

Between Theology and Religion: Ibn Taymiyyah's Methodological Approach and its Contemporary Relevance

Ismail Abdullah*

Abstract

Religious beliefs and theological scrutiny of those beliefs exist side by side with each other from the time immemorial. Religious beliefs seek to continuously characterise and regenerate values, feelings, imaginations and actual daily activities of a person whosoever. Theology stands to scrutinize such religious beliefs, thoughts and values to see whether these beliefs and values are sustainable in human life based on reasoning. Although there is hardly any distinctive single definition for theology, it is said to be the rational inquiry into religious matters such as the nature of God and the truth of the sacred scriptures or, in a broader sense, it is a system of thought which attempts to present what we can know and understand about God in an organised and understandable manner. However, throughout the human history, questions related to the rapport between religion and theology particularly whether that relationship is harmonious or contradictory and what are the proper rational theological means to understand and interpret the nature of God as well as God's Words, have long been the main concern of theologians, philosophers as well as religious scholars. Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) was one of the prominent Muslim theologians who endeavoured to comprehend the nature of this relationship and produced numerous volumes on this subject. Ibn Taymiyyah maintains that religion and theology are not contradictory to each other; they are both rather complementary to each other. He believes that the religious teachings can be further clarified and validated through the application of theological approach. He also raises the question as to the nature of the theological methodology. He invites the philosophers to deliberate over the issue whether the matters concerning the religion are purely rational. It seems that Ibn Taymiyyah's concern and suggestions are of universal nature, thus making them still relevant to the 21st century world. This paper seeks to explain his methodological approach to religion and theology with a view to substantiating its contemporary relevance. Analytical and comparative methods will be applied in this paper.

Abstrak

Kepercayaan agama dan penelitian teologi wujud bersampingan di antara satu sama lain dari zaman dahulu lagi. Kepercayaan agama bertujuan secara berterusan menyifatkan dan menjana semula nilai-nilai, perasaan, imaginasi dan aktiviti harian sesiapa sahaja. Teologi berdiri untuk meneliti apa-apa kepercayaan agama, pemikiran dan nilai-nilai untuk melihat sama ada kepercayaan dan nilai ini lebih berkesinambungan dalam kehidupan manusia yang berdasarkan penaakulan. Walaupun hampir tidak ada definisi teologi yang tunggal dan distinktif, ia dikatakan untuk bermaksud siasatan rasional ke dalam hal-hal agama seperti sifat Tuhan dan kebenaran kitab-kitab suci atau dalam erti kata yang lebih luas, ia adalah satu pemikiran yang mencuba membentangkan apa yang kita dapat mengetahui dan memahami tentang

* Associate Professor, Department of Qur'an and Sunnah Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia.

Tuhan dalam cara yang teratur dan mudah difahami. Walau bagaimanapun, sepanjang sejarah manusia, soalan-soalan yang berkaitan dengan hubungan baik di antara agama dan teologi terutamanya sama ada hubungan tersebut adalah yang berharmoni atau bercanggah dan apakah cara teologi yang rasional untuk memahami dan mentafsir sifat Tuhan dan Kata-Kata-Nya, telah lama menjadi kebimbangan utama ahli-ahli teologi, ahli falsafah serta ulama. Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) merupakan salah satu daripada ahli-ahli teologi Islam yang berusaha untuk memahami sifat hubungan ini dan menghasilkan beberapa jilid tentang subjek ini. Ibn Taymiyyah mengekalkan bahawa agama dan teologi tidak bercanggah antara satu sama lain, sebaliknya kedua-dua saling melengkapi satu sama lain. Beliau percaya bahawa ajaran agama boleh selanjutnya diperjelaskan dan disahkan melalui aplikasi pendekatan teologi. Beliau jugak menimbulkan soalan tentang sifat kaedah teologi. Beliau menjemput ahli-ahli falsafah untuk membincangkan isu sama ada perkara-perkara yang berkaitan dengan agama, rasional semata-mata. Ia kelihatan bahawa kebimbangan dan cadangan Ibn Taymiyyah bersifat sejagat, sekali gus menjadikannya masih relevan pada abad ke-21. Karya ini bertujuan untuk menerangkan pendekatan metodologinya kepada agama dan teologi dengan tujuan untuk menyokong perkaitan kontemporarinya. Kaedah analisi dan perbandingan akan diterapkan dalam karya ini.

Introduction

Theology which is known within the Islamic scholastic thought as *‘ilm al-kalām* i.e., knowledge of theological rhetoric, is a discipline of Islamic thought generally concerned with interpreting and clarifying *uṣūl al-dīn*, i.e., the basic foundations of religion, or *‘ilm al-tawḥīd*, i.e., the sciences on the subject of the unity of God. After spreading throughout the Arabian peninsular and beyond, especially through the Roman-Byzantine Empire of the East and the Persian Empire of the West, Islam experienced diversity of cultures and thoughts. The possessors of these various cultures and societies who have different backgrounds to Islam constituted a real challenge to previous traditional interpretations of the religious scriptures. As a result of this, *kalām* appeared at both academic and scholastic stages of the Islamic thought.

The function of this discipline, which evolved from the tendency of the scholars to have rational interpretations of the religious sacred scriptures and texts, comprises the interpretations of religious doctrine and the defense of these interpretations by means of discursive deliberations. After the early stages of Islamic thought where *kalām* was merely limited to the understanding and justifying of dogmatic principles, it has developed to assimilate into the Aristotelian philosophical themes, though the shift in this direction was not completely successful. Besides having groups whose aim was political in origin, adopting theological arguments to support their political

interest, there were also groups with primary focus on understanding the text theologically.¹ Predestination, Man's freedom and will, attributes of God,² the relationship between the will of the Divine Transcendent and that of Man, and the status of a person who commits grave sin³ were among the issues discussed in the early stages of *kalām* in Islam.⁴

Among well known Muslim theologians who deeply participated in the systemisation of theology in the Islamic thought were Imām Ḥasan, al-Ash'ari (874 – 935),⁵ Abū 'Alī Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahab,

1 Ṣubḥī, Aḥmad Maḥmūd, *Fī 'Ilm al-Kalām Dirāsah Falsafiyah Li Ārā' al-Firaq al-Islāmiyah*, Iskandāriyah: Mu'assasāt al-Thaqāfah al-Jāmi'iyah, 1982, pp.30-31.

2 Contrarily, there was another group who advocated a deterministic view about such issues, namely the Jabriyah (determinists). This group thought that no attributes could be predicated of God except for creation, power and action, since any attribute that could be predicated of creatures was not fit to be predicated of the Creator. As God is the sole Creator and Actor, our actions are also authored by Him alone; therefore, we as persons have no control over our actions and no free will. (Ibid., pp. 34-35)

3 Some Muslim sects like al-Khāwarij contended the opinion of the traditional Muslim scholars' mainstream, by saying that any person who committed a grave sin automatically became a non-believer, thus forfeiting all rights and protections afforded by Islamic law. The Murji'ah argued for the withholding of judgment while tending to widen the interpretation of who could qualify as a believer, however, the Mu'tazilite held that such a person should be placed in an intermediate position, being neither a Muslim nor an unbeliever. (See: Amīr, Najār, *al-Khawārij: 'Aqīdatan, wa Fikran wa Falsafatan*, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 2nd ed. 1988, pp.145-146.)

4 The group of Qadariyyah (i.e., proponents of *qadar*-predestination or the freedom of Man's will.) This school argued for the absolute freedom of will. God is justice and He is never unjust, therefore, for them it is injustice that God would put on human beings under obligation to act righteously if we do not possess the power to choose our course of action. Hence, rationally Man is given free choice for his course of action, and because of this freedom he will be punished and rewarded in the hereafter. The view of mainstream orthodox and traditionalist groups who affirmed that the will of God is supreme and that He is the Creator of all human acts, whether evil or good; about this matter was that nothing could happen on earth that contradicted His will. This position was later given some nuances by al-Ash'ari, who argued that God created human acts, but we acquired (*kasaba*) these acts by willing them prior to their creation. (See: Maghribi, 'Alī 'Abdul Fataḥ, *al-Firaq al-Kalāmiyah al-Islāmiyah, Madkhal Wadīrāsah*, Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2nd ed.1986, p.56. See: also, al-Shahrastāni, 'Abdul Karam b. Abi Bakar, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1982, pp.92-93.

5 A famous Muslim theologian in Baghdad who was the real founder of Islamic scholastic theology specially that of al-Ash'arites. He attempted to surmount the gap between rational and logical values and orthodox faith and scriptural teachings. In an early work 'Maqalāt al-Islamiyīn' he compiled the various opinions of scholars on Muslim theological questions. He endeavoured to establish a rational ground for textual religious interpretations of the faith, to defend the belief and justify the validation of such belief elements. (See: Al-Imām al-Ash'ari, *al-Ibānah 'an Usūl al-Diyānah*, Egypt: Idārat al-Tibā'ah al-Muniriyyah, 1928, pp.10-25.)

al-Juba'i, (d.915-6, a.d),⁶ and Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd Abū Manṣūr al-Samarqandi al-Ḥanafī al-Māturīdī (d.915 a.d.).⁷

In the meantime, while such scholars had endeavoured to establish a harmonious condition between religion and rational understanding of its values; like theology, there were some who were concerned about the validity of interpreting religious thought through reason-based norms. Such concerns questioned the possibility of having theological discourse of the type advocated by both Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite theologians, characterising such discourse as, at best, excessive or superfluous and at worst, a heretical deviation.

This attitude has been expressed historically by the founders of Islamic Jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). These scholars mainly discourage their pupils to get involved in any form of theological engagement. This approach is clearly expressed in the well-known statement of Mālik b. Anas who clearly stated his position about the proper understanding of textual articulation of God's establishment on the throne. In the chapter 20 of the Qur'ān, it was stated that 'God is firmly established on the Throne'.

Ta-Ha we have not sent down the Qur'Ēn to thee to be (an occasion) for thy distress, but only as an admonition to those who fear (Allah). A revelation from Him Who created the earth and the heavens on high. (Allah) Most Gracious is firmly established on the throne (of authority). To Him belongs what is in the heavens and on earth, and all between them, and all beneath the soil.⁸

The interpretation of such statement had caused huge speculations both among Muslim scholars and laymen. When asked to explain how

6 One of the most celebrated of Mu'tazilite theologians, who attempted to give fresh and new mandate to Mu'tazilite theological thought. It can be said that he was able to add some additional brilliance to the traditions of the previous Mu'tazilite thought, while at same time refreshed it and opened the way to new solutions. (See: 'Abdul Raḥmān b. Aḥmad al-Ijī, *al-Mawāqif Fī 'Ilm al-Kalām*, Beirut: Ālam al-Kutub, pp.20-30.)

7 One of the two foremost Imams of the theologians of Ahl al-Sunnah, i.e., the group of the sunnah, known in his time as the Imam of Guidance (Imām al-Hudā). It is said there is not much doctrinal difference between Ash'arite and Māturīdīs, hence both groups are now called *ahl-al-sunnah*. (See: al-Imām Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 2nd ed. 1970, pp.12-30.)

8 The Qur'ān, 20:1-6.

God could be said to have ‘established himself on the Throne’ as mentioned in the Qur’ān, Imām Mālik responded by saying:

The establishment is known, the modality is unknown, the belief in it is obligatory and asking questions about it is an unwarranted innovation.⁹

Similarly, about the question of “divine justice”, advocated by the Mu‘tazilite, the traditionalists rejected and characterized it as an attempt to impose human and rational concepts on the “justice of God”. They have denounced this by firmly pointing out that it would be meaningless to speak of justice in this context, since God is the absolute sovereign and absolute Master of all His creations, which means that anything, which He created, is by definition just. The struggle and unrest between these two rival trends continued and even become more intensified in the latter centuries. The legitimacy of the rational inquisition of religious interpretations had been questioned and had many times been seen as an act of deviation from the true nature of religious teachings. Despite the fact that theology had reclaimed for orthodoxy through the endeavours of al-Ash‘ari and others, the traditionalists and those who were anti-*kalām* had strengthened their position. Thus, the science and art of arguing matters of faith with appeal to human intellect and reason fell into disrepute and went into a decline ever since the dawn of the twelfth century.

However, despite the strong opposition in the subsequent generations of Muslim scholars particularly those of Ash‘arites and Mu‘tazilites, theology emerged to be part of the core essential elements of religious thought within the scholastic fields of religious thought. Systemisation of theology appeared to be vital in order to systematise religious doctrine into a rational schema centered on the affirmation of God’s absolute unity and absolute justice.¹⁰

Ibn Taymiyyah’s life and milieu

Ibn Taymiyyah’s full name is Taqiyu al-Dīn Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm b. ‘Abd al-Salām b. ‘Abd Allāh b. al-

⁹ See: Subḥī, Aḥmad, op. cit., p.20.

¹⁰ See: Fatāḥ, Irfān Abdul Ḥamīd, *Dirāsāt Fī al-Firaq al-Islāmiyah*, Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1991, pp. 20-25. And also, Al-Sayyid al-Sharīf ‘Alī Muḥamad al-Jurjāni, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif Fī Ilm al-Kalām*, Cairo: Maktabat al-Azhar, 1976, p.25.

Khiār b. Muḥammad b. al-Khiār b. Āli b. Ābd Allah b. Taymiyyah al-Ḥarrānī. He was born on the tenth day of Rabi‘ al-Awwal, 661 A.H. / 1263 C.E. in Ḥarrān, a city near Damascus. When he reached the age of seven, the Mongols destroyed the city of Ḥarrān, and thus, all his family members had to migrate to Damascus.¹¹

At the age of thirty, he was offered the post of a judge (*qādi*) but he hesitated to accept this offer since he could not restrict himself from merely following the limitations imposed by the authorities. Throughout his life, he vehemently defended his well-known motto, “Go back to the Qur’ān and the Sunnah”, which was inspired by the earliest generation of Muslims (*salaf*) who freed themselves from all sorts of innovation (*bid‘ah*). As a result, Ibn Taymiyyah always expressed his refutations against some practices in Sufism, pantheism and scholastic theology. In addition, he released himself from blind imitation (*taqlīd*) and acted as one who exerted himself to give his own opinion in his particular sect (*mujtahid fī al-madhhab*) though he was known to have been influenced by the works of Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241 A.H), the author of al-Musnad and the founder of the Hanbalite school.¹²

Ibn Taymiyyah was well-known for his boldness and courage; he stood against tyrannical, unjust and misleading actions. He was also actively involved in refuting the practices of the Sufis (particularly tomb veneration and worship of the prophets and the saints), the pantheists, and the Mu‘tazilites during his time. Therefore, some leaders of these groups opposed him and they used their influence upon the ruling authorities against him. As a result, he was exiled and imprisoned for a number of times. He died during his imprisonment in Damascus in the year 728 A.H. / 1328 C.E.¹³

11 In Damascus, Ibn Taymiyyah sought various disciplines in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and its principles (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), Arabic language, tradition (*hadīth*), theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*), etc. He was also reported to have memorised the whole al-Qur’ān during his adolescence age. After the death of his father in 1282, he succeeded his father’s position as a scholar where he delivered lectures on the exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Qur’ān. (See: Serajul Haque, *Ibn Taymiyyah and His Projects of Reform*, Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1982, pp. 5 – 6.)

12 Ibid., p. 8.

13 Victor E. Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah’s Ethics: The Social Factor*, California: American Academy of Religion, 1983, pp. 28 – 29.

Ibn Taymiyyah and the question of methodology in theology

Ibn Taymiyyah summarised the content of theology to mainly comprise of two ingredients; firstly, an endeavour and attempt to justify religious beliefs through rationality, and secondly, an employment of reason to draw new conclusions and consequences from these beliefs. Theologically:

Doctrines comprise three major components: the articulation of what a school regarded as fundamental beliefs; the construction of the speculative framework within which these beliefs must be understood; and the attempt to give coherence to these views within the accepted speculative framework.¹⁴

He then articulated the relationship between theology and religion whereby theologians normally agree on the authority of a sacred scripture to be the basis of the debate. However, since scriptural and textual expositions are possible only through semantic interpretations and etymological explanations of the text, they disagree about the length of the rational analysis in the scripture.

Traditionalists had always suspected that the ‘reason’ being referred to was in fact the suspect intellect of infidel heretics; why else would a believer want to drag the articles of faith in front of the court of human reason, fallible and limited as it was?¹⁵

Methodologically, the early groups of theologians advocated the necessity of having a speculative framework to construct a system of religious thought, which is based on both religious text and (because of complete confidence in human reason) rational justifications of man’s rational convictions. While (because of the lack of reverence for the authority of texts) provocatively approaching the text, some theologians advocated the necessity of giving priority to reason over revelation.¹⁶

14 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muwāfaqat Ṣaḥīḥ al-Manqūl Li Sarīḥ al-Ma’qūl*, al-Qāhirah : Matba’at al-Sunnah al-Muḥammadiyah, 2nd ed. 1951, pp.12-29.

15 Ibid, p.31.

16 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’u Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, Riyadh: Jami’ah al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa’ūd al-Islāmiyah, 1st ed. 1981, v.5, p.295.

Methodologically, the central ingredients of the early stages of theological interpretations of doctrinal issues were limited to textual and linguistic analyses.¹⁷ However, the late employment of Aristotelian logic to theology had marked the exit point of theology from its Islamic identity, where authoritative texts were routinely cited to clinch an argument, while an accusation of heresy was thought to be a conclusive refutation of any argument. Ibn Taymiyyah contended the methods used by both philosophers and mystics, particularly those that promote the unity of truth or pantheism (*wahdat al-wujūd*). He argued that the goal of human life is neither to engage in philosophic contemplations nor to involve the mystic type of love of God. Because of the pantheists' unsacred method, he accused them of not perceiving the total dissimilarity between God and His creations. This is because, "the basis of the error of these people is that they do not apprehend the dissimilarity of God to creatures and His transcendence beyond them (*'uluwwuhu 'alayhim*). They know that He exists, and they therefore think that His existence is none other than (*la yakhruj 'an*) their existence, in the manner of someone who sees the rays of the sun and supposes that they are the sun itself."¹⁸

On the other hand, Ibn Taymiyyah also challenged the method of the philosophers and characterised it as a double sided tool, which could, on one side, endanger some aspects of knowledge while on the other side, jeopardise the process of information flow, therefore ending up with unappreciated result and conclusion. He said,

the teaching of the philosophers on divine matters and general intellectual principles is extremely limited and there is much confusion in it. They only speak well on matters of natural sense perception and it is partly good. However, they know nothing at all regarding the unseen of which the prophets bring information about and universal intellectual principles which are general to all existent beings.¹⁹

Ibn Taymiyyah directed his contentions against philosophers to both their method and attitudes towards the revelation and the scriptural teachings. They had committed methodologically incredible errors by assuming intentionally that whatever they do not know or cannot prove

17 Ibid, v.5, p. 296.

18 Ibid., p. 297.

19 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Tafsīr Surah al-Ikhlās*, Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhirah, 1900, pp.82-83.

cannot be true; and by doing so, they employed a grave methodological alteration and distortion to the scriptural texts, both in terminology and in concept. After these contentions, Ibn Taymiyyah concluded that both philosophers and pantheists, because of their erroneous approach and technique towards knowledge and belief, present a deviant and corrupted thought to humanity.

With regards to the theologians' speculative approach to the religious scriptures and beliefs, though essentially questioning the revelational legitimacy of speculative theology about the prophetic teachings, Ibn Taymiyyah accepted the basic position of the theologians' method of speculation in principles. He stated:

That its original intent was both valid and praiseworthy. Speculative theology developed as an apologetic science whose purpose was to argue the case for Islam convincingly in the terminology and conceptions of its opponents.²⁰

The error that had been committed by most speculative theologians, in Ibn Taymiyyah's view, was their comprising attitude in allowing the judgment of reason to determine the content and the message of the sacred texts.²¹ When translating religious scriptures, Ibn Taymiyyah warned theologians against the grave consequence of imposing any outside elements and terminologies and applying them to the fundamental teachings of revelation.²² Though Ibn Taymiyyah approved speculative theology as a discipline that is somehow permissible and beneficial to Islam, he remained provocative and critical of the approaches of theologians that they use in interpreting the religious text. He aggressively criticized the act of imposing alien rational values on the procedures of religious textual elucidations.

20 Thomas F. Michel, S.J, *Muslim Theologian's Response To Christianity*, New York: Caravan Books, Delmar, 1984. p.41.

21 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar'u Ta'arūḍ al-'Aql wa Naql*, v.5, pp.299-301.

22 Ibn Taymiyyah mentioned as an example certain terms like: "*Jawhar* (substance), *Jism* (body), and *hayyiz* (place) that imply categories which are incompatible with the teachings of the Qur'ān and Sunnah. To him imposing this extraterrestrial terms to the religious text will lead misconception to the majority of the religious layman. (Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muwāfaqat Ṣaḥīḥ al-Manqūl li Ṣariḥ al-Ma'qūl*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1st ed. 1985, p.151.)

Ibn Taymiyyah's methodological approach and its contemporary relevance

Ibn Taymiyyah started with proposing a paramount and preferable package of principles through which we will be able to understand, safely, the sacred scripture. His approach to the relationship between theology and religion comprises three interrelated elements, which still have both methodological and theological relevance; not only with the classical-medieval times but also to our contemporary epochs. These approaches include a method of textual interpretations of the sacred scriptures, inquisitively enquire what human 'rationality' is all about, and finally, in the event of reconciling between 'mind and revelation' he advocated the latter over the former. Thus, he proposed (what he called), a reliable and trustworthy interpretive approach, which consists of various interrelated principles. These three elements could be highlighted as follows:

1. The method of textual exegeses of the scripture

The first principle of understanding of the sacred scripture is to let the text explain itself. For instance, the method of possible textual exegeses of the *Qur'ān*, to him, was to explain the *Qur'ān* through the *Qur'ān*. This is because what the *Qur'ān* generalised in one place, is explained in the other, and what has been abridged in certain occasions is elaborated widely in other occasions.²³ However, to understand the whole Quran, this approach is not enough sometimes; for human minds to extract the meaning directly from the text they need more actual models and examples; therefore, Ibn Taymiyyah advised that the prophetic teachings and actions be the second source of textual interpretation of the sacred books. But if this does not help you, you should turn to the *Sunnah*, because the *Sunnah* explains and elucidates the *Qur'ān*. Besides, the role of the *Sunnah* is to expose the *Qur'ān*:

We have sent down to you the book in truth that you may judge between me, as Allah guides you; so don't be an advocate for those who betray their trust.²⁴

23 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, Bierut: Dār al-Fikr, 1992, pp.12-13.

24 The *Qur'ān*, 4:105.

If in any case, you do not get a clear picture from the *Qur'ān* or the *Sunnah*, turn to the words of the companions and those who have experienced the time of scriptural revelation; for they know the revelation better, because:

They have witnessed its revelation, and passed through the situations in which it was revealed: and know it and understand it fully. This is particularly true of the scholars and leaders such as the four righteous caliphs. 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ūd said: there is no Being deserves to be worshipped except Him, there is no verse in the *Qur'ān* about which I do not know in whose case and at what place was it revealed. If I were aware that anyone knew the *Qur'ān* more than me, and I could reach him, I would certainly have gone to see him.²⁵

2. The method of reconciliation between religion and theology

Another interesting point related to theology and religion is the role of reason. Ibn Taymiyyah blamed the theologians for distorting the true Islamic religion by engaging in Greek logical values and abandoning the Islamic branches of knowledge such as jurisprudence and *fiqh*. Though affirming that faith and deeds are connected, and that reason is part of revelation, he seemed to have allowed a passage for reasoning into law and ethics in Islamic thought. His contention to “rationality” was in fact against the theologians as well as the philosophers’ employment of the Greek logic without limitations to understand the sacred text of the *Qur'ān*.²⁶ Nonetheless, to anyone who has a few tracts or works of theology, they are neither spiritually refreshing nor do they satisfy the intellect. On the relationship between religion and rationality, Ibn Taymiyyah argued that our position on both rationality and theology should be unambiguously determined before we employ the terms. Theology is said to be a unified science in which all things are treated under the aspect of God either because they are about God Himself or because they refer to God. This science is about the facts of the divine revelation so far as those facts govern the nature of God and our relation to Him. Therefore, it is a dialogue between religion and the human mind.²⁷

²⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, op. cit., p.20.

²⁶ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muwāfaqat Ṣaḥīḥ al-Manqūl li Ṣarīḥ al-Ma'qūl*, op. cit., p.151.

²⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar'u Ta'arūḍ al-'Aql wa Naql*, op. cit., pp. 301-305.

He raised certain doubtful and sceptical concerns about the possibility of whether the human mind will be able to comprehend sufficiently the religious beliefs, which might sometimes seem to be contradictory to the mind. In this position, Ibn Taymiyyah firmly called that the human mind should not be placed in a higher status than the revealed laws. It is wrong, he said, to work on the premise that what is revealed in the books must be in agreement with reason, where there would no longer be a revelation, but rather a reason, which then becomes the ultimate criterion of truth.²⁸

Ibn Taymiyyah believed that religious thought should be rooted in the strict adherence to the scriptural revelation simply because it contains all the religious and spiritual guidance necessary for our salvation in the hereafter. Thus he rejected the arguments and ideas of both philosophers and theologians regarding religious knowledge, rational experiences and metaphysical issues.²⁹ He concluded that logic is not a reliable means of attaining religious truth and that the intellect must be subservient to revealed truth. Since theologians were affected and were being improperly influenced by aspects of Greek logic and thought and its impossible to eliminate such influence from the thought of theologians, therefore theology remains rejected and relevant to the religion.³⁰

Ibn Taymiyyah gave primary importance to the revelation, when its authenticity is verified, as the only reliable source of knowledge about God and about a person's religious duties towards Him. Therefore, the human intellect (*'aql*) and its powers of reason, said Ibn Taymiyyah, must be subservient to the revelation. To Ibn Taymiyyah, the only proper use of *'aql* i.e., intellect, is to understand the scripture, in the way the Prophet and his Companions did, and then to defend it against deviant sects. When discussing the nature of God, he argued, one must accept the descriptions found in the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah* and apply the orthodox view of not asking how particular attributes existed in God. This means that one believes in all of the attributes of God mentioned in the *Qur'ān* and *the Sunnah* without investigating the nature of these because the human mind is incapable of understanding the eternal God.³¹ For example, one accepts that God is mounted upon a throne above the

28 Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Rad 'Alā al-Mantiqiyīn*, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1993, pp.101-110.

29 Ibid, p.111.

30 Ibid, p.112.

31 Ibid, p. 120.

heavens without questioning how this is possible. The same attitude is held for all of God's attributes such as His sight, His hearing or His hands. This view is very much opposed to the philosophical view of God as first the cause and as being, devoid of attributes. Thus the philosophical argument that the Oneness of God precludes a multiplicity of attributes was not acceptable to Ibn Taymiyyah because God says that He is Only one and that He has various attributes. This denial of the attributes of God based on rationalism was adopted by some Muslim theologians of the Mu'tazilite, of whom Ibn Taymiyyah was especially critical.³²

3. The problem in defining 'rationality'

Ibn Taymiyyah raised the question of how to define the reason and rationality, leading to the question of whether it contradicts the revelation. To him, rationalism does not contradict revelation. To prove this, he delineated the term 'logic or reason' in order to identify what is the logic that opposes the religious scripture. Ibn Taymiyyah analysed the content of *'aql*; normal mental state, a declaration made to explain or justify action, decision, or conviction, an underlying fact or cause that provides logical sense for a premise or occurrence, and the capacity for logical, rational, and analytic thought and intelligence. These three aspects of reason pride various interrelated types of knowledge. Knowledge by acquaintance is the object related knowledge or knowing something through experience. Second is the competence knowledge or skill knowledge; it is when a person knows how to do something. Thirdly, propositional knowledge or sometimes called as descriptive knowledge; it contains two parts of knowledge: a posterior knowledge or empirical knowledge which is based on sensory or perceptual experience; and a priori or non-empirical knowledge which is not based on any such experience even though sensory or perceptual experience is involved in acquiring it.³³

Ibn Taymiyyah challenged those who claim the contradiction between mind and revelation to prove their claim. According to him it is impossible that the study of the principles of reasoning, especially of the structure of propositions as distinguished from their content and of method and validity in deductive reasoning will contradict with

³² Ibid, p. 125.

³³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muwāfaqat Ṣaḥīḥ al-Manqūl Li Ṣarīḥ al-Ma'qūl*, op. cit., pp.120-125.

revelation. Second, it is also unreasonable how the knowledge of acquiring the relationship between elements and between an element and the whole in a set of objects, individuals, principles would contradict with revelation.³⁴ The doctrine of rational innate ideas and the method of logically deducing truths about the world from self-evident premises without any revelational aid are denounced by Ibn Taymiyyah. He maintained that pure reason, which is claimed to oppose revelation, could be detected against its untruthfulness prior to its contradiction to the revelation.³⁵

Conclusion

Ibn Taymiyyah presented a package of principles by using them we will be able to understand the sacred scripture genuinely. Ibn Taymiyyah's approach to the relationship between theology and religion started with his call for the necessity of clarifying and validating the religious teachings. He also provocatively raised questions about the nature of the logical issues related to theology; particularly, whether they are purely rational or otherwise. This attempt contained various interrelated issues such as deliberations on the method of textual interpretations of the sacred scriptures, aspects of human 'rationality' that arise from human mind's inquisitive nature, and finally, the issue of reconciliation between 'mind and revelation' which he preferred and defended against unaided reason. His interpretive approach of the relationship between religion and theology consisting of various interrelated principles is both reliable and trustworthy. In brief, though many contended theology within the Muslim scholastic debates, however, the pro-traditionalist Ibn Taymiyyah's approach and insights are still both enduring and relevant to our contemporary epoch of scholarship on the subject.

34 Ibid, pp.126-128.

35 Ibid, pp130-131.