

**Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation:
A Study of *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-ʿaql wa-l-naql***

Carl Sharif El-Tobgui

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Carl Sharif El-Tobgui's ambitious study of Ibn Taymiyya's *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-ʿaql wa-l-naql* provides a comprehensive exposition of Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy. The work is divided into two parts, the first covering chapters 1 through 3 and the second chapters 4 through 6. Chapter one begins by providing a broad survey of the question of reason and revelation in Islam prior to Ibn Taymiyya; chapter two continues from there with a detailed introduction on Ibn Taymiyya's life, times, and overall intellectual positioning. The third chapter carefully analyzes the thirty-eight discrete points made by Ibn Taymiyya against the "universal rule" of interpretation. The second part addresses Ibn Taymiyya's ontology, philosophy, and epistemology (chaps. 4 and 5) as well as how Ibn Taymiyya applied his proposed reforms in these areas to the question of the divine attributes (chap. 6). The two parts of the work are preceded by prefatory content introducing readers to the *Dar'* and outlining the fundamental stakes under contention in Ibn Taymiyya's writing. The legacy of Ibn Taymiyya himself is considered in some depth in chapter two which reviews, inter alia, contemporary reception of the *Shaykh al-Islam*, a figure whose legacy remains a point of considerable contestation in the modern West. For some, Ibn Taymiyya remains a caricature of intractable literalism, a dogmatist who yields no

ground to thoughtful theological efforts, and an unimaginative polemicist, whereas others paint a very different picture of an astute and brilliant theologian who deconstructs unchallenged orthodoxies and adheres, often at great personal cost, to a methodology that finds its origins in the life and thinking of the early community, or Salaf.

The universal rule (*al-qānūn al-kullī*), introduced in the third chapter of part 1, had been most recently articulated by the Persian Ash‘arī polymath Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. The rule is used as a method for reconciling conflicts between reason and revelation. According to the *qānūn*, any explicit contradiction between reason and revelation must be settled in favor of reason. This is grounded in the contention that sound reason is a precondition for the acceptability of revelation, such that a rejection or subordination of reason would not only undermine reason, but revelation as well. Moreover, al-Rāzī argues that revelation can never furnish conclusiveness of its own accord, though reason can. Accordingly, reason–revelation conflicts necessitate reconciliation, one that can only be achieved by interpreting the text of revelation metaphorically through *ta’wīl* (such that the conflict is no longer enduring) or by suspending judgment on the true meaning of scripture by negating its apparent meaning without committing to an alternative meaning, metaphorically or otherwise (a process known as *tafwīd*).

Ibn Taymiyya systematically refutes the universal rule, dissecting in the process the conceptions of both “reason” and “revelation” posited by al-Rāzī and other scholastic theologians as monolithic and unquestioned entities. It is here that El-Tobgui reveals the layers of Ibn Taymiyya’s thinking, one that proffers firstly a spectrum of what we might term “reason,” starting from sound and pure reasoning (*‘aql ṣarīḥ*)—“endorsed by revelation and exemplified by the Salaf” (141)—and steadily declining from there on account of disagreement, doubt, incoherence, and ignorance. El-Tobgui depicts this conceptual apparatus as a pyramid, the zenith and point of uppermost inflection being where sound reason and authentic revelation meet and the floor being where groups vacillate between total allegorization and sophistry (143). Against these fundamental infirmities—ones essential and definitional to the universal rule—Ibn Taymiyya advances a breakdown of both rational proofs (*dalīl ‘aqlī*) and scriptural proofs (*dalīl naqlī*) as either conclusive (*qat’ī*) or inconclusive (*ẓannī*). In this Taymiyyan paradigm, priority is granted to what is conclusive, with conclusive rational and scriptural proofs never contradicting each other (such contradiction being precluded

conceptually on both sound rational and scriptural grounds). El-Tobgui includes Ibn Taymiyya's more thoroughgoing critique of the *mutakallimūn* in chapters 5 and 6, including therein repudiations of their negating of God's attributes, arguments on the basis of "bodies" and "accidents," and inconclusiveness concerning God's location.

Following his examination of the universal rule, part 2 of El-Tobgui's work, spanning chapters 4 through 6, reviews Ibn Taymiyya's "reform of language, ontology, and epistemology." Here, more fundamental questions are asked, including the meaning of revelation, the linguistic convention of the Salaf, the nature and structure of reason, and questions of basic ontology. Each chapter reveals how Ibn Taymiyya reconfigures alleged deviations promulgated by deviant and stray groups and thinkers, offering instead a conceptual schema that coheres with the intent and text of revelation along with the collective contributions of the Salaf. It is within this section that El-Tobgui lays out Ibn Taymiyya's contextual method of interpretation, or "conceptual *ta'wīl*," one that works on the principle of "self-contained intertextuality." In this, meaning is "dependent on and inseparable from context" (197), with the traditionally held dichotomy of "literal" (*ḥaqīqa*) vs. "figurative" (*majāz*) and meaning contested as a "mental construct entirely divorced from the way language functions in the real world" (194). On this view, the latter dichotomy (literal vs. figurative) can only be sustained by ignoring context and taking language as possessing "literal" or "real" meanings which, in certain circumstances, have to be abandoned for "metaphorical" or "non-literal" ones. For Ibn Taymiyya, "all meaning ... is determined by context, as judged in light of the known, communally shared conventions of the language in question" (194).

El-Tobgui brings all of this together in chapter 6 by applying Ibn Taymiyya's reforms and renovations—linguistic, ontological, epistemological—to the question that concerned him the most, namely, that of the divine attributes. It is here that El-Tobgui considers the attribute of knowledge, systematically reviewing how knowledge can be understood to apply to God in manner that is "fully commensurate with the essential reality of the (divine) essence in which it inheres," "necessary, unlimited (that is, it encompasses all possible knowables), perfect, and indestructible," and maintaining ontological distinction between the "true reality" (*ḥaqīqa*) of God's knowing and our own limited capacity (as contingent beings) to know things (286).

El-Tobgui concludes his work by summarizing some of the core contentions in the *Dar'* and revisiting the centrality of the concept of *fiṭra* in the writings of Ibn Taymiyya originally expounded in chapter 5. El-Tobgui suggests a translation of *fiṭra* as “original normative disposition,” inclusive of not only “a priori knowledge lodged in the mind ab initio” (294) but also, more precisely, a “moral *cum* cognitive faculty” (195). A healthy *fiṭra* yields certitude, and ravaging doubts emerge through corruptions, such as those of erroneous doctrines or sinful indulgences. But even if the *fiṭra* is compromised by such factors, it is never fully lost, as rehabilitation and rectification remain available for the sincere and the paths of rational investigation and spiritual purification can both serve to course-correct a stray soul. As El-Tobgui describes it, “*fiṭra* is to the moral-cognitive dimension of a man as health is to his body” (298), with the guiding light of revelation necessary and concomitant to proper cognition.

The appendices provide both summary and detailed outlines of the *Dar'*, and extensive glossaries documenting Arabic terms (almost 400 in total) and proper names with brief entries denoting their studies, death dates, and relevant contributions. These latter glossaries are especially useful resources for students and scholars of Islamic studies.

El-Tobgui's work is, by any measure, an impressive and authoritative contribution to the discipline of Islamic theology and within it to the burgeoning field of Taymiyyan studies. The importance of El-Tobgui's work is especially evident in its immediate relevance to the real-world challenges facing Muslims dealing with conflicts between Islam and certain features of modernity and the abiding status of Ibn Taymiyya within that discourse. Accordingly, students, lay Muslims, and theologians will find the work elucidating to varying degrees, and the work abounds with rich theological commentary, analysis, and comparison.

Possible extensions to this work may include bringing it into conversation with the remainder of Ibn Taymiyya's encyclopedic oeuvre. Like the *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, many of Ibn Taymiyya's works exhibit his expository style, one that makes seemingly haphazard digressions and attends to multiple interlocutors simultaneously. They also address similar topics, with theological debates occupying a distinct point of focus in many of Ibn Taymiyya's treatises. Bringing forth the consistency in Ibn Taymiyya's thinking through a careful study of these works in tandem, including areas in which his thought may have evolved or developed, can serve to provide a larger

portrait of the great shaykh's thinking, one that has too often been victim to gross distortion and exaggerated caricature.

Any student or scholar looking to understand Ibn Taymiyya will be served well by reading El-Tobgui's work, and it is sure to remain a pivotal contribution to the field of Taymiyyan studies for the foreseeable future.

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