions obtained due to a valid procedure of reasoning supersede the content of the scriptures. In his *Asās al-taqdīs*, al-Rāzī advanced this principle a step further and determined that the scale according to which the content of the revelation was measured was the rational scale. One of the major byproducts of this epistemological system was implanting a sense of superiority in the later Ash‘arites. They perceived themselves to be the guardians of a rational apodictic truth (p. 150). Similarly, they held in contempt the traditionalistic scholars and the common people for their naïve and unreserved loyalty to the scriptures, especially to the anthropomorphic expressions in the Ḥadīth literature. Comfortable in their exclusive milieu, the later Ash‘arites quoted al-Rāzī’s *Asās al-taqdīs* to justify their detached elitist and hierarchical worldview. Advancing pessimistic views on predetermination – and thus preserving the old societal order – was also in their best interest. Anjum quite rightly calls the ideas of the later Ash‘arites “theological cynicism” (p. 168).

The second part of the book (chapters 4-6) discusses Ibn Taymiyya and the alternative worldview that he presented as being in opposition to the Ash‘arite worldview. Whereas the Ash‘arites presented pessimism, Ibn Taymiyya offered optimism. Chapter four (pp. 173-195) is an indispensable introductory survey. Here, Anjum examines Ibn Taymiyya’s attitude toward the *‘ulamā’*, his view on the ailments of Mamlūk society, and the remedies that he offers. Anjum’s achievement in this chapter is in accurately presenting Ibn Taymiyya’s nuanced approach toward Ash‘arite *kalām*, and in particular Ibn Taymiyya’s realization that the use of rationalist reason was essential to erase the harmful effect of *kalām*. Anjum highlights a previously overlooked text by one of Ibn Taymiyya’s biographers, Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Bazzār (d. 1350 C.E.), in which Ibn Taymiyya explains his decision to dedicate his intellectual efforts to theology rather than to *fiqh*. Ibn Taymiyya was deeply committed to reason because he believed that the scholars of the *umma*, the *salaf*, permitted the use of rational argumentation against erroneous ideas and were engaged in such endeavors themselves (pp. 178-181). This point should have been further elaborated by Anjum, and one can only hope that he will pursue it in his future works. Later in chapter four, Anjum highlights Ibn Taymiyya’s fundamental points of controversy with the Ash‘arites, and especially his perception of human will and its efficacy toward the human agent. Although these topics were thoroughly discussed by, among others, Daniel Gimaret and Jon Hoover, Anjum

makes his substantial contribution when he illuminates the political implications of the Taymiyyan form of free will, which stands in contrast to the Rāziyyan manifestation of the Ash‘arite doctrine of the human agent. Al-Rāzī’s controversial declarations in favor of *jabr* (fatalism) were targeted by Ibn Taymiyya, who repeatedly emphasized the destructive effect of fatalism on society.

In the fifth chapter (pp. 196-227), Anjum provides an insightful survey of *Dar’ ta‘ārud al-‘aql wa-l-naql*, its objectives, structure, themes, and style. The main purpose of Ibn Taymiyya in this work was to refute the foundations of the later Ash‘arite *kalām*. To demonstrate Ibn Taymiyya’s optimism in the domain of politics, Anjum discusses the concepts of “natural constitution” (*fiṭra*) and “natural reason” (*‘aql fiṭrī*) that Ibn Taymiyya systematically promoted in his writings. These terms are fundamental to Ibn Taymiyya’s epistemology; however, Anjum demonstrates their role in Ibn Taymiyya’s political thought. According to Ibn Taymiyya, *fiṭra* is a fundamental trait of the human disposition, and its essence is “to love what is beneficial and to conclude that there is a Creator and that He is good, and hence to love God.” (p. 203). On the epistemological level, the concept of *fiṭra* enables Ibn Taymiyya to reject the *kalām* claim that establishing the existence of God can be known only by rational speculation (*nazar*). People with uncorrupted *fiṭra* – according to Ibn Taymiyya – have inherent knowledge of the existence of God. In fact, they do not need the testimony of the scriptures to be aware of God’s existence. Toward the end of the fifth chapter, Anjum explains that the elitist views of Ash‘arite theologians excluded and were disrespectful toward the naïve beliefs of the commoners. Ibn Taymiyya reconstructed an independent epistemological system that celebrates the *fiṭra*, hence the natural uncorrupted beliefs of the commoners. With this system, Ibn Taymiyya created an alternative to the elitist epistemological system of the Ash‘arites, and this alternative was presented as accessible to the commoners. This does not mean that Ibn Taymiyya accepted all types of popular beliefs and vulgar customs; on the contrary, he severely attacked popular rituals such as the sacralization of graves. The core of Ibn Taymiyya’s stance is that natural reason, namely the *‘aql* guided by the *fiṭra*, plays a crucial role in obtaining ethical truths. Therefore, Ibn Taymiyya advanced an optimistic view that relied on “natural” beliefs as opposed to the bitter pessimistic views of the Ash‘arites that only generated skepticism.

In the sixth chapter (pp. 228-265), Anjum elaborates on Ibn Taymiyya's political thought, which is coherently based on the principle of *fiṭra*. Particularly in this chapter, which is the high point of the book, Anjum's circumvented method of presenting several lengthy prologues on different topics merely interferes with the reading experience. Despite its meandering course of argumentation, the chapter offers a fresh look at *fiṭra*, a concept that was examined only through the theological prism in previous research. Anjum is the first to discuss the political implications of *fiṭra*, and by doing so, he provides a broad philosophical perspective on Ibn Taymiyya's unique political stand. Anjum's analysis also simplifies the endless theological discussions; first and foremost, *fiṭra* is the permission granted by God to the Muslim community to see themselves as the custodians of divine law, instead of the rulers. *Fiṭra* is somewhat like "the wisdom of crowds;" although its basis is religious, it points to a democratic vision in which the Community is entitled to take its fate into its own hands. The concept of *fiṭra* is diametrically opposed to the elitist concept of *kashf* (spiritual disclosure) that al-Ghazālī promoted. In fact, Anjum refers to Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra* as the "democratic" version of al-Ghazālī's *kashf*. Hence, the knowledge of God's existence and goodness is available to everyone and not merely to the privileged few, the Ash'arites.

The book could have benefitted from more careful editing, especially in the footnotes. These notes contain discussions that are appropriate for inclusion in the body of the text; in other instances, we find too many flaws. On pages 138-139, for example, Anjum cites a lengthy passage from al-Nawawī's commentary of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. The footnote on page 139, however, refers the reader to Ibn Ḥajar's commentary of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. In addition, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi-Sharḥ al-Nawawī* is not included in the bibliography. On page 165, a lengthy text is quoted from al-Rāzī's *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya*; however, footnote 89 points to al-Rāzī's *al-Taḥfīr al-kabīr*. On page 229, Anjum mentions the Ash'arite theologian al-ʿĀmidī and his thought, without clarifying who he was. Several sources that the author cites throughout the book (for example, a book and an article by Yaacov Lev that appear in the footnotes on pages 102 and 104) were omitted from the bibliography. These are minor mishaps, no doubt, but they pose difficulties for a reader who wishes to track down the sources that Anjum uses, and in general, they diminish the credibility of this important work.

Lastly, "The Taymiyyan Moment," a term coined by Anjum which makes its first appearance in the conclusion (pp. 266-273), is not entirely clear. I suspect that this phrase echoes J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*, but Anjum does not explain it. The reader is left puzzled about "the Taymiyyan Moment" and is forced to speculate on its meaning. Is it the moment in time in which Ibn Taymiyya appeared and challenged the classical idea of state and politics in Islam? Or perhaps "the Taymiyyan Moment" is a selectively and thematically defined "moment" in which old patterns were rejected and original ones emerged? In any case, if the question remains in the reader's mind after reading the book thoroughly, then the author should have made further efforts to clarify it, especially because "the Taymiyyan Moment" is the subtitle of the book.

That said, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought* offers a stimulating and rewarding reading experience. The book expresses with extreme clarity the radical implications of Ibn Taymiyya's notion of the *fiṭra*. This concept leads to a vision of a harmonious society of mutual support and solidarity, in which every sector (the rulers, the 'ulamā', and the commoners) cooperates for the general good. This description gives the clearest background to Ibn Taymiyya's call for the people to follow only the righteous caliph, although this background is presented sometimes too sophisticatedly. Written with much enthusiasm and equally as much erudition, Anjum's *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* is thought-provoking, and its place on the Taymiyyan book-shelf is secured.