BOOK REVIEWS

CARL SHARIF EL TOBGUI. *IBN TAYMIYYA ON REASON AND REVELATION: A STUDY OF DARʾ TAʿĀRUḌ AL-ʿAQL WA-L-NAQL.* **Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020. 444 pp. ISBN 9789004412866.**

Akeem Olayinka Kazeem[1]

The book is essentially the author's attempt to capture Ibn Taymiyyah's approach to resolving the long-standing, and arguably "constructed" dichotomy between revelation and reason that had preoccupied Muslim theologians and philosophers for over six centuries prior to Ibn Taymiyyah. The author pursues this objective through an analytical study of what may be regarded as Ibn Taymiyyah's ten-volume magnum opus, *Darʾ taʿāruḍ al-ʿaqlwa-l-naql* (Refutation of the Contradiction between Reason and Revelation) – henceforth referred to as *Darʾ*. The volume provides a detailed and systematic account of the implicit underlying philosophy and methodology that undergird how Ibn Taymiyyah addresses the question of the compatibility of reason and revelation (*in Darʾ*).[2]

[1] Akeem Olayinka Kazeem, PhD Candidate, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC-IIUM), International Islamic University Malaysia; Lecturer, School of Liberal Studies, Yaba College of Technology, Nigeria. Email: olayinkaakeem38@yahoo.com
[2] Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Darʾ*

Against this backdrop, this paper presents a brief overview of the book's treatment of Ibn Taymiyyah's approaches and postulations on this issue based on its analyses of the *Darʾ*. It necessarily attempts specific critiques of the author's method and makes some recommendations for the book.

The author, Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies and Director of the Arabic Language Program, Near Eastern and Judaic Studies department, Brandeis University, Waltham, London, U.K. His scholarly interest is Islamic thought with a special focus on theology, law, and jurisprudence. He brought his expertise to bear in this monograph study on Ibn Taymiyyah.

Prior to this work by El-Tobgui, there had been no major academic attempt in Western scholarship to provide a comprehensive study of *Darʾ*. Except for Yasir Kazi, who examines selected arguments advanced by Ibn Taymiyyah against the so-called "universal rule" and offers a detailed analysis of Ibn Taymiyyah's notion of *fiṭrah* in *Darʾ*, the few available studies either address only parts of the work or consist of partial translations.

Central to El-Tobgui's volume is a demonstration of how Ibn Taymiyyah deals with the question of "rational objections to the plain sense of revelation." The author attempts to capture the methodologies employed by Ibn Taymiyyah to debunk the commonly adopted "universal rule" (*al-qānūn al-kullī*). This rule, as it had come to be formulated by the time of the famous Ashʿarī theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in the 6th/12th century, implies "that in the event of a conflict between reason and revelation, the dictates of reason be given priority and revelation be reinterpreted accordingly via *taʾwīl* (i.e., reinterpretation)." The justification for this rule is predicated on "the consideration that it is the reason that grounds our assent to the truth of revelation", therefore, "any gainsaying of reason in the face of a revealed text would undermine reason and revelation together."

An intellectual engagement of this magnitude is very

Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa-l-Naql (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 4,13.

worthwhile. According to the author, this is because *Dar'* concerns itself mainly with, perhaps, the most compelling project that goes beyond Ibn Taymiyyah himself. Besides, the tension between revelation and reason, and related issues—keenly examined by Ibn Taymiyyah in *Dar'*—are arguably considered key problems of Islamic modernity. The author believes that both the "textually-based advocates" and the "liberal-minded" protagonists, in the contemporary Muslim world, are much concerned with the appropriation of human rationality vis-à-vis the primacy and eternal truth of the revelation, namely the Qurʾān and the ḥadīth.

While this might not be immediately obvious as issues of reason and revelation, a closer consideration of the questions of science and revelation, the tension between shariah and secular visions of law and system of government, or biotechnological products and Islamic juristic position, one would begin to see the issue in this context. This is because these realities have been genuine sources of dilemmas for Muslims in the contemporary period, and "the root of all these issues can be traced to the deeper lying tensions with which Ibn Taymiyyah grappled when confronting the delicate question of the relationship between reason and revelation in his own day'' (p. 19).

In the author's view, the contemporary challenges also emerge—strikingly—from a similar intellectual trajectory. Whereas the earlier encounter originated with Greek philosophy, today it arises from a modern civilisation that is itself intellectually descended from Greece. The central question, therefore, remains unchanged: "How might the tension once more be resolved between the relentless vicissitudes of the times and a Book whose adherents believe was sent down by an eternal God into our world of time and space on the tongue of a prophet some fourteen hundred years ago?" (p.19).

This comparison is both significant and persuasively drawn. Despite differences in scope and historical context, El-Tobgui convincingly demonstrates that the epistemological problems addressed by Ibn Taymiyyah bear close resemblance to the intellectual challenges confronting contemporary Muslims, and that the source of these tensions appears, in important respects, to be the same.

Another noteworthy strength of the study lies in the author's treatment of Ibn Taymiyyah's arguments in *Darʾ*. The book is organised into two main parts, each comprising three chapters, in addition to an introduction, two appendices, and two glossaries. Part One examines Ibn Taymiyyah's biographical background and the historical antecedents of the theological debates to which he devoted *Darʾ* as a sustained intellectual project. It also provides an extensive analysis of Ibn Taymiyyah's arguments against the entrenched dichotomy between reason and revelation, with particular attention to his methodology, motives, and argumentative strategies, all of which are presented with clarity.

In Part Two, the author turns to Ibn Taymiyyah's alternative theory of language. Here, the volume demonstrates how Ibn Taymiyyah reframes the conventional distinction between literal and figurative language, thereby transcending the alleged contradiction between the two. The fundamental theological issues that motivated the composition of *Darʾ*—including the question of the divine attributes, accusations of anthropomorphism, and the limits of figurative interpretation—are examined in detail, particularly in Chapter Six.

The author provides insight into how Ibn Taymiyyah seeks to preserve God's comprehensibility (i.e., His conceivability and knowability to us) through the application of the principles and methods of Ibn Taymiyyah's philosophy. In the author's view, "elements of Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of language, his ontology, and his epistemology eventually converge in a synthesis that is meant to accommodate a robust and rationally defensible *affirmationism* vis-à-vis the divine attributes while yet avoiding the *tashbīh* (i.e., an unacceptable assimilation of comparing God to man) that the Islamic philosophical and later theological traditions so often presumed such *affirmationism* to entail."

The book illustrates, with great prowess and clear analysis, Ibn Taymiyyah's philosophy and methodology. However, the author might have missed some cruxes on certain issues. This is because the book does not cross-reference the position of Ibn Taymiyyah with

many of his other writings or passages, even when Ibn Taymiyyah has also raised some of those issues he discussed elsewhere in *Dar'*. As a justification, the book claims that "given the length of the *Dar'* itself, together with the vastness of Ibn Taymiyyah's larger oeuvre and his well-known habit of addressing the same issue in many separate places, a systematic cross-referencing of the primary sources would have hardly been feasible" (p. 15).

The author might seem justified in his approach; however, the fact remains that he might also have missed out, if not mistaken, on some points in Ibn Taymiyyah's postulation, as he (i.e., Ibn Taymiyyah) is better read intertextually. A particularly good instance is the concept of *fiṭrah*, which the author seems "to conflate with reason" (p. 260). This has been better discussed in other writings of Ibn Taymiyyah. However, the caveat by the author is a ground for this critique. For instance, he said, "the current study should be seen primarily as an exposition and analysis of the *Dar'* as a discrete work, not as a study of everything Ibn Taymiyyah has written on the topic of reason and revelation" (p. 15).

Nonetheless, the author has achieved his objective in contributing to "the growing field of post-classical Islamic scholarship—at the beginning of which Ibn Taymiyyah stands – by laying a new brick in the edifice of our still nascent understanding of what is, in fact, turning out to be a rich and productive phase of Islamic thought" (p.12).

Overall, the book will be of considerable value to a wide range of students and scholars, offering an outstanding scholarly analysis of key issues in Islamic theology and philosophy. Its sustained engagement with medieval Islamic thought and post-classical intellectual history also renders it relevant beyond the immediate field of Ibn Taymiyyah studies. Moreover, the work will be accessible to non-specialists and informed lay readers, as the philosophical and theological questions addressed in *Dar'* possess a universal significance that transcends both historical periods and religious communities.