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IBN TAYMIYYA, SALAFISM AND MERCY

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Some analysts wonder whether the Damascene Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) was a Salafi or not. M. Kh. Harrâs affirms that he was.¹ According to M. M. M. 'Awîs, he was not.² Whatever the answer, he has been accused at some point of being "*the Father of the Islamic Revolution*"³ and, more recently, was named in *The 9/11 Commission Report* as the source of the "*long tradition of extreme intolerance*"⁴ leading to Usama Bin Ladin. In my "*Ibn Taymiyya, against Extremisms*" and other publications,⁵ I tried to

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1. See M. Kh. HARRÂS, *Bâ'ith al-nahdat al-islâmiyya Ibn Taymiyya al-salafi: naqduhu li-masâlik al-mutakallimîn wa l-falâsifa fi l-ilâhiyyât* (Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1404/1984)

2. See M. M. M. 'AWÎS, *Ibn Taymiyya laysa salafiyyan* (Cairo: Dâr al-Nahdat al-'Arabiyya, 1970)

3. See E. SIVAN, *Ibn Taymiyya: Father of the Islamic Revolution. Medieval Theology & Modern Politics*, in *Encounter*, vol. LX/v (1983), p. 41-50

4. See T. H. KEAN, *The 9/11 Commission Report. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York - London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 362

5. See Y. MICHOT, *IBN TAYMIYYA. Against Extremisms. Texts translated, annotated and introduced. With a foreword by Bruce B. LAWRENCE* (Beirut - Paris: Albouraq, 1433/2012); *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule. Ibn Taymiyya on fleeing from sin, kinds of emigration, the status of Mardin (domain of peace/war, domain composite), the conditions for challenging power. Texts translated, annotated and presented in relation to six modern readings of the Mardin fatwa. Foreword by J. PISCATORI* (Oxford - London: Interface Publications, 2006); *IBN TAYMIYYA. Mécréance et pardon.*

show that things are more complex. A clear perception of Ibn Taymiyya's understanding of Salafism is nevertheless of crucial importance, not only in relation to the modern world but also for a proper assessment of the history of Ottoman puritanism, as illustrated for example by Mehmed Birgivi and Ahmad al-Rûmî al-Aqhisârî, and of the latter's influence on the development of radicalism in the Indian subcontinent.⁶ However, this would be another topic and let us thus go back to the Mamlûk sultanate...

Ibn Taymiyya was both a theologian and a muftî and, in this second capacity, must be expected to have expressed a variety of legal opinions according to circumstances and audiences. It is therefore always difficult to affirm that this or that view was his "*doctrine*", permanent and final. Methodologically, it is also more beneficial to look at a specific fatwa or other type of text as it is then possible to affirm, despite imprecisions of chronology and context, that this was how he then tackled a particular topic. The present paper will start with an analysis of some pages of the first of the two volumes of the *Kitâb al-Istiqâma*,⁷ *Book of Rectitude*, which Ibn Taymiyya composed in Egypt, possibly while he was in detention or under house arrest, between 705/1305 and 709/1309, probably in 708/1308-709/1309. The book includes a discussion of different parts of the famous *Epistle (Risâla)* on Sufism by Abû l-Qâsim al-Qushayrî (d. 465/1072), notably six arguments against those who, like al-Qushayrî, promote the use of music for spiritual purposes (*samâ'*). In the course of the sixth argument, the Damascene muftî unexpectedly addressed the question of the origins of the military music of the Egypto-Syrian

Textes traduits de l'arabe, introduits et annotés (Beirut: Albouraq, "Écrits spirituels d'Ibn Taymiyya, 2", 1426/ 2005)

6. See Y. MICHOT, AHMAD AL-RÛMÎ AL-AQHISÂRÎ. *Against Smoking. An Ottoman Manifesto. Introduction, Editio Princeps and Translation. Foreword by Mohammad A. NADWI* (Oxford: Interface Publications - Markfield, Kube Publishing, 1431/2010)

7. IBN TAYMIYYA, *al-Istiqâma*, ed. M. R. SÂLIM, 2 vols. (Riyâdh: Dâr al-Fadîla li-l-Nashr wa l-Tawzî' - Beirut: Dâr Ibn Hazm li-l-Tibâ'a wa l-Nashr wa l-Tawzî', 1420/2000), vol. I, p. 322-331 (sigle I). On the date the book was written, see M. R. Sâlim's introduction to his edition, p. 6. On its content, see Y. MICHOT, *Ibn Taymiyya's Commentary on the Creed of al-Hallâj*, in A. SHIHADÉH (ed.), *Sufism and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 123-136; p. 124

sultanate – the Mamlûk equivalent of the Ottoman *mehter*. One thing leading to another, it is in relation to this surprising topic and other practices of the Mamlûk elite that Ibn Taymiyya then writes very interesting things about the “*way of the Ancients*” (*salaf*). The ideas he expresses in *al-Istiqâma* will thereafter be explored further by looking at several other texts – in relation, notably, to recent political developments in the Muslim world. Rather than summarizing or paraphrasing Ibn Taymiyya’s writings, I will as much as possible let him speak first, and then offer some comments.⁸

1. “These beatings (*daqdaqqa*) and these trumpets (*bûq*) that resemble the shofars of the Jews and the bells of the Nazarenes were not known in the time of the well-guided caliphs, nor of the emirs of the Muslims who [reigned] after them. It is only, I think, a novelty introduced by one of the kings of the East (*mashriq*), from amongst the people of Persia. They have indeed introduced (*ahdatha*) many novelties in the matter of the emirate and fighting, and these have spread through the earth as their kingdom expanded; so far so that the young is educated in the idea that things have always been that way and that the old man falling into decrepitude thinks likewise. They know nothing else but that. Moreover, they object the opposite to be said by anyone. Some people are even of the opinion that it is a novelty introduced (*ihdâth*) by ‘Uthmân b. ‘Affân. The matter is nevertheless not so. On the contrary, this was not practiced commonly by the caliphs and the emirs posterior to ‘Uthmân, God be satisfied with him.”⁹

Modern historians might differ with Ibn Taymiyya about the exact origins of the military music of the Mamlûks.¹⁰ One should however remem-

8. I have published a complete French translation of the pages of *al-Istiqâma* examined here in my *Textes spirituels d’Ibn Taymiyya* (Nouvelle série). XII. Salafisme vrai et nouveautés mamlûkes, on www.muslimphilosophy.com (December 2011), p. 1-6

9. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Istiqaama*, vol. I, p. 325

10. On these origins, see H. G. FARMER, *Encyclopaedia of Islam* II, art. *Tabl Khâna*. Some high-ranking Mamlûk emirs “were entitled to have a band playing (*tablkhâna*) in front of their houses. According to the sources, the *tablkhâna* consisted of a group of musical instruments, including many drums and some trumpets (*abwâq*), and flutes (*zumûr*) of various timbres and playing in a specific style. Every evening, fol-

ber that his incrimination of the Persians in this concern is less dictated by historical research than by religious conviction; in this case, it is some Prophetic hadiths that serve as his guide:

2. “In the community appeared what the Prophet, God bless him and grant him peace, had informed us about by saying: ‘You will surely adopt the modes of action of the communities that preceded you, inch by inch, cubit by cubit.’ – ‘The Persians and the Rûmîs?’¹¹ they said. He answered: ‘Who else would it be if it was not them?’¹² He also said, in this other hadith: ‘You will travel the paths (*sunna*) of those who preceded you as the feathers of an arrow correspond to each other; so far so that, if they entered into a lizard’s hole, you would enter it also.’ – ‘O Messenger of God, the Jews and the Nazarenes?’¹³ they said. He answered: ‘Who else would it be?’ Each of these two hadiths are in the *Sahîh*. He informed us thereby that there would be in the community people seeking to resemble the Jews and the Nazarenes, just as

lowing the evening prayer, the instruments would be played [...] The tablkhâna accompanied the tulbs of the sultan or the amirs in wars and expeditions with the aim of heartening the troops and striking terror into the hearts of the enemy” (D. AYALON, Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army, II, in Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 15/3 (London, 1953), p. 448-476; p. 469-470)

For Ibn Khaldûn, “the Muslims refrained from beating drums and blowing trumpets at the beginning of Islam. They wanted to avoid the coarseness of royal authority and do without royal customs. They also despised pomp, which has nothing whatever to do with the truth. The caliphate then came to be royal authority, and the Muslims learned to esteem the splendour and luxury of this world. Persian and Byzantines clients, subjects of the preceding (pre-Islamic) dynasties, mixed with them and showed them their ways of ostentation and luxury” (İBN KHALDÛN, The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History. Translated and Introduced by F. ROSENTHAL. Abridged and edited by N. J. DAWOOD. With a new introduction by Bruce B. LAWRENCE (Princeton - Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 215

11. I.e. the Byzantines

12. See İBN HANBAL, Musnad (Bûlâq ed., vol. II, p. 325)

13. See AL-BUKHÂRİ, Sahîh, Anbiyâ’ (Bûlâq ed., vol. IV, p. 169) ; MUSLİM, Sahîh, ‘İlm (Constantinople ed., vol. VIII, p. 57)

there would be therein people seeking to resemble the Persians and the Rûmîs.”¹⁴

For Ibn Taymiyya, the influence exerted by non-Arabs on Muslims was so great that it caused among their military the apparition of a number of other novelties than martial music. He writes after passage 2:

3. “This is why the emblematic practices (*sha’ira*) of the non-Arabs – the Persians and others– appeared among the emblematic practices of the military (*jund*) and the fighters of this country; and this, even in the clothing, the fighting operations, and the names given to the emiral offices. This is for instance the case with the terms constructed with the suffix *-dâr*, just as our military say *rikâb-dâr*, *tisht-dâr*, and *jân-dâr*.¹⁵ This *-dâr*, in the language of the Persians, has the meaning of ‘master’ (*sâhib*) and ‘guardian’ (*hâfiz*).”¹⁶

After listing and explaining the Persianate titles of more than a dozen of Mamlûk dignitaries, from the “guardian of the mounts” (*rikâbdâr*) to the “master of hospitality” (*mihmândâr*),¹⁷ Ibn Taymiyya concludes:

4. “The novelties introduced (*muhdath*) in the fields of the emirate, kingship and fighting are very numerous but this is not the place to speak about them.”¹⁸

For Ibn Taymiyya, novelties are not innovations (*bid’a*) as he reserves this latter term for changes in the creed and the canonic practices of Islam. He nevertheless writes, just before passage 1, that “the Sunna, when fighting, was to lower the voice,” i.e. not to shout and, a fortiori, not to accompany jihâd with music. This being so, what kind of religious position should one

14. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Istiqâma*, vol. I, p. 325

15. *jândâr* : *khândâr* I

16. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Istiqâma*, vol. I, p. 326

17. Ibn Taymiyya’s list of emiral offices should be of great interest to the historians of Mamlûk institutions. It is more complete than the list given by Abû l-Fidâ’ and predates al-Qalqashandî’s by more than a century; see Y. MICHOT, *Textes spirituels* N.S. XII

18. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Istiqâma*, vol. I, p. 328

adopt vis-à-vis martial music and other such novelties? Can they be condoned or should they be condemned?

The Shaykh al-Islam's answer to such questions is introduced by a realistic assessment of the diversity of human circumstances and a pragmatic reminder concerning the finality of the prophetic call:

5. "Most human affairs include these three types of things: commanded things, prohibited things, and permitted things. What is obligatory, it is commanding what God commands, prohibiting what God prohibits, and allowing what God permits. However, when an individual or a group do not perform something commanded except by also committing something forbidden and more important than that, or¹⁹ do not abandon something forbidden except by also abandoning something commanded²⁰ and more important than that, the truth is that nothing was commanded by God in a manner necessarily entailing that something preponderantly forbidden also occur; just as nothing was forbidden by God in a manner necessarily entailing to abandon²¹ something preponderantly commanded.²² Commanding the proper and forbidding the reprehensible, this is what the Messengers have been sent out for, the purpose being the pursuit of beneficial things and bringing them to their perfection (*tahsîl al-masâlih wa takmilu-hâ*), as well as the neutralization of factors of corruption and their diminution (*ta'tîl al-mafâsîd wa taqlîlu-hâ*), as far as possible."²³

For Ibn Taymiyya, this world's reality is never black and white but *al-wân*, multicoloured, multifaceted like a stormy sea, and navigating between its sharp reefs is always a dangerous, uneasy exercise requiring continuous attention, weighting of pros and cons, pondering of aims and effects rela-

19. lâ tatrûku mahzûran + : aw I

20. illâ bi-tark ma'mûran : lâ tatrûku ma'mûran illâ [li-mahzûr] I

21. tark : [wuqû'] I

22. The text of the three first lines of p. 330 is manifestly corrupt and the emendations between square brackets made by the editor do not improve the situation. Those suggested here are inspired by the Taymiyyan text concerning the same topic translated in Y. MICHOT, IBN TAYMIYYA. *Against Extremisms*, p. 264-266.

23. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Istiqâma*, vol. I, p. 329-330.

tively to each other, in order to make the right choices: lesser evils and greater goods. Moreover, humans are weak, inconstant, and mostly ignorant. The Prophet himself had to take this situation into account and did not expect from the believers anything that was impossible to achieve. Those wanting to guide the Muslims on his path should therefore be extremely cautious not to take any unconsidered, irresponsible, absolute, measures. Ibn Taymiyya could indeed not come with a stronger, more explicit, statement: even commanding the proper and forbidding the reprehensible may sometimes be inappropriate:

6. "When commanding the proper and forbidding the reprehensible necessarily entails more corruption (*fasâd*) than what it encompasses of goodness (*salâh*), it is not Lawful (*lam yakun mashrû'an*). The imâms of the Sunna have detested one to take part in the fighting during the dissensions that many of the adepts of caprices cause²⁴ by commanding²⁵ the proper and forbidding the reprehensible; this, when commanding the proper and forbidding the reprehensible necessarily entails dissensions producing a more serious corruption than there would come from abstaining from doing so. The lesser of two corruptions shall indeed not be repelled by means of the highest one. One shall rather repel the highest of the two by bearing the lesser one, as the Prophet said, God bless him and grant him peace: 'Shall I not inform you of something more eminent than the degree of fasting, praying, giving alms, commanding the proper and forbidding the reprehensible?' – 'Oh yes, o Messenger of God,' the Companions said. – 'To re-establish good relations (*islâh dhât al-bayn*),' he said. 'Have corrupted relations and there comes the woman who shaves! I do not say that she shaves the hair but, rather, that she shaves the religion.'"²⁶

24. yusabbibu-hâ : yusammî-hâ I

25. bi-l-amr : al-amr I

26. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Istiqâma*, vol. I, p. 330. The meaning of this shaving of the religion is that nothing remains of it. On this hadîth, see ABÛ DÂ'ÛD, *Sunan*, Adab (ed. M. M. D 'ABD AL-HAMÎD, vol. IV, p. 280, no 4919); AL-TIRMIDHÎ, *Sunan*, Qiyâma (ed. 'A. R. M. 'UTHMÂN, vol. IV, p. 73, no 2627); IBN HANBAL, *Musnad* (Bûlâq ed., vol. VI, p. 444-445)

This passage 6 confirms Ibn Taymiyya's total awareness of the risks always inherent to the issuing of religious opinions. Coming back to the question of Mamlûk military music, he nevertheless firmly disagrees with those who see some preponderant benefit therein and reaffirms his indefectible attachment to the "way of the Ancients (*salaf*)" on this, and other, points:

7. "Some might be of the opinion that there is a preponderant benefit (*maslaha râjiha*) in these sonorities newly introduced in the matter of jihâd. It is nevertheless in holding to what is proper that the preponderant interest resides, just as is the case with the sonorities of the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. The early vanguard of Islam and those who followed them in beneficence were indeed more eminent than the later Muslims, in everything: the prayer and what is of its genus – the remembrance and the invocation of God, reciting the Qur'ân and listening to it, etc. –, the jihâd, the emirate and what is attached thereto – the various types of policies (*siyâsât*), the chastisements and the procedures concerning the payment of sums of money and their spending. The way of the Ancients is indeed more perfect in everything (*fa-inna tariq al-salaf akmal fi kull shay*'). The Muslim shall nevertheless implement thereof what he is capable of (*wa lâkin yaf'al al-muslim min dhâlika mâ yaqdiru 'alay-hi*)"²⁷

The short sentence ending this passage 7 is as important as the profession of Salafism preceding it and should in fact never be separated from it since it qualifies what effectively constitutes true Salafism for Ibn Taymiyya: a faithfulness to the way of the Ancients both absolute (*fi kull shay*') and mercifully conscious of man's incapacity; in other words, an idealism both unconditional and tempered by reality. To justify his position, he could have quoted the verse of the Qur'ân, *al-'Asr* - CIII, 2 "Indeed man is at a loss." He chooses another verse and adds a Prophetic tradition:

8. "God Most High said (Q. *al-Taghâbun* - lxiv, 16): 'Fear God as much as you can!' The Prophet, God bless him and grant him peace also

27. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Istiqâma*, vol. I, p. 331

said: 'When I command something to you, execute thereof what you can!'²⁸
And there is neither power nor might except by God."²⁹

It is worth exploring further the theological rationale behind the merciful and pragmatic realism with which Ibn Taymiyya concludes his examination of the problem of Mamlūk military music and other novelties and which characterizes his Salafism. A few points only will be highlighted here.

Somehow, disobeying is less serious than innovating. As Ibn Taymiyya writes it,

9. "Innovation is more loved by Iblīs than disobedience. Someone disobeying indeed knows that he is disobeying and repents. As for the innovator, he reckons that what he does is obeying and he does not repent."³⁰

Christianity appears to the Damascene muftī as a religion of perpetual innovation in which the revealed norms are replaced, generation after generation, council after council, by new, man-made, innovated rules which the Church, or some of the Churches, then impose. Because of this normative evolution, practices that were scripturally forbidden yesterday become accepted today and not considered sins anymore. Evolutions are not unknown in Islamic societies but they result from a different deep logic. When they actually take place, it is not (in Sunnī Islam) because of the involvement of some central clerical authority imposing them but because a consensus of the community develops that does not in fact see them as innovations. But if such evolutions indeed come to be judged, in the community, as unfaithful to the revealed and prophetic sources, they have no chance to last. The Qur'ān and Sunna keep their exclusive authoritativeness and are never to be replaced by any innovation. Although the scriptural norm thus remains *the* Norm, first and final, it is of course disobeyed in innumerable circumstances. As human beings and societies indigent of the mercy of the Lord, we indeed

28. See AL-BUKHĀRĪ, *Sahīh*, I'tisām (Būlāq ed., vol. IX, p. 94-95); MUSLIM, *Sahīh*, Hajj (Constantinople ed., vol. IV, p. 102)

29. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Istiqāma*, vol. I, p. 331

30. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, ed. 'A. R. b. M. IBN QĀSIM, 37 vols. (Rabat: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1401/1981. — King Khālid edition. Sigle F), vol. XI, p. 633

continuously disobey the commands and prohibitions of His religion. In doing so, we nevertheless remain aware that we are doing nothing better than sinning and are always invited to repent. In other words, we are not questioning God's rule by associating with Him human religious or ethical authorities. Despite not usually living at the level of commitment required by this *tawhîd al-hukm wa l-amr*, we remain convinced that it is the only ideal worth striving for in order to go from darkness to the light. There will always be a gap between what we should do and what we effectively come up with. It creates a dynamic tension towards a better world which is at the heart of Ibn Taymiyya's understanding of Islam. As expected with him, this understanding of the religion is once more a *via media* between two extremes – in this case two opposite ways of approaching human sinning: one by normalizing sins through innovated rules and thus reducing the divine commands and prohibitions to nothing, the other by denying the forgivable nature of sins and thus seeing nothing else than God's commands and prohibitions, without attention for His mercy.

God's mercy is indeed, for Ibn Taymiyya, a fundamental principle. Firstly, as explicitly stated in the Qur'anic verse *al-Baqara* - ii, 286, which he quotes in several occasions, "God does not burden a soul except with that which it is capable of carrying." Moreover, the Shaykh al-Islam insists more than once on the following:

10. "Every man who makes an error is not on that account alone an unbeliever, nor a pervert (*fâsiq*). To the contrary, God has absolved the errors and forgetfulness of this community. Thus the Exalted has said in His Book, in the invocation of the Messenger, God pray over him and grant him peace, and of the believers: 'Our Lord, do not hold us strictly to account if we forget or err!'³¹ And it is established in the *Sahîh*³² that God has said: 'I have done so.'³³

31. Q. al-Baqara - ii, 286.

32. See MUSLIM, *Sahîh*, *Îmân* (Constantinople ed., vol. I, p. 81)

33. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmû' al-fatâwâ*, vol. III, p. 420

Directly related to this tolerant approach of Muslims' deficiencies is the cautiousness, to say the least, which Ibn Taymiyya expresses in the following passage vis-à-vis anathematizing other Muslims:

11. "It is not permissible to call a Muslim 'unbeliever' (*takfīr*), not for a sin which he has committed, nor for anything about which he was in error, such as the questions about which the people of the Qibla dispute [...] For none of these factions is it permissible to call the other 'unbeliever'; nor to judge their blood and property lawful, even when there is in this faction a proven innovation (*bid'a muhaqqāqa*). How thus, a fortiori, will things be if the faction calling the other 'unbeliever' is itself innovating? It may be that the innovation of the latter people is grosser (*ghalīz*), just as it may be that the innovation of the former people is so. The most likely thing, however, is that all of them are ignorant of the truths about which they differ!"³⁴

In opposition to those who unconditionally resort to *takfīr* and to other practitioners of automatic condemnations, Ibn Taymiyya insists not only upon the divine mercy, but also upon the primacy of faith, circumspection and the Sharī'a rules in the matter of issuing anathemas, the need to take account of circumstances, and the imperative requirement that the one accused have had some Islamic upbringing. Even the Ancients (*salaf*), he writes, sometimes had disagreements, questions or doubts about some topics!

12. "The fundamental principle to follow in this subject is that, about spoken words that are expressive of unbelief vis-à-vis the Book, the Tradition (*sunna*) and the consensus (*ijmā'*), one will say in absolute manner that they are words of unbelief, as demonstrated by the proofs of Legal nature. Faith is indeed among the statuses (*hukm*) fixed by God and His Messenger. It is not something of which people will judge according to their opinions and caprices! For any individual making such statements one must however not judge that he is an unbeliever until the conditions for accusing someone of unbelief (*takfīr*) have been established for him, and until the reasons forbidding doing so have been reduced to nothing. Someone may say for example that wine or usury are lawful on account of his adherence to Islam being re-

34. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, vol. III, p. 282-283.

cent, or because he grew up in remote steppes, or because of his having heard some sayings that he disputes and of which he has not believed that they come from the Qur'ân, nor that they are hadîths of God's Messenger, God pray over him and grant him peace. So too certain among the Ancients (*salaf*) disputed certain things until it was established to their eyes that the Prophet, God pray over him and grant him peace, had said them. Similarly, the Companions had doubts about things like the seeing of God, etc., until the moment when they questioned God's Messenger, God pray over him and grant him peace, about these subjects."³⁵

For Ibn Taymiyya, how could an ulema show less mercy than God to the Muslims of his time? As a muftî, he is indeed well aware of the state of the society he lives in, with many of its people, including rulers like the Îlk-hâns of Persia or the Mamlûks of Egypt and Syria, often born in the steppes of Central Asia or elsewhere, far away from the traditional centres of Islamic scholarship, and recently converted to Islam. The golden age of Medina is long gone and the people he has in view appear to him less close to the Companions of the Prophet and to the two generations of believers who followed them than to the latter-day Muslims portrayed in the hadîth, mostly ignorant but nevertheless forgiven by God. It could be added that these people are also quite similar to us...

13. "Many people may be growing up in places and times in which many of the sciences of prophethood have faded (*indarasa*), so much so that nobody remains there any more who might communicate that, of the Book and the Wisdom, with which God sent His Messenger. Not much is known any longer of that with which God sent His Messenger and there is no-one there who could communicate that. People finding themselves in a situation like that shall not be accused of unbelief. That is why there was agreement of the imâms on the fact that someone who has grown up in the steppe, far from the people of knowledge and faith, who has only recently converted to Islam and contests one or other of these outward (*zâhir*) prescriptions recurrent in the canonical sources, shall not to accused of unbelief until he has

35. IBN TAYMIYYA, Majmû' al-fatâwâ, vol. XXXV, p. 165

knowledge of that with which the Messenger came. That is why there is in the *hadīth*:³⁶ ‘A time will come upon men when they will know neither prayer nor alms-tax, nor fasting nor pilgrimage any more, unless it is a very elderly man or a very aged old woman. “We would overhear,” someone will say, “our fathers in the midst of saying ‘No god but God’.” It was said to Hudhayfa: “To say ‘No god but God’ will not be of any use to them³⁷ if they do not know either prayer or alms-tax or fasting³⁸ or pilgrimage!” He said:³⁹ “That will save them from the Fire.”⁴⁰

These texts 9 to 13, like many others that could also be quoted, certainly offer another image of the Damascene Shaykh al-Islam than the biased, caricatural, judgements still circulating too often about his personality and ideas. Hence the following question: two or three years after the Arab Spring offered the opportunity to so-called modern Salafī movements to come to power here and there in the Muslim world, do Ibn Taymiyya’s works remain pertinent to shed light on the ups and downs of the new societal alchemy initiated, to understand what sometimes went wrong, and to improve things in the coming years? Somehow, I would argue, yes.

On the one hand, it is of course true that, during the Arab Spring, the old demons of military dictatorship, anarchy or poverty did not die everywhere as quickly and definitively as had been hoped for by many.⁴¹ On the other hand, it seems impossible not to consider that, despite the best intentions animating them, some of the democratically elected religious governments born of the Arab Spring – and even the Turkish AKP – have sometimes been going too fast in the re-routing of their countries on the path of

36. See IBN MĀJA, *Sunan, Fitan* (M. F. ‘ABD AL-BĀQI ed., vol. II, p. 1344-1345, no. 4049)

37. *fa-qīla li-Hudhayfa mā yughnī ‘an-hum qawl lâ ilāha illā Allāh + : Allāh F (hom.)*

38. *wa lâ sawm + : zakāh F*

39. — : *wa lâ sawm F*

40. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, vol. XI, p. 407-408

41. To prevent any misunderstanding, let it be said clearly here that, in my opinion, democracy does not need to be protected by military coups and that the regimes born of such coups are illegitimate, be it in Egypt or anywhere else.

God (*fî sabîl Allâh*), with the consequence that a more or less important part of the populations affected drew back and opposed the societal evolution orchestrated by them. Or, at least, such are the thoughts suggested by a number of passages from Ibn Taymiyya's *Collection of Fatwas (Majmû' al-fatâwâ)* and *The Way of the Prophetic Tradition (Minhâj al-sunnat al-nabawiyya)*. When Muslim societies have been systematically cut from their past, westernized by force, culturally muzzled, secularized *à la française* and structurally de-traditionalized by more than a century of colonization and decades of dictatorial independence, it is useless to imagine possible to "re-İslâmize" them in an instant. The identity trouble is too deep, the societal trauma too serious to attempt anything else than a patient, subtle and very slow therapy, gently, little by little. It is therefore also useless to dream of re-establishing a new golden age of the Medinian type by double doses of commanding good and forbidding evil. But let us allow Ibn Taymiyya to explain himself how to operate in such times of religious lukewarmness, when the effects of the prophetic message have nearly totally faded and old people barely remember that their forefathers were saying *Lâ ilâha illâ Llâh*.

14. "It is proper for the scholar (*'âlim*) to ponder (*tadabbur*) these various kinds of questions. In some of them [...] what is obligatory is to show leniency (*'afw*) regarding the commanding and prohibiting of certain things, not to declare lawful (*tahlîl*) what is prohibited nor to forsake (*isqât*) what is obligatory. For example, there may ensue from a scholar's commanding an act of obedience, the doing of an act of disobedience greater than it: he therefore abandons commanding it in order to repulse the occurrence of that act of disobedience [...] For example, he abandons bringing a sinner before an unjust holder of power who, in chastising him, would be in enmity to the sinner more gravely harmful than his sin. Another example: by prohibiting some reprehensible thing (*munkar*), he might leave undone something proper (*ma'rûf*) of far greater usefulness than the abandonment of this reprehensible things. He keeps quiet therefore rather than prohibiting it, for fear that prohibiting it necessarily entails abandoning something that God and His Messenger have commanded, something that in his eyes is more impor-

tant than the simple abandonment of that reprehensible thing⁴² — Mamlûk martial music for example.

Ponderation (*tadabbur*) and leniency (*'afw*)! And realizing that proceeding intelligently and mercifully does not automatically entail abandoning the commanding of good and forbidding of evil, i.e. replacing the divine norm, the religion, with some innovated rules, but just going for the lesser evil and the greatest good in complex situations! In some cases, it will even be obligatory for the authorities, religious or civil, to keep silent rather than to command and forbid. Before anything else, they should also learn how to communicate:

15. "So the scholar sometimes commands and sometimes prohibits, sometimes he authorizes and sometimes he remains silent rather than commanding, prohibiting or authorizing—authorizing, for example, a sheer or preponderant virtue, or prohibiting a sheer or preponderant corruption. And, in case of incompatibility of two things, he will [...] make the preponderant thing preponderant, according to what is possible. But if the one to whom command and prohibition are addressed does not, whether on account of his ignorance or on account of his injustice, even hold to what the one addressing these things to him judges it possible to say to him, and it is not possible to put an end to his ignorance and injustice, the best (*aslah*) is perhaps to abandon the attempt and to abstain from addressing commands and prohibitions to him. Thus it has been said that, among the questions that come up, there are some for which the appropriate answer is to remain silent, as the Legislator (*shâri'*) was silent at the outset, rather than commanding certain things and prohibiting others, which situation continued until the time when Islam had the upper hand and triumphed.

So it goes similarly for what concerns expounding (*bayân*) and communicating (*balâgh*): the scholar shall delay the exposition and communication of certain things until the moment when he has the possibility (*waqt al-tamakkun*) of doing so, just as God, Glorified is He, delayed the sending down of certain verses and the exposition of certain judgements (*hukm*) until

42. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmû' al-fatâwâ*, vol. XX, p. 58

the Messenger of God, God pray over him and grant him abundant peace, had the possibility of expounding them. What makes the situation really clear on this point is that God said: 'We do not torment with a chastisement until we have sent a Messenger' (Q. *al-Isrâ* - xvii, 15). The divine argument (*hujja*) against the servants rests on only two things. It has by way of conditions only that they have the possibility to have knowledge of what God has sent down as revelation and that they are able to implement it. Whoever is unable to know—like the madman—or is unable to act, neither command nor prohibition is imposed on him. When there is an interruption in the knowledge of a part of the religion or there is incapacity to implement a part of it, this situation, for the one who is incapable of knowing or implementing this part of what it says, is like the situation of someone who is cut off from the knowledge of the whole religion or incapable of implementing it in its entirety like the madman, for example. Such are times of religious lukewarmness (*awqât al-fatarât*). When someone then comes along who, among the ulemas, or the emirs, or the whole of their two orders, takes the religion in hand, his exposition of that with which the Messenger came is done little by little (*shay'an fa-shay'an*), on the pattern of the exposition that the Messenger did of that with which he was sent, little by little (*shay'an fa-shay'an*). We know that the Messenger only communicates what it is possible to know and to implement, and the Law did not come all at once (*wa lam ta'ti al-shari'a jumlatan*). Thus it is said: 'If you want to be obeyed, command what people are capable of.'⁴³

The Messenger sometimes kept silent... God Himself delayed some revelations until the appropriate moment... The religion was not established in one day but "little by little", *shay'an fa-shay'an*... And those were golden days, not an era of religious tepidity and civilizational madness like ours. Rather than promoting Islamic revolutions or rushing in changing legal systems in place to impose the Sharî'a, what E. Sivan's so-called "Father of the Islamic Revolution" would recommend, as far as we can assume on the basis of the texts presented here, would be to prepare the ground until the right moment and to proceed progressively, very cautiously. This would notably

43. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmû' al-fatâwâ*, vol. XX, p. 58-60

require to build a true partnership between the people and their leaders. For him, there is indeed no effective authority without its acceptance by those over whom it is supposed to be exercised. Rejecting all forms of autocracy, Ibn Taymiyya underlines the necessity of a veritable association (*mushâraka*) between government and the governed. Just so he emphasizes that no imâm can claim to lead a congregational prayer or the Friday prayer if nobody is actually there to pray with him.

16. "The imâm is the associate (*sharik*) of the people in respect of matters of general interest (*al-masâlih al-âmma*). On his own, he is indeed not capable of accomplishing them unless he and they associate for that. Thus, it is not possible for him to execute the penalties (*hadd*), nor to recover people's rights, nor to honour them, nor to lead the jihâd against an enemy – unless the people help him. Indeed, it is not even possible for him to lead the Friday prayer or the congregational prayer if they do not pray with him. Moreover, it is not possible that they do what he commands them if not with their force and their will. Since therefore they are his associates (*mushârik*) in respect of action and power (*qudra*), he will not isolate himself from them in these concerns. The same goes for knowledge and opinion: he must not isolate himself from them in respect of knowledge and opinion; rather, he must, concerning these, associate himself with them. He will therefore be helping them, and they will be helping him. Just as his power is deficient unless they are helping him, so his knowledge is deficient unless they are helping him."⁴⁴

Reformists of our time wishing to renew Islam and to revive the Sunna should in fact, according to Ibn Taymiyya, show towards today's Muslim societies the same tolerance, patience, leniency, that one is supposed to have with new converts or repentants. This is indeed how the Prophet himself acted:

17. "Similarly, the renewer (*mujaddid*) of God's religion and reviver (*muhyi*) of the Prophet's Sunna only communicates what it is possible to

44. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Minhâj al-sunnat al-nabawiyya fi naqd kalâm al-Shî'at al-qadariyya*, ed. M. R. SÂLIM, 9 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, 1409/1989), vol. VI, p. 409-410

know and implement. So also it is not possible that he who enters Islam should see himself inculcated, at the moment that he enters it, with the whole of its prescriptions and commanded to implement them all. Similarly again, for the one who repents of his sins, the one who instructs himself, the one who seeks to be guided by others, it is not possible to communicate to them at the outset all the commandments of the religion, nor to evoke before them the whole of the knowledge to be acquired. Indeed, they would not be able to bear it. Now, as they would not bear it, in this situation it would not be something obligatory for them. And as this would not be something obligatory, it would not be for either the scholar or the emir to make the whole obligatory from the outset. Rather, one shall with leniency abstain from commanding and prohibiting things that it would not be possible for them to know and implement, until the time when that becomes possible, just as the Messenger showed leniency in regard to what he showed leniency in regard to, until the time when he expounded it. To act] in this way shall not signify approving prohibited things, nor abandoning commanding the obligatory things. Obligation and prohibition are indeed conditional on the possibility of knowledge and action. Now, we have hypothesized that this condition was not achieved. Ponder this fundamental principle! It is useful.⁴⁵

As for the protection of freedoms, there is a remarkable text in which the Damascene Shaykh al-Islam strips the authorities of any special ideological power in favour, instead, of "the community of Muhammad as a whole". And if this community is marked by diverse opinions, the authorities must not only accept this pluralism but protect it:

18. "It is not for a magistrate to judge that such-and-such a matter has been commanded by God's Messenger, God pray over him and grant him peace, nor that such-and-such an action is an act of obedience or devotion, or is not an act of obedience and devotion, nor that making a journey to mosques, tombs, and the tomb of the Prophet, is Legally prescribed or is not Legally prescribed. It is not at all for the magistrates to intervene in these matters except the way other Muslims intervene in them. Far rather, it is for

45. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmû' al-fatâwâ*, vol. XX, p. 60

the community (*jami' umma*) of Muhammad as a whole, God pray over him and grant him peace, to speak of this, whoever has some knowledge speaking according to the knowledge he has."⁴⁶

19. "When the mufti, the soldier (*jundî*), and the common man (*'ammî*) speak of a matter in expression of their *ijtihâd* – through *ijtihâd* or through *taqlîd* –, aiming thereby to follow the Messenger, according to their level of knowledge, they do not merit punishment – there is a consensus of the Muslims on that –, even if it is the case that they are committing an error, moreover an error about whose being an error there is a consensus! If they say 'We have spoken the truth!' and justify it with Legal proofs, it is not for any magistrate (*hâkim*) to force them simply to accept what he says, nor to judge that what he says is the Truth, and not what they say. Rather, it is the Book and the Sunna that shall judge between him and them."⁴⁷

An empowerment of individual consciences with pure intentions goes hand in hand with Ibn Taymiyya's magisterial empowerment of the community and doctrinal disempowerment of its governants. When there is no consensus of the community and no decision can be derived from the Qur'ân and the Sunna, Muslims must be allowed to hold to their opinions, each of them worshipping God according to his *ijtihâd*, and no magistrate can force anyone to accept the sayings of another. And, Ibn Taymiyya explicitly states, this respect for the diversity of opinions within the community was the way the Ancients (*salaf*) acted:

20. "That about which the Muslims are in agreement is a truth with which the Messenger came (*mâ ittafaqa 'alay-hi l-muslimûn fa-huwa haqqun jâ'a bi-hi l-rasûl*). There will indeed not be consensual agreement of his community, to God the praise is due, on something constituting a going-astray, just as he, God pray over him and grant him peace, informed us in saying: 'God has preserved you, by the tongue of your Prophet, from reaching a consensus on something constituting a going-astray.'⁴⁸ What they dis-

46. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmû' al-fatâwâ*, vol. XXXV, p. 382

47. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmû' al-fatâwâ*, vol. XXXV, p. 379

48. See ABÛ DA'ÛD, *Sunan, Fitan* ('Abd al-Hamîd ed., vol. IV, p. 98, no. 4253).

pute about they defer to the Book and the Sunna, just as the Exalted has said: 'O you who believe, obey God, obey the Messenger and those among you who hold the command. If you dispute over a matter, defer it to God and the Messenger, if you believe in God and the last Day. That will be best and the best interpretation' (Q. *al-Nisâ'* - iv, 59).

It is thus that the Ancients (*salaf*) acted. One of them could have a hadîth that he had heard or a signification that he had understood while these were hidden from another. This other was nevertheless equally rewarded for his *ijtihâd*, and on him there was not at all any burden of sin in respect of what remained hidden from him after his *ijtihâd*. Thus it is reported in the two *Sahîhs* about the Prophet, God pray over him and grant him peace, that he said: 'When the magistrate (*hâkim*) does *ijtihâd* and gets it right, there are two rewards for him. If he gets it wrong, there is one reward for him.'⁴⁹ If four persons pray in four different directions, the sky being covered with clouds and each of them orienting his prayer in expression of his *ijtihâd*, each of them has obeyed God, Powerful and Majestic is He, and is acquitted of the obligation of that prayer. A single one of them however has hit upon the direction of the Ka'ba and for him there are two rewards."⁵⁰

Be it about the question of the orthodoxy of Mamlûk martial music or about those of the modalities of Islamic renewal and protection of ideological diversity within the community, Ibn Taymiyya's Salafism displays the same qualities of moderation, pragmatism, open-mindedness and mercy. By being both faithful to the revealed and prophetic norms, as paradigmatically implemented by the Ancients, and merciful towards the later Muslims, their weaknesses and their deficiencies, as well as sympathetic to their often traumatic circumstances, it combines idealism and realism into an Islamic humanism most attractive in today's world. And God knows better.

49. See AL-BUKHÂRÎ, *Sahîh*, I'tisâm (Bûlâq ed., vol. IX, p. 108); MUSLIM, *Sahîh*, Aqdiya (Constantinople ed., vol. V, p. 131)

50. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmû' al-fatâwâ*, vol. XXVII, p. 373