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**CORRUPTIONS, IMITATIONS, AND INNOVATIONS:  
TROPES OF IBN TAYMIYYA'S POLEMICS**

**by**

**FARIS AL AHMAD**

A master's thesis submitted to The Graduate Faculty in  
Middle Eastern Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

Corruptions, Imitations, and Innovations: Tropes of Ibn Taymiyya’s Polemics  
by

Faris Al Ahmad

Advisor: Professor Anna Ayse Akasoy

Most of the Mamluk theologian Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad ibn Taymiyya’s opinions had a polemical nature. This paper traces certain common tropes of Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics such as *tahrīf* (corruption), *taqlīd* (imitation), and *bid‘a* (innovation) that he repeatedly used in some of his judgments that targeted Christians, Jews, Sufis, *mutakallimūn*, philosophers, and Nusayris. The paper argues that what connects all of these groups in Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics is the tropes of corruption, imitation, and innovation that he identified in their thought and practice. When investigating Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics within the broader array of religious polemics, a consideration of his commentaries on different groups is important. The fact is that Ibn Taymiyya does not target a religious or intellectual group per se. He targets certain “corrupted or innovated” ideas and practices done by certain groups and being blindly “imitated” by other groups. He does not tolerate any mistakes in theology as a result of the imperfect human intellect not only by the followers of other religions, but also by Muslims. In his judgment strategies, Ibn Taymiyya referred to Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scriptures as well as analytical methods of reason and logic. Nonetheless, he is convinced that Revelation should always take precedent over any human intellect methods in evaluating theology; otherwise, we will corrupt theology.

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## Introduction

*“What can my enemies do to me? My garden and paradise are in my heart. They go with me everywhere I go. My imprisonment is a nook (khalwa)! Killing me is martyrdom (shahāda)! And exiling me out of my home is pilgrimage (siyyāha)!”<sup>1</sup>*

Ibn Taymiyya

The Mamluk theologian, Shaykh al-Islām Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328 A. D.)<sup>2</sup>, is usually described as a polemical, traditionalist, Hanbali shaykh. At the same time, some scholars read him as a rationalist who followed the Qur’an and the Prophet’s tradition in his religious opinions. Ibn Taymiyya’s works have attracted much recent scholarship as they have become the main literature associated with jihadists and radical Islamists. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and with the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Hanbali scholar’s thought became of importance to political and intellectual activists in the Muslim world in particular, and thereupon in academic circles worldwide. He is currently one of the most quoted medieval Muslim scholars. Ibn Taymiyya wrote many Islamic legal opinions or *fatāwā* (sing. *fatwā*-Islamic religious decree or opinion) presenting a bitter criticism of Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers, sects, and religions. Certain opinions of Ibn Taymiyya were also perceived as controversial.

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<sup>1</sup> A famous quote of Ibn Taymiyya that he originally said to his most known disciple, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292-1350), after Ibn Taymiyya had been harassed by the Mamluk authorities for many times. See: ‘Abd al-Majīd ‘Abūd, *Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya: Arā`uhu wa Mawāqifuhu* (Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya: His Opinions and Stands) (Beirut: al-Dhahi Publishing House, 2012), 5.

<sup>2</sup> The genealogy of his full name, titles, and family names usually introduced in Arabic monographs as, *the Shaykh al-Islam, Taqī al-Dīn* (the religious pious) Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Halīm ibn ‘Abd al-Salām ibn ‘Abdullah Ibn Abī l-Qāsim ibn Taymiyya, *the Harrānī* (from Harran), the Damascene Hanbali scholar. For more information see Khairi Yousif, *Ibn Taymiyya: al-Muftarī ‘alyhi fil-‘aqidah* (Ibn Taymiyya: the Wrongly Judged in his Creed) (Cairo: Atlas, 2013), 20.



Indeed, today there is a never-ending debate about this thinker among scholars who are studying Islamic thought, theology, and history.

Ibn Taymiyya was born on Monday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1263 in Harran, five years after the Mongols had invaded Baghdad.<sup>3</sup> Harran is a historical town located between the Euphrates and the Tigris in modern-day Turkey, not far north of the modern borders of Syria. The town had become a homeland for scholars of Islam, especially the Hanbalites.<sup>4</sup> Ibn Taymiyya is a descendent of a traditionally educated family of Hanbali scholars who were in charge of the local Hanbali school in Harran for hundreds of years.<sup>5</sup> However, he had to escape with his family to Damascus during the Mongol invasion of the region.

Reviewing some of Ibn Taymiyya's biographies gives us a general idea of the social, intellectual, and political environment he experienced in Mamluk Damascus. Most of his biographers, including his contemporaries and more recent biographers, cite one of his disciples, Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1347/48). Those who referred to al-Dhahabī or Ibn Kathīr concluded that Ibn Taymiyya had plenty of enemies among the Syrian and Egyptian Mamluk 'ulamā'.<sup>6</sup> In a text written by al-Dhahabī that was first revealed by Caterina Bori, al-Dhahabī offers more details on his master's personal and intellectual qualities. On the one hand, al-Dhahabī lays out all the great personal and intellectual achievements the Damascene scholar enjoyed in his life and in his service of Islam; on the other hand, he also does not hesitate to denigrate his master's personality. For instance, commenting on the way Ibn Taymiyya

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<sup>3</sup> Ahmad Hatīt, *al-Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya: dirāsa fī fikrihi wa ijihādātihī* (The Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya: A Study of his Thought) (London: The Druze Heritage Foundation, 2009), 17. Also see 'Abd al-Majīd 'Abūd, *Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya: Arā'uh wa Mawāqifuh* (Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya: His Opinions and Stands) (Beirut: al-Dhahi Publishing House, 2012), 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmad Hatīt, *al-Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya: dirāsa fī fikrih wa ijihādātih* (The Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya: A Study of his Thought), (London: The Druze Heritage Foundation, 2009), 17-18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Little, "The Historical and Historiographical Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya," *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (1973): 311-327.

responded to his opponents, al-Dhahabī describes him as being frequently tactless and argumentative, as much able to insult as to honor his companion. To put it in al-Dhahabī's terms, "he was firm without giving himself up to flattery or to favoritism, on the contrary, he uttered the bitter truth to which he had been led by his independent judgment, his sharp mind, his vast knowledge of the Islamic tradition and of the [scholars'] opinions."<sup>7</sup> We may extrapolate from this statement that Ibn Taymiyya was explicit in his opinions and somewhat harsh in his criticism and rejected to abate his polemics, in what he saw the truth, in favor of the ruling authorities or other religious shaykhs.

Donald Little offered an analysis of the Damascene scholar's personality based on Ibn Battūta's travel reports with the aim to find if his "personality influenced his career."<sup>8</sup> Upon his visit to Damascus in 1326, Ibn Battūta described Ibn Taymiyya as *majnūn* (insane). Nevertheless, Little points out valid concerns about the credibility of Ibn Battūta's judgment since Ibn Taymiyya was in prison when the traveller arrived to Damascus according to Little's sources. Although Little suspects that Ibn Battūta's judgment was not based on his own observation but rather on what he heard about the shaykh from others, he took it as a valid source to investigate Ibn Taymiyya's life<sup>9</sup>. What makes Little take Ibn Battūta's judgment into consideration is al-Dhahabī's biographical anecdotes about the Hanbali scholar, which he calls "ambivalent" as al-Dhahabī sometimes praised him and other times harshly criticized him<sup>10</sup>. Little supports his argument that Ibn Taymiyya might be mentally ill by connecting Ibn Battūta's polemics to those of al-Dhahabī. Overall, Little states "it is difficult to deny Ibn Battūta's characterization since it is corroborated on more than one occasion by al-Dhahabī. It is cruel perhaps, and even flippant,

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Dhahabī, quoted from primary material used by Caterina Bori, "A New Source for the Biography of Ibn Taymiyya," *The Bulletin of the School of the Oriental and African Studies* 67 (2004): 321-348.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Little, "Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?" *Studia Islamica* 41 (1975): 93.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 96-97.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 103.

but it is not without a grain of truth.”<sup>11</sup> Little thus speculated that Ibn Taymiyya’s mental state had an effect on his career.

The contemporary Tunisian Islamic thinker Rachid Al-Ghanouchi views Ibn Taymiyya differently. He considers him a pioneer of a reformist movement during his time that was “deeply rooted in the decline”<sup>12</sup> of Islamic thought. Al-Ghanouchi believes that a greater part of the Mamluk scholar’s efforts was dedicated to purifying Islamic thought of traces of Hellenic philosophy, agnosticism, inconsequential theological debates, and philosophical mysticism. At that time, these concepts had deeply penetrated all branches of Islamic culture and thought.<sup>13</sup> Elaborating on the life of the young Ibn Taymiyya, al-Ghanouchi states that he did not limit himself to the religious sciences inherited within his Hanbali family traditions. He learned in depth the sciences of theology, philosophy, mathematics, algebra, and the history of religions.<sup>14</sup> He also became qualified to issue *fatāwā* at the age of twenty-one.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of his production, Ibn Taymiyya is still considered to be one of the most prolific Muslim scholars ever. What survived of his work is estimated to be between three hundred to five hundred texts.<sup>16</sup> Only few of these are organized by topics, or disciplines.<sup>17</sup> That is partly due to the wide scope of academic interests Ibn Taymiyya had. “Both friends and foes acknowledge that Ibn Taymiyya had a breathtaking mastery of the Islamic intellectual

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 110.

<sup>12</sup> Rachid Al-Ghanouchi, *al-Qadar ‘ind Ibn Taymiyya* (The Divine Destiny for Ibn Taymiyya) (Beirut: Maghrib Center for Research & Translation, 1999), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 23-24.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 23-25.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Please see ‘Alī ibn Hasan ibn Nāsir in the introduction of *al-Jawāb al-sahīh li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīh* (The Apt Answer to the One Who Changed the Religion of the Christ) (Riyadh: Dar al-‘Asima Publishing House, 1993), 14.

<sup>17</sup> The number of his monographs varies from a source to another. For example another source mentioned, “His volumes exceeded more than two hundred.” See Ahmad Hatīt, *al-Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya: dirāsah fī fikrih wa ijtihādātih* (The Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya: A Study of his Thought) (London: The Druze Heritage Foundation, 2009), 8.

tradition.”<sup>18</sup> His early writings were mostly on theological topics that focused on the interpretation of revelation and the role of reason, whereas his later works were mainly oriented towards questions of religious practice, and detailed evaluations of Jews, Christians, philosophy, and other Muslim sects. His contributions to Islamic thought covered varied discourses of law, theology, philosophy, Qur’anic exegesis, Hadith, mysticism, and religious polemics. While some aspects of Ibn Taymiyya’s thought have been discussed in some detail, his vast work has not yet been completely investigated in academic circles.

What is striking about Ibn Taymiyya’s biographies is the relation between his modern reputation and his reputation in his time. By examining the Damascene theologian’s intellectual milieu, Bori reveals his break with the traditionalist Hanbali ‘*ulamā*’. She argues that the contemporary Hanbali circles in Damascus were not supportive of Ibn Taymiyya’s constant polemics.<sup>19</sup> His views were received as challenges to traditional Hanbali thought, and his opinions, particularly on matters related to law, were not welcomed, Bori explains. Similar arguments were also presented by Khaled el-Rouayheb. El-Rouayheb argues that Ibn Taymiyya’s modern reputation and influence should not lead to the conclusion that he had enjoyed this influence since his own time. He states, “Ibn Taymiyya had very little influence on mainstream Sunni, non-Hanbali Islam until the nineteenth century.”<sup>20</sup> Both of these scholars push for an argument that Ibn Taymiyya’s importance is relatively a modern phenomenon.

Clearly, Ibn Taymiyya was viewed as a controversial Hanbali scholar by his contemporaries as well as by modern scholars. Even though his *fatāwā* were not widely endorsed

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<sup>18</sup> Yossef Rapoport, *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Caterina Bori, “Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā‘atuhu: Authority, Conflict and Consensus in Ibn Taymiyya’s Circle,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Khaled El-Rouayheb, “From Ibn Hajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566) to Khayr al-Dīn al-Ālūsī (d. 1899): Changing views of Ibn Taymiyya among non-Hanbalī Sunni scholars,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times*, ed., Yossef Rapoport (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 269-270.

then, there is no doubt they seem to be important now, as they have been constantly quoted by both jihadist and intellectual Islamists. Ibn Taymiyya's polemics are diverse and tackled many issues that ranged from religious and social to political. Consequently, analyzing his polemics in our time might not be a simple task. One important aspect of Ibn Taymiyya's context to consider is that the Mamluk Sultanate was under multiple threats externally and internally. The Mamluks had to fight against the constant threat of the Mongols and the Crusaders as well as their own non-Sunni Muslim subjects, and neighbors who were gaining power. For Ibn Taymiyya, any heterodox groups, beliefs, or any activity that did not correspond to what he believed to be the mainstream of Islam was a serious danger to orthodox Muslim society and thought that he was defending. It was an era that witnessed the Islamic umma in a fragile situation as the Crusaders were not completely expelled from the region and the Mongols had "destroyed the eastern Islamic empire when they captured Baghdad."<sup>21</sup> Internally, the Sufis were spreading beliefs and practices that were not permitted by some orthodox Muslim shaykhs like Ibn Taymiyya. Meanwhile, the Muslim *bāṭiniyya* sects' (i.e., the Isma'īlis, Druzes, and Alawites) power grew to constitute a threat to the fragile sultanate. These internal and external threats to the Mamluk authorities were also perceived by Ibn Taymiyya as threats to Sunni Islam.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the competitive relations among the eminent '*ulamā*' in Damascus and Cairo created an antagonistic environment among the religious elites.

This paper examines some of Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of Christians, Jews, philosophers, Sufis, Kalām theologians, and the Nusayris, exploring some threads of the common tropes Ibn Taymiyya used when constructing his polemics against these groups. Three tropes in particular

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<sup>21</sup> Ismail Abdullah, "Tawhid and Trinity: A Study of Ibn Taymiyyah's al-Jawab al-Sahih," *Intellectual Discourse*, 14 (2006): 91.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 91.

stand out: *bid'a* (innovation), *tahrīf* (corruption or distortion), and *taqlīd* (imitation). All of these terms are used in Sunni Islamic thought to refer to certain actions or beliefs in theology. I argue that Ibn Taymiyya constructed his polemics against these groups based on certain structures of “corruption” of the religion’s thought and teachings that he believes are common among these groups. He also based his polemics on connections between the deed of “imitation” and “corrupted” thought and practice, as well as “innovations” of teachings and rituals that did not exist in the original revelations. When investigating Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics within the broader array of religious polemics, a consideration of his commentaries on different groups is important. The fact is that Ibn Taymiyya does not target a religious or intellectual group per se. He targets certain “corrupted or innovated” ideas and practices done by certain groups and being blindly “imitated” by other groups. He does not tolerate any mistakes in theology as a result of the imperfect human intellect not only by the followers of other religions, but also by Muslims. In his judgments, Ibn Taymiyya drew on the Qur’an, the Prophetic Traditions, the ‘authentic and uncorrupted’ revelations, and reason and philosophical principles.

Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics raise a number of questions that I will explore below: How did Ibn Taymiyya construct his polemics against these groups and in what context did he put them? How do his polemics against a sect within his own religion of Islam compare to his polemics against other religions such as Christianity or Judaism? What kinds of analytical strategies did he use before accusing these groups of corruption, imitation, and innovation? To what extent does Ibn Taymiyya consider non-religious, or non-Islamic sources when evaluating these groups?

The terms *bid'a*, *tahrīf*, and *taqlīd* have original and clear definitions in the Islamic legal tradition. *Bid'a* is usually translated as innovation. However, the term does not always carry a

positive meaning like “innovation” in the English language. In Islamic thought, *bid‘a* refers to any newly invented matter that is without precedent in the Qur’an and *Sunna*. *Bid‘a* could be positive or negative. When used with a negative connotation, *bid‘a* is usually used by scholars as “heresy”. Sunni scholars generally have divided *bida‘* (innovations) into two types: innovations in worldly matters and innovations in religious matters. Some have additionally divided *bida‘* into lawful and unlawful innovations.<sup>23</sup> As for our inquiries here, Ibn Taymiyya used *bid‘a* to refer to bad innovations in religious thought and practice. *Tahrīf* could be translated as distortion or corruption of texts. Muslim theologians generally believe that the New and Old Testaments originally contained a prefiguration of the appearance of Muhammad, or some other references to Islam. However, due to *tahrīf*, which is here used as corruption of the biblical text,<sup>24</sup> these references were deleted by the religious authorities. This is the kind of corruption Ibn Taymiyya used the term *tahrīf* for in his polemics. *Taqīd* is one of the most common terms in Islamic legal theory, *usūl al-fiqh*. The literal meaning of the Arabic word *taqīd* is imitation. We should note here that there is a substantial difference in the legal interpretation and use of the term between Sunni and Shiite law. In Sunni law, *taqīd* is accepting and following the teachings, traditions, and the jurists of one of the four schools of law. In a broader sense in the sharia, *taqīd* also means following the Prophet and his companions, or following the *ijmā‘* (the consensus of religious authorities) concerning an issue in the Islamic legal tradition. There are also different opinions whether *taqīd* is obligatory.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, there have been many debates about whether *taqīd* is a positive or negative tradition as opposed to *ijtihād* (independent reasoning

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<sup>23</sup> For more information see: Al-Imām al-Nawawī, *Tahdhīb al-Asmā` wa al-Lughāt* (Cultivating Language and Names) (Beirut: Dar al-Kitaāb al-‘Ilmiyya), vol. 2, 21-23.

<sup>24</sup> Aziz Al-Azmeh, “Chronophagous Discourse: A Study of ClericoLegal Appropriation of the World in an Islamic Tradition,” in *Religion and Practical Reason: New Essays in the Comparative Philosophy of Religions*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds (SUNY Press, 1994), 171.

<sup>25</sup> Rudolph Peters, “Idjtiḥād and Taqīd in 18th and 19th Century Islam,” *Die Welt des Islams New Series* (1980): 131-145.

when issuing rule) in Sunni law.<sup>26</sup> However, since this paper deals with Ibn Taymiyya's polemics that are not related to the debates about the use of *taqlīd* in the sharia, rather with his evaluation of the theological thought and practices of certain religions, groups, and sects, we focus on the sense in which Ibn Taymiyya used the term. The Hanbali scholar used the term *taqlīd* with its negative connotations as "blind following, or imitation" in the polemics studied here.

Most of Ibn Taymiyya's polemics came in the form of legal opinions or *fatāwā* (sing. *fatwā*), especially his comments on the Nusayriyya. A *fatwā* is a religious edict or legal opinion issued by a scholar of religious law, or a jurisconsult (*muftī*)<sup>27</sup>. The usual form of a *fatwā* is a question or an inquiry (*su`āl/istiftā`*) presented by a Muslim (*mustaftī*) who is seeking a legal opinion from a jurisconsult, and the *fatwā* is usually given as an answer (*jawāb*)<sup>28</sup>, which is the body of the *fatwā* itself. It is worth mentioning here that although Ibn Taymiyya was not actually granted the post of a *muftī* by the Mamluk authorities<sup>29</sup>, he seems to have been known among the religious scholars of his time, and his *fatāwā* and religious views had always received either positive or negative attention.

Each one of the groups investigated here that were targets of Ibn Taymiyya's polemics could be analyzed independently. Nonetheless, in agreement with our hypothesis, when judging

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<sup>26</sup> Sherman A. Jackson, "Taqlīd, Legal Scaffolding and the Scope of Legal Injunctions in Post-Formative Theory," *Islamic Law and Society* (1996): 165-192.

<sup>27</sup> Wael Hallaq, "From Fatwās to Furū': Growth and Change in Islamic Substantive Law," *Islamic Law and Society* 1 (1994): 30-32.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

<sup>29</sup> The official *muftī* post, which is usually appointed by the ruling authorities in the Sunni tradition, in fact does not prevent any other learned religious figure to issue *fatāwā*. For more details on the topic, please see Brinkley Messick, "The Mufti, the Text and the World: Legal Interpretation in Yemen," *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1986): 102-119, Or Wael Hallaq, "From Fatwās to Furū': Growth and Change in Islamic Substantive Law," *Islamic Law and Society* 1 (1994)



each one individually, the Mamluk scholar kept referring back and forth to the other groups using the same tropes of *tahrīf*, *taqlīd*, and *bid'a*. Therefore, it is one of our goals in this paper to explore these cross-references and to find out how he connected, compared, and contrasted them. For example, he refers to what he viewed as polytheist traditions and thought that are inherent in Christianity and Judaism when criticizing Christians and Jews and looks for the same beliefs and practices when judging the Nusayris. He also traced what he believed to be some of the corrupted thought and traditions of the Sufis and Kalām thinkers and connected them to Jews and Christians. First, I am going to explore what he considered *tahrīf*, *taqlīd*, and *bid'a* within Christian and Jewish scriptures and traditions.

## Chapter 1

### Ibn Taymiyya's Criticism of Christians and Jews

The bulk of Ibn Taymiyya's polemics against Christians and Jews are in his book *al-Jawāb al-sahīh li-man Baddala Dīn al-Masīh* (The Apt Answer to the One Who Changed the Religion of the Christ).<sup>30</sup> In this book, he responded to a treatise that was written more than a century earlier by Paul of Antioch (d. 1180)<sup>31</sup>, the Melkite bishop of Sidon.<sup>32</sup> Paul wrote a treatise titled "A Letter to a Muslim Friend," in which he argued that the Qur'an in its own terms "proves that Muhammad was sent with an Arabic revelation to the pagan Arabs alone, and that its teachings give unmistakable indications that the main elements of Christian belief and practice are sound and God-given."<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that Paul's treatise did not physically reach Ibn Taymiyya until 1316 after it was reproduced and modified by an unknown Christian author who was a resident of Cyprus.<sup>34</sup> This Christian writer carefully went through Paul's treatise and made some changes, additions, and omissions. He altered the document substantially before sending it to Ibn Taymiyya, and later to other scholars in Damascus. One scholar has argued that the altered version was more "responsible, or that changed political and social conditions demanded a new tenor, but the result is a work that invites agreement and acknowledgement rather than the provocation and assertiveness of Paul's original."<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>30</sup> The copy of Ibn Taymiyya's *Jawāb al-sahīh* that I am referring to is one of the most recently edited versions of the book. It is a six-volume version that was edited in 1993 by Dr. 'Alī ibn Hasan ibn Nāsir and published by *Dar al-'Asima* Publishing House, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>31</sup> Sona Grigoryan, *Anti-Christian Polemics of Ibn Taymiyya: Corruption of the Scriptures* (MA Thesis, The Central European University Budapest, 2011), 11.

<sup>32</sup> David Thomas, "Idealism and Intransigence: A Christian-Muslim Encounter in Early Mamluk Times," *The Mamluk Studies Review* 2 (2009): 85-86.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

unknown person who revised the treatise made it more appealing to a Muslim reader by adding more quotes from the Qur'an, completing the Qur'anic quotes of Paul, and making the language less polemical.<sup>36</sup> Both Arabic versions of the treatise were published side by side in a volume of the History of Christian-Muslim Relations series in 2005. When reading the two versions of the treatise, the first alteration the reader will notice and which is indicative of the revision to the document is that the anonymous Cypriote's version begins with *bismi llāh al-Hayy al-Muhyi [...]* (in the name of God, the Ever Living, the Giver of Life), which are two of the Muslim Names (attributes) of God, while Paul of Antioch's version begins with *bism al-`āb wal-ibn wa al-rūh al-quds* (in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).<sup>37</sup> Clearly, Paul's opening is a distinctly Christian reference to the trinity, which is one of the most common reasons for polemical Muslim accusations of *shirk*. Aside from the book mentioned above, in which the Paul of Antioch's treatise was published along with the revised version, the editors of the volumes of *al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīh* I reviewed stated that there is an original fragmentary copy of the treatise in the Coptic Museum of the Church of Mary Girges in Cairo, Egypt.<sup>38</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya replied to this treatise with *al-Jawāb al-saḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīh*,<sup>39</sup> in which he carefully exposed the weaknesses of Christianity, which in his opinion cannot compete with Islam. In Ibn Taymiyya's view, the message of the Islamic faith is superior to Christianity's message in tradition, law, and practice. For him and other Muslim scholars, Muhammad was sent to complete the message of earlier Abrahamic religions and correct the wrongs that were done by their followers. For its extensive volumes and importance, *al-Jawāb*

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<sup>36</sup> See David Thomas, ed., *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>38</sup> See Ali ibn Hasan ibn Nasir in the introduction of *al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīh* (the Apt Answer to the One Who Changed the Religion of the Christ) (Riyadh: Dar al-‘Asima Publishing House, 1993), 29.

<sup>39</sup> From now on, it will be referred to as *al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ*.

*al-sahīh* was described as “a work whose length and scope have never been equaled in pre-modern Muslim critiques of the Christian religion and whose depth of insight into the issues that separate Christianity and Islam sets it among the masterpieces of Muslim polemics against Christianity.”<sup>40</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics in *al-Jawāb al-sahīh* mainly targeted the Christian Trinity, what is lawful and what is prohibited in Christianity and Judaism, and castigated the Christians and Jews who ‘corrupted the teachings of Jesus and Moses.’ Ibn Taymiyya commented on the treatise point by point and supported his opinions by quoting from the Qur’an, the *Sunna* as well as the Torah and the Gospels. Additionally, according to his representation of his own strategies of refutation, he used *al-‘aql* (reason), and *al-mantiq* (logic) as methods of judging Christian and Jewish traditions in relation to what is an authentic prophetic revelation and what is not. When considering reasoning strategies, Ibn Taymiyya believes that religious traditions should always arise from God’s revelation and they should be in agreement with and accepted by the sound human intellect. If not, that means people have corrupted the tradition and a good reasoning judgment by a sound human intellect will expose that. Ibn Taymiyya’s approach in employing both revelation and reason was part of his attempt to prove that Islam is a religion that encourages the use of sound mind, on the premise that reason, if used accordingly, will guide one to the truth.<sup>41</sup> When evaluating the Christian and Jewish scriptures, traditions, and practices Ibn Taymiyya particularly criticized what he believed qualified as *tahrīf* and *taqlīd* and based his refutation on his two main strategies, references to the Qur’an and the *Sunna*, but also to human intellect reasoning methods.

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<sup>40</sup> Mohammad Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 75.

<sup>41</sup> Ismail Abdullah, “Tawhid and Trinity: A Study of Ibn Taymiyyah’s al-Jawab al Sahih,” *Intellectual Discourse*, 14 (2006): 105.

In this section of the essay, I will trace two of Ibn Taymiyya's tropes that he used in his polemics against the People of the Book. These are the themes of *tahrīf* and *taqlīd*. I am going to discuss what he identified as *tahrīf*, and *taqlīd* and how he reached such conclusions. Also, according to Ibn Taymiyya, what exactly is the nature of corruption that he associates with the Christian and Jewish's teachings and what was their original nature before they were corrupted? And what exactly annoys Ibn Taymiyya about *taqlīd*?

In his general approach in *al-Jawāb al-sahīh*, the Mamluk scholar presents Islam as a great religion, before shifting to a critique of Christians and Jews. Ibn Taymiyya also had intentions to educate the reader about Islam in addition to his polemical arguments against the People of the Book. He wanted not only to respond to the writer of the letter, but also to use *al-Jawāb al-sahīh* to educate Muslims not to be misled from the path of true faith by distorted interpretations such as those by Christians.<sup>42</sup>

In his book, Ibn Taymiyya summarized Paul's treatise into main sections before responding to it as follows:

The claims of the treatise's writer could be divided into these main sections. Section One: their (i.e., the Christians') claims that Muhammad was not sent to them, but to the unlettered Arabs. They also claim that the Qur'an contains verses that prove the authenticity of their religion, as does reason. Section Two: They claim that in the Qur'an Muhammad praised their religion that they practice now, which proves that they are right. Section Three: their claims that the prophecies of earlier prophets in the Torah, Gospels, and Psalms support their religion and traditions, which prove the true faith of Christianity. The religion that they have now which allows the Trinity [...] Section Four: They claim that reason and intellect are in agreement with the trinity. Section Five: They claim that they are *Muwahhidūn* (monotheists) and that their

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<sup>42</sup> David Thomas, "Idealism and Intransigence: A Christian-Muslim Encounter in Early Mamluk Times," *The Mamluk Studies Review* 2 (2009): 96.

religious text, which refers to Trinity, is similar to the figurative language in the Qur'an. Section Six: They claim that Jesus came after Moses to complete his religion, therefore there is no need for more prophets.<sup>43</sup>

After summarizing the main points of the treatise, the Hanbali scholar pointed out his general approach of responding to them. He stated that all of what the Christian writer used of textual arguments from the Qur'an and previous holy books, or intellectual arguments, disapproves their beliefs.<sup>44</sup> In Ibn Taymiyya's view, the Qur'an came to both confirm and reject some of the Jewish and Christian teachings. It is one of the pillars of faith in Islam to believe in the previous messengers of God like Moses and Jesus and "their true teachings," he notes. However, this should not be interpreted by them (i.e., Christians and Jews) as if they were in support of their corrupted teachings. Additionally, "when they use reason to verify their arguments about the prophets' thought, it is a proof that they corrupted the prophets' teachings. We could easily refute their arguments."<sup>45</sup> In other words, the Damascene scholar believes that their use of reason and rational analysis of establishing the truth is not convincing and that could be used against them. Ibn Taymiyya believes that the religious authorities of the People of the Book hopelessly tried to justify what they corrupted of the scripture by using the imperfect strategies of intellectual reasoning.

The concept of *tahrīf* (Corruption of Scripture) in the polemical discourse of Ibn Taymiyya encapsulates the major arguments against Judaism and Christianity. He believes it is the main reason why the contemporary practices and traditions of the People of the Book could not be taken as rational by Muslim thinkers. He dedicated most of *al-Jawāb al-sahīh* to show

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<sup>43</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-sahīh li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīh* (The Apt Answer to the One Who Changed the Religion of the Christ), ed., 'Ali ibn Hasan ibn Nāsir (Riyadh: *Dar al-'Asima Publishing House, 1993*), vol. 2. 101-104.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 104.

what he believed was the original messages of Moses and Jesus and how they were corrupted later by the religions' followers:

The true message of religion is what God revealed to his Messenger (Muhammad) and opposed to Christians who after the Christ came up with many innovations he did not allow, neither the Gospels, nor the other books mentioned. They claimed that what their religious leaders permitted, the Christ would allow as well [...] while the Jews would prohibit for themselves something that God had previously permitted. And Christians would allow and follow their religious leaders to abrogate what God commanded.<sup>46</sup>

In this comparison, the Mamluk scholar intended to show that the religious authorities of both faiths had corrupted their original scriptures and the teachings of their prophets. Ibn Taymiyya believes that the Jews had prohibited for themselves things that God as well as God's messenger to them, Moses, had permitted.<sup>47</sup> By doing so they had corrupted the original teachings of the prophet Moses. As for Christians (*al-Nasārā*), he argues that their priests had corrupted the teachings of the Christ by either misinterpreting them, or by adding to or eliminating them. One critical argument Ibn Taymiyya elaborated on is the Trinity and the "Christian claim" that Jesus is a god (*ilāh*). Ibn Taymiyya believed that the followers of the Christian faith misinterpreted the miracles that Jesus came with and they came to the wrong conclusion that he was a god. The Hanbali scholar states "miracles should not be taken as a sign of *al-ilāhiyya* (divinity). All prophets came with miracles and they were not considered to be gods."<sup>48</sup> However, as a Muslim theologian, Ibn Taymiyya does not completely reject the biblical sources. He reduced their status

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 340-341.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. vol. 341.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-Ssaḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ* (The Apt Answer to the One Who Changed the Religion of the Christ), ed., 'Ali ibn Hasan ibn Nāsir (Riyadh: *Dar al-'Asima* Publishing House, 1993), vol. 2, P., 41.

“presenting them as a secondary source of knowledge like the *Sunna* in Islamic tradition and unlike the Qur’an as an absolute source.”<sup>49</sup>

In his quest of examining *tahrīf* in the Jewish and Christian scripture, theology, practices, and law, Ibn Taymiyya mostly referred to the Qur’an in his analysis, but also to the *Sunna* and rational arguments. For example, Ibn Taymiyya responded to the Christian belief that “the Christ was both God and a messenger of God” saying that “if he was God, he cannot be a messenger of God at the same time” (i.e., if God was talking directly to people He would not need a messenger). If he was a messenger of God, he cannot be God.”<sup>50</sup> This statement can serve as a good example of his intention of using reason in his attempt to refute some of the Christian’s claims. Nonetheless, for him, prophetic revelation remains at the center of measuring the authenticity of any kind of religious knowledge. “As far as Ibn Taymiyyah was concerned, assessments made according to the *shar‘* (God’s law) always take precedence over those made using the *‘aql*.”<sup>51</sup>

In his polemics against the People of the Book, Ibn Taymiyya also got involved in examining *taqlīd* (imitation) and genuine traditions in the Christian and Jewish scriptures. It is worth noting here that when Ibn Taymiyya used the terms *taqlīd* or *muqallidūn* (imitators) when judging Christians and Jews he is referring to the blind or uneducated *taqlīd* by the two groups of their religious authorities. He also criticized Muslims who blindly imitated their masters without using their intellect or referring to the scripture. In this regard, in another *fatwā* by Ibn Taymiyya that we referred to, in addition to *al-Jawāb al-sahīh*, as quoted below, one finds that his critique

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<sup>49</sup> Sona Grigoryan, “*Anti-Christian Polemics of Ibn Taymiyya: Corruption of the Scriptures*” (MA Thesis, The Central European University Budapest, 2011), 29.

<sup>50</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-sahīh li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīh* (The Apt Answer to the One Who Changed the Religion of the Christ), ed., ‘Ali ibn Hasan ibn Nāsir (Riyadh: *Dar al-‘Asima* Publishing House, 1993), vol. 2, 46.

<sup>51</sup> Mohammad Khalil, “Ibn Taymiyyah on Reason and Revelation in Ethics,” *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 2 (2006): 119.



primarily concerned people's loyalty to their spiritual masters and the religion of their ancestors, rather than to God. In this particular *fatwā*, Ibn Taymiyya appears to be answering a request for his commentary on the Christians, Jews, and Muslims asking whether they are *muqallidūn* or not. In the first passage, Ibn Taymiyya's main concern is related to "whom to follow and imitate in religion." He starts his response as follows:

He who follows the religion of his ancestors as a routine of his life and ignores following the truth, is the dreadful imitator. This is the situation of the Jews and Christians. [...] He who obeys the people in disobeying God and His messenger is either following doubt (*yatibi'u al-zann*) or following his passion (*yatibi'u hawāhu*) and many follow both. Thus, this is the situation of all of those who disobeyed the messenger of God among the infidels and the People of the Book.<sup>52</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya argues that Christians, Jews, and probably some Muslims who followed the traditions and rituals of their ancestors, even if they were misled, are "dreadful imitators." This is related to his view that the believers, especially among the People of the Book, have no excuse but to see the truth after the message of Islam was revealed by the Prophet. It is so for Ibn Taymiyya because the People of the Book are the closest to Islam in faith and tradition. The truth in religion for the Damascene shaykh is that God sent messengers to humanity over different periods of time. Each one came to affirm, complete, or correct the teachings of the previous prophets and messengers. While the essence of God's *risāla* (message of religion) in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is invariable, Islam came to complete these teachings and correct the corrupted ones. Thus, for Ibn Taymiyya, if Christians and Jews had used their intellect, they would find that their scripture was corrupted by their priests whom they were imitating, and that Islam is the true path to God. In his criticism, our Mamluk theologian placed what he called "dreadful imitators" among the believers of the three religions on a parallel level with *al-kafirūn*

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<sup>52</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: *Dar Alkutb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 4, 198.

(the disbelievers). “Apparently all of the Jews and Christians practice blind imitations that are similar to those done by hypocrites among Muslims.”<sup>53</sup> Ibn Taymiyya believes these Muslims follow the Prophet ostensibly without real faith in their heart. Their faith is more in their ancestors and religious leaders than in God and his Prophet.

Ibn Taymiyya judged *taqlīd* in the Jewish and Christian traditions on many levels. First, he argued that if the religious authorities looked with a sound mind into their scripture they would find the truth. Ibn Taymiyya accused the clergy among the People of the Book of knowing the truth and the right message of their religion and the right path to God but they still refuse to follow it. In a passage he states:

Every person of intellect admits this, even from the Jews and Christians. They admit that the religion of Muslims is a true religion, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and that whoever follows him goes to Paradise. In fact, they even admit that Islam is better than their own religion, as was mentioned by the philosophers, such as Ibn Sīnā. The philosophers agree that there is no law better than this law (i.e., Islam).<sup>54</sup>

It seems that Ibn Taymiyya refers to the philosophers to prove that they reached this conclusion after using reason in their judgment. Certainly, Ibn Taymiyya did not adhere to revelation alone as an assessment strategy in his judgments of Christians and Jews. His use of reason as a strategy of judgment regularly appears in his texts. Although Ibn Taymiyya believes that revelation has the highest authority in matters of theology, he appeals to reason as used by some of the same groups he targeted such as philosophers and the *mutakallimūn*. This raises the question as to how reason and revelation compare for Ibn Taymiyya. He actually believes that

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 200-201.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 203.

revelation is the ultimate reference for reason, and they should not disagree with each other.<sup>55</sup> However, he also takes revelation as the basis of reason, not the opposite. Thus, how important is the role of reason then in the judgment of revelation? In other words, how important is reason as an analytical strategy when applied to revelation as the latter always takes the precedence in Ibn Taymiyya's assessment?

Historically, Muslim philosophers, theologians, and thinkers had great disputes on this matter. The central one, which occurred several centuries before Ibn Taymiyya, was between the Mu'tazilites, proponents of logical reasoning, and the Ash'arites. For the Ash'arites, "moral values could only be ultimately based on Scripture, as that was the only source that could be deemed absolutely reliable."<sup>56</sup> The Mu'tazilites employed rational and philosophical arguments in their debates about theology.<sup>57</sup> Notably, the Hanbalites adopted similar views as the Ash'arites, giving less value to reason.<sup>58</sup> However, despite being closer to the Ash'arite camp theologically, Ibn Taymiyya engaged some of the same techniques of rationalist analysis as the Mu'tazilites. Now, taking the previous statement into consideration that Ibn Taymiyya would always take revelation as the basis of reason, it seems that he intentionally occasionally breaks out of his own rules. He attempted to use the reasoning strategies of Christian, Jewish, as well as some Muslim religious authorities and philosophers in analyzing the scripture to show *taqlīd* and *tahrīf*. As he repeatedly said in his work, particularly in *al-Jawāb al-sahīh*, it seems that Ibn Taymiyya intended to base some of his arguments on reason.

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<sup>55</sup> Binyamin Abrahamov, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition," *The Muslim World* 82 (1992): 272.

<sup>56</sup> Mohammad Khalil, "Ibn Taymiyyah on Reason and Revelation in Ethics," *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 2 (2006): 105.

<sup>57</sup> Ziauddin Ahmed, "A Survey of the Development of Theology in Islam," *Islamic Studies* 11 (1972): 99.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 119.

Other criteria Ibn Taymiyya used for judging religious authority include the *isnād* (chain of transmitters of *hadīth* narrative), which was supported by *tawātur* (concomitant transmission of a Tradition). He did so to affirm his argument of “the superiority of Islam” over other Abrahamic religions in matters related to scripture and tradition. First, his judgment of Islam’s supremacy is concerned with those who transmitted the knowledge from the prophets Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. For Ibn Taymiyya, as well as many Muslim scholars, a substantial reason to assume that the Jewish and the Christian scriptures were corrupted, is that they do not have the tradition of the *isnād* like in Islam.

Ibn Taymiyya stated:

It is well known that those who transmitted what was revealed to Muhammad of religion and law, and transmitted what he came with of signs, miracles, and knowledge are superior to those who transmitted from *Mūsā* (Moses) and *‘Īsā* (Jesus). Additionally, what he delivered of theological teachings are greater than what *Mūsā* and *‘Īsā* came with.<sup>59</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya not only used the tradition of *isnād* as a proof to authenticate Muhammad’s companions and what they transmitted from him, but also to judge the transmission of Moses’ and Jesus’ messages. For him, since the Jews and Christians lack a well-documented chain of transmitters, the chance of corruption in their scripture is always greater. Although *isnād* is used in the Islamic tradition to authenticate a *hadīth* and establish whether it is *sahīh* (authentic) or not, Ibn Taymiyya also used it to argue that this preserved the Qur’an and the Tradition from corruption, contrary to the scriptures of the People of the Book.

The translations of the Christ’s teachings are a crucial issue for Ibn Taymiyya when tracking *tahrīf* in the Christian scripture. In his judgments of the Bible’s authenticity, he was concerned with what had happened when Jesus’ teachings were translated into different

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 200-202.

languages. He commented on a section in the treatise that argues, “The apostles who translated the Bible and the Gospels from Hebrew into different languages were *rusul ma’sūmūn* (impeccable messengers).”<sup>60</sup> Ibn Taymiyya’s response came to confirm that the Apostles of Jesus are not *ma’sūmūn*, only the Prophets are *ma’sūmūn*. However, he believes that the Apostles might not be the source of *tahrīf*, rather those who translated the Bible after them were. He believes that a close investigation of the four Gospels shows inconsistency:

There are four Gospels and each was originally written in a different language such as Hebrew, Roman, and Greek. Some contain verses that do not exist in the others, such as the one in Mathew’s that reads, “baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”, which they turned into the cure of their religion. So if every one of the four wrote a Gospel that means there is not an original bible that we can relate all of the versions of the Gospels to, especially their claim that the four Gospels were translated into seventy-two languages. In other words, their argument is full of lies and inconsistencies.<sup>61</sup>

The Damascene scholar believes that there are several factors that make the Gospels inauthentic. His observation of what might have been lost in translation is an interesting argument. He looked into this from two angles. First, he did not repudiate the reliability of the Apostles as he viewed them in the same manner like Muhammad’s companions. Although they were not *ma’sūmūn*, they were knowledgeable of God’s religion and fearful of Him and they sincerely disseminated “the original teachings” of the Prophet Jesus. Thus, *tahrīf* most likely occurred when documenting Jesus’ teachings later in history. The way Ibn Taymiyya saw this is that “all four Gospels were written after the resurrection of Jesus with no mention that they

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<sup>60</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-saḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ* (The Apt Answer to the One Who Changed the Religion of the Christ), ed., ‘Ali ibn Hasan ibn Nāsir (Riyadh: *Dar al-‘Asima* Publishing House, 1993), vol. 2, 80.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

contain the word of God revealed through Jesus.”<sup>62</sup> Hence, for Muslim scholars including Ibn Taymiyya, *isnād* preserved the Islamic tradition and scripture, while the lack of that in Christianity left their scripture liable for *tahrīf*. The second point Ibn Taymiyya sought to make in his judgment is that the teachings of Jesus were first documented in four bibles in different languages, then translated into “seventy-two languages,” which means there was not an original one-language-version to relate other copies of the Bible to. “Moreover, the Apostles confess that they recorded only some of what Jesus narrated and some of his deeds. The Gospels, therefore, do not express the whole prophetic message.”<sup>63</sup>

The Mamluk theologian seems to be sure that translation caused a lot of corruption to the teachings Jesus delivered to the Apostles, as well as the authentic teachings the Apostles taught to everyone else. He states, “A liar and slanderer (*muftarin kadhāb*) is whoever says that the messengers of Jesus delivered to them the Torah, the Gospels, and all of the prophecies in seventy-two languages and they still have the same exact meaning until today.”<sup>64</sup> Ibn Taymiyya actually elaborated on this matter in details in *Al-Jawāb al-sahīh*. He believes that there is no one who can compare these copies in the seventy-two languages they were originally translated into. He thinks that this is only possible to someone who speaks all of these languages and owns original copies that were delivered to him directly from Jesus’ messengers so he can compare the different versions. In fact, the Hanbali scholar himself spent time examining the copies that were translated into Arabic. He states, “I found in different Arabic copies of the Torah and Psalms

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<sup>62</sup> Sona Grigoryan, “*Anti-Christian Polemics of Ibn Taymiyya: Corruption of the Scriptures*” (MA Thesis, The Central European University Budapest, 2011), 34.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>64</sup> Ibn Taymiyya *al-Jawāb al-sahīh li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīh* (The Apt Answer to the One Who Changed the Religion of the Christ), ed., ‘Ali ibn Hasan ibn Nāsir (Riyadh: *Dar al-‘Asima* Publishing House, 1993), vol. 2, 90.

many examples of inconsistency and difference which should make everyone not to trust them. And that is only in the copies that were translated into Arabic.”<sup>65</sup>

To summarize, Ibn Taymiyya used a variety of strategies in his attempts to prove *tahrīf* and *taqlīd* in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. However, in spite of the non-revelation based analytical arguments, he had always referred to the Qur’an and the *Sunna* as the ultimate source in his reasoning. He does not completely reject the Christian and Jewish teachings, however, he is convinced that *tahrīf* had done lot of damage to the true teachings of Moses and Jesus. Therefore, Islam came to correct these corruptions and to guide people through the right path to God. It is not an Arab religion, but a religion for humankind. In Ibn Taymiyya’s views, the religious authorities of the People of the Book should be the first to recognize these facts. For him *tahrīf* in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures is clear even without referring to Islamic Scripture and any human with a sound intellect would figure that out. Consequently, the followers of the Jewish and Christian faiths are misled by imitating the traditions of their priests, which is a dreadful *taqlīd*, he believes. Ibn Taymiyya also believed that there have always been followers of the authentic *risāla* of Christianity who refused to imitate the corrupted authorities. Nonetheless, Ibn Taymiyya gave the ultimate legitimacy in measuring what is true and untrue in the three Abrahamic religions to Islamic Scripture as it is the ultimate message of God that was revealed to Muhammad to affirm the right teachings of previous Prophets and correct what human beings have corrupted.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 91.

## Chapter 2

### Ibn Taymiyya's Criticism of Sufism, Philosophy, and '*ilm al-kalām*'<sup>66</sup>

This section will discuss Ibn Taymiyya's polemics against Sufis, philosophers, and *mutakallimūn* (kalām theologians). In particular, I focus on his views of how these fields' scholars corrupted scripture in their interpretations. First, the three disciplines are discussed together here for the reason that the Damascene scholar himself had put all of them under the same umbrella. Second, thinkers of these backgrounds sometimes practiced more than one of these disciplines and qualified for instance as philosopher and a Sufi, or a *mutakallim* and a Sufi. One should indeed not forget that scholars of this period engaged with multiple fields of knowledge. For example, many celebrated Muslim thinkers developed themselves in philosophy and '*ilm al-kalām*, or in Sufism and '*ilm al-kalām*, philosophy and Sufism. In his polemics against them, Ibn Taymiyya again used the accusations of *tahrīf*, *taqlīd*, and *bid'a* as his main arguments. The Mamluk theologian connected his polemics of corruption, imitation, and innovation of these fields' thinkers to their parallels in Jewish and Christian theological thought

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<sup>66</sup> '*Ilm al-kalām* is one of the "religious sciences" of Islam. The term could be translated as the science of speculative, or discursive theology. As an Islamic discipline of theology, the origins of '*ilm al-kalām* are hard to specify, but they are generally assumed to go back between the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. For more information on the term's definitions and history, please refer to *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition at: <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ilm-al-kalam-COM\\_0366](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ilm-al-kalam-COM_0366)> (Accessed: 28 April 2015)



and practices. He believes that Sufis, philosophers, and *mutakallimūn* were sometimes influenced by the People of the Book's corruptions and innovations and therefore fell into the same trap.

### **I) Sufism and *'ilm al-kalām***

Ibn Taymiyya's harsh opinions of Sufism attracted polemics against him by those who defended Sufism. One of the main disputes between Ibn Taymiyya and Sufi scholars concerns Qur'anic hermeneutics. In respect of the Quran's *tafsīr* (exegesis), sometimes the semantics of Arabic led in disputes between Muslim scholars of different backgrounds. When interpreting certain terms of the Quran, there is difference between terms that could be interpreted through *tā`wīl* (allegorical interpretation)<sup>67</sup> and *majāz* (words which have figurative meaning)<sup>68</sup>, or through the literal meaning of the terms. Sufi shaykhs sometimes preferred the *tā`wīl* and *majāz* meanings of the terms, while Ibn Taymiyya adheres to the literal meaning of terms.<sup>69</sup> This discrepancy laid the ground for arguments between the scholars who supported either side. Additionally, Ibn Taymiyya was criticized for his commentaries on beliefs held by certain Sufis, as he accused them of believing in the concept of *hulūl* (the concept of God dwelling in the people)<sup>70</sup> and *al-ittihād* (unity of existence). His polemics were completely rejected by Sufi scholars. They argued that these are his own claims and the Sufis actually follow the path of the *salaf* (the early Muslim predecessors), the founders of the Islamic tradition, whereas Ibn

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<sup>67</sup> For more information on the term please refer to: John Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 316.

<sup>68</sup> See Thomas Patrick Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam* (Clifton: Reference Book Publishers, 1965), 519.

<sup>69</sup> 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Tijānī, *al-'Aqīda al-sahīha bayna al-Sūfiyya wa-Ibn Taymiyya* (The Correct Creed Between Sufism and Ibn Taymiyya) (Cairo: al-Amanah Press, 1985), vol. 1, 42-45.

<sup>70</sup> *Hulūl* is the belief that God incarnates in a human body. Some common examples of such belief are in the case of Jesus for Christians or 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib for certain Shiites. The Sufis believe that happened to some of their masters like al-Hallāj. For Ibn Taymiyya this belief constitutes a contradiction with the Qur'anic teachings about God.

Taymiyya who claims to follow the *salaf*, in fact does not.<sup>71</sup> Also, he was criticized for not being accurate about the history of Sufism. “He believes that Sufism did not exist in the first three centuries of Islam. However, he contradicts himself when he mentioned in the same source that Imām Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 855 A.D.) talked about them.”<sup>72</sup>

It is certainly not easy to evaluate the relationship between Ibn Taymiyya and Sufism as Sufism is such a diverse phenomenon. The relation between Sufism and Islam mostly is the same like the relation between mysticism and other religions. Some have argued that the word “mystic” is represented in Arabic by “Sufi,” however, the two words are not synonyms and there are different views on its original meaning in Arabic.<sup>73</sup> Some scholars argued that early “ascetic Sufi movements in Islam were inspired by Christian ideals, and contrasted sharply with the active and pleasure loving spirit of Islam.”<sup>74</sup> There also different types of Sufi movements, which arose in different ways in Islamic history. The earliest signs of Sufism in Islam appeared early in the third century of the Hijra (the ninth century CE). Some of these movements were also influenced by Greek philosophy, and later, they influenced and were influenced by the Mu‘tazilites and the Ash‘arites.<sup>75</sup> Overall, mysticism in Islam, like other religions, focused on the spirituality of inner life and was very diverse in nature.

In his criticism of Sufism and mystical Islam in general, Ibn Taymiyya gave his seal of approval to some of the moral and ethical elements within this tradition. However, he still disagreed with most of Sufi thinkers regarding the means to achieve moral and ethical

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<sup>71</sup> ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Tijānī, *al-‘Aqīda al-sahīha bayna al-Sūfiyya wa-Ibn Taymiyya* (The Correct Creed Between Sufism and Ibn Taymiyya) (Cairo: al-Amanah Press, 1985), vol. 1, 61.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>73</sup> Reynold Nicholson, *Sufism: the Mysticism of Islam* (Penguin Books, 1975), 2-3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 5-10.

standards.<sup>76</sup> Ibn Taymiyya blessed some of the Sufis' practices that encourage good morals and ethics that Islam encouraged and insisted on, nonetheless, he still harshly criticized some of them. Accordingly, he divided Sufis into three categories. The first category of Sufis, he preferred to call *mashāykh al-Islām, mashāykh al-kitāb wa'l-sunna, wa a`immat al-hudā* (the shaykhs of Islam, the shaykhs of the Book and Tradition, and the right path leaders).<sup>77</sup> For Ibn Taymiyya the Sufis of this group were never "intoxicated" and never said anything against the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. The second Sufi group in Ibn Taymiyya's categorization included those who "experience *fanā`* (which is passing away from the self and the world), and *sukr* (intoxication)."<sup>78</sup> He believed that these Sufis had weakened their sense of discrimination and he offers apologies for them. The third category of Sufis receives the harshest criticism of Ibn Taymiyya. It is the group of "Sufis who believed in ideas and expanded doctrines that contradict Islamic principles."<sup>79</sup> This is the group of Sufis in Ibn Taymiyya's criticism that is the target of our inquiry here. In this group, Ibn Taymiyya has a blacklist that included al-Hallāj (d. 922), Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1273), Ibn Sab'īn (d. 1269) and al-Tilimsānī (d. 1291).<sup>80</sup> It is important to note that some of these writers could be perceived also as *mutakallimūn*, or even philosophers (*falāsifa*), especially in the case of Ibn 'Arabī, al-Qūnawī, and Ibn Sab'īn.

Ibn Taymiyya focused his polemics against Sufis and *mutakallimūn* on either their thought, or practice, or both of them together. In his assessments of *sūfiyyūn* (Sufis) and *mutakallimūn*, Ibn Taymiyya believed that both of them missed something crucial in the main path to faith as well as both of them followed two corrupted ways:

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<sup>76</sup> Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition* (State University of New York, 1998), 88.

<sup>77</sup> Abdullhaq Ansari, "Ibn Taymiyyah and Sufism," *Islamic Studies* 24 (1985): 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 2-3.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 2-3.

The first, *al-kalāmiyyūn* followed a path of discourse with no knowledge (*al-qawl bilā ‘ilm*), and *al-sūfiyyūn* followed the path of practice with no knowledge (*al-‘amal bilā ‘ilm*). And these two groups combined make the practical and theoretical innovations (*bida’*) that violated the Book and the *Sunna*. The second, *al-mutakallim* (scholar of *kalām*) missed practice, while *al-mutasawwif* missed discourse.<sup>81</sup>

In Ibn Taymiyya’s judgment each of these groups missed something that is essential to Islam, which led them to either corrupted thought, or innovations in religious practices. The way Ibn Taymiyya looked at this is based on his judgment that Islam is a combination of the right knowledge and practice, and both should be strictly based on the Book and the Tradition. He believes that the Sufis and the *mutakallimūn* had deviated from the correct path by neglecting either the right knowledge or practice, and also by not adhering to the Qur’an and the *Sunna* in their thought and practice. Additionally, as a result of their “corrupted knowledge and innovations,” Ibn Taymiyya occasionally compared the Sufis and the *mutakallimūn* to the People of the Book regarding their manners in thought and practice. He believes that “among those of *ahl al-kalām* (the scholars of *kalām*), there are people who are similar to the Jews in their extreme attachments to discourse and words and their relations to faith.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, they tried to over-debate the words of God until resulting in corruptions in their religious teachings. Among the Sufis he saw that “there are people who are similar to the Christians who attached their faith to practice more than to knowledge.”<sup>83</sup> The Damascene Shaykh believes that they were only imitating and following the innovations of their masters in the same way Christians did with their priests without even searching for the correct teachings of the Christ. The parallels of Christian theological corruptions and innovations counts as one of the Damascene shaykh’s

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<sup>81</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū’ Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: *Dar Alkutb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 2, 41.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

major polemics here against the Sufis and *mutakallimūn*. He is convinced that both missed the right path to faith by adhering to debates about the nature of God's existence and words.

*Bida'a* and *tahrīf* remain at the heart of Ibn Taymiyya's polemics against Sufism. In his view, Sufis fell into this corrupted thought when they abandoned the lawful worshiping practices and followed innovations. He listed many examples of Sufi rituals and practices that he labeled *bida'*. Some of these are when Sufis engage in ascetic practices such as keeping silent for long periods of time, or not eating bread or meat. Other "innovations" that Ibn Taymiyya cites include Sufis standing out on the roof under the sun for long time,<sup>84</sup> or keeping their heads shaved. He believes that although this latter habit is in accordance with the *Sunna*, it should be practiced during the Haj season only.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, a critical innovation for him is when they abandon the *Jum'a* (Friday) prayer, or when they abandon the community altogether to live alone.<sup>86</sup> All of these are Sufi innovations in the view of Ibn Taymiyya since they have no roots in the Qur'an or the *hadīth*. Now, some of these Sufi rituals that the Hanbali scholar counted as "innovations" are based on original Muslim rituals that could be practiced for the purpose of eating and wearing clothes in accordance with a humble lifestyle. And some of them are not recognized as Islamic rituals or practices like living a solitary life. I suggest that Ibn Taymiyya counted them as innovations because the Sufis had either exaggerated in practicing the lawful rituals, or came up with other rituals for religious purposes that did not originally exist in the Islamic tradition.

Other Sufi practices that Ibn Taymiyya harshly criticized he considered not only innovations, but in fact *muharāmāt* (prohibited things). Some of these are *al-ta'ammuq wa al-*

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<sup>84</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: *Dar Alkutb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 6, 200.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* vol. 21,17-18.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* vol. 11, 612-619.

*tantu*‘ (being extreme in worship and practice). He believes that they should be prohibited because the Prophet advised not to do them. Examples of these worshipping practices are “extreme starving that could be harmful to the body and the mind [...] also walking barefoot, or semi naked in public.”<sup>87</sup> Ibn Taymiyya was also asked his opinion about one of “the most controversial Sufi practices”, which is when the Sufi masters regularly keep the company of their juvenile students, even in solitude. He claimed that even if it is done for educational purposes and not obscene (*fāhish*) behaviors, “it is prohibited not only by Muslims, but also by Jews and Christians.”<sup>88</sup> An interesting observation here that Ibn Taymiyya used parallels with Jews and Christians, but this time to support his own point of view. Ibn Taymiyya did not directly accuse Sufi masters of homosexual relations with their students, but he affirmed that this particular Sufi practice attracts suspicions in this regard. He believes it should be avoided since there are more effective and God-given methods to teach *ahdāth* (juveniles) students.

The Damascene theologian was also interested in judging Sufis’ obsession with poetry and music and their relation to the Sufi rituals. He is convinced that the emotions and feelings that the Sufis experience when they dance and listen to or recite poetry are false since they do not come from authentic religious beliefs. In Ibn Taymiyya’s evaluation of false Sufi feelings here is based on common Sufi expressions such as *sukr* (intoxication) that the Sufis use to describe their feelings of joy and ecstasy when dancing and reciting poetry. In the Sufi rituals, *sukr* is one of the *maqāmāt* (stations) that they experience in their spiritual ascent on the path to God.<sup>89</sup> Ibn Taymiyya states, “some of the corrupted Sufis substituted reciting, and listening to the Qur’an with reciting, and listening to poetry as it moved their feelings with no connection to real

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. vol. 10, 620.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. vol. 11, 542-544.

<sup>89</sup> “Sufism.” In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2260> (accessed 22-Apr-2015).

knowledge or faith.”<sup>90</sup> What is even “worse than these corrupted acts” for Ibn Taymiyya, is the way Sufis justified their corrupted acts. “And they justify that saying the Qur’an is the truth that was descended from the Truth (God) who is the ultimate knowledge, while human beings in nature prefer the false temporary feelings that come from poetry as they affect the soul and move it.”<sup>91</sup> On the subject of rituals and practices in Ibn Taymiyya’s criticism, he dedicated more time looking into the Sufi practices than discussing Christian and Jewish practices. He was annoyed by the notion that the Sufis introduced these practices as an original part of the Islamic tradition, while for him they were no more than innovations and corruptions and some of them are influenced by Christian ascetic practices.

Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya remains one of the most thorough and incisive critics of Sufism. However, “his criticism is not limited to few philosophical doctrines or some popular Sufi practices.”<sup>92</sup> When issuing a *fatwā* concerning Sufism, Ibn Taymiyya always based his detailed criticism on *qiyās*, a method commonly known as analogical reasoning in the Islamic tradition, a method he also used in his assessment of Jews, Christians, Sufis, and philosophers discussed above. His general approach to examining Sufism “is to accept what is in agreement with the Qur’an and the *Sunna*, and reject what is not.”<sup>93</sup> He applies this principle of judicious criticism to Sufi ideas, practices, and personalities to mark what counts as a corrupted thought, or practice.

For Ibn Taymiyya, one of the most controversial Sufi thinkers is al-Hallāj. According to the Hanbali scholar’s verdict, al-Hallāj is a *kāfir* (an infidel) and he was killed for heterodoxy (*zandaqa*). He also affirms that al-Hallāj was not recognized as a *wālī* (a man of God) as many people think:

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid. vol. 2, 43.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>92</sup> Abdullhaq Ansari, “Ibn Taymiyyah and Sufism,” *Islamic Studies* 24 (1985): 1-2.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 5.

He was a *kāfir* according to the consensus of the Muslim scholars. It is also believed that he was a *sāhir* (warlock) with some magic abilities. It is also believed that he wrote books about *sihr* [...] Who ever says that God talked through al-Hallāj is a *kāfir* too. [...] And what has been told of *karamāt* (miracles) that happened upon his execution is all lies. Many Muslim scholars had gathered his news and none of them mentioned anything good of him.<sup>94</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya also stated in his commentary on al-Hallāj that the authorities of Sufism expelled him from their tradition. For example, he states that “the Shaykh Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī mentioned in his book, *Tabaqāt al-Sūfiyya* (the Sufi Stages), that most of the shaykhs expelled al-Hallāj out of the Sufi path.”<sup>95</sup>

Some of the most common questions that are usually asked about al-Hallāj, and were also directed to Ibn Taymiyya, were whether the execution of al-Hallāj was justified or whether he was a friend of God as he claimed. Similarly, how should we understand his famous theopathic exclamation “*anā l-Haqq*” (“I am the Truth”)? For Ibn Taymiyya, when it comes to studying al-Hallāj’s statements, the main issue is related to his language and in particular his famous phrases “*anā l-Haqq*”, or “*anā allāh*” (“I am God”) and also “*ilāhun fī al-samā` wa ilāhun fī al-ard*” (a god in heaven and a god on earth).<sup>96</sup> People believed that it was God speaking through al-Hallāj’s mouth when he said these words. However, Ibn Taymiyya believed “it could have been al-Hallāj himself supposing he was affected by psychological disorder.”<sup>97</sup> Ibn Taymiyya composed his criticism based on the literal meaning of the language used by al-Hallāj. He believes that it could be classified as a language of an insane person, or a *zandīq* (heretic). Michot states, “according to Ibn Taymiyya, in the creed of al-Hallāj there are of course words

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<sup>94</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: *Dar Alkutb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 2, 480-483.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 483.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 480.

<sup>97</sup> Yahya Michot, *Ibn Taymiyya's Commentary on the Creed of al-Hallaj* (Edinburgh University Press: 2007), 123.



that are vain and others that are equivocal, ambiguous; there are some for which no true meaning can be found and which, furthermore, are confused.”<sup>98</sup> In his evaluation of al-Hallāj, Ibn Taymiyya focused on what was unclear in his language and thought. He considered al-Hallāj’s ambiguous language dangerous enough that it could mislead people.

In his assessment of Sufis and *mutakallimūn*, the Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya believes that the innovations and corruptions in their thought and practice are influenced by imitation of the People of the Book. They did so as they drifted away from the main references of Islam and instead they got involved in rituals and beliefs that are closer to Christianity and Judaism than to Islam. As a Hanbali scholar who thought of himself as following the steps of the *salaf*, Ibn Taymiyya intended to evaluate people’s behaviors and thought based on their appearance. He sometimes focused more on rituals and practices, but he also carefully evaluated their thought, as expressed in writing. Islam for him is following the Qur’an and the Tradition, which are clear enough to guide to the right path of faith. Ibn Taymiyya does not entirely oppose the Sufis if their practices do not contradict with God’s law and the prophet’s tradition. He believes that there is no path to God except of following the Prophet externally and internally.

## **II) Philosophy and *‘ilm al-kalām***

Tracking the polemics of Ibn Taymiyya, the tropes of *tahrīf* and *bid‘a* return in his polemics against the philosophers. We should note that he is not against philosophy as a field of knowledge; what irritates him the most about philosophers is their way of engagement in interpreting religion and debating the words of God using philosophical methods. A question to ask in the context is who qualified as a philosopher and who did not for Ibn Taymiyya. Anna Akasoy argues by pointing out philosophical implications [Ibn Taymiyya] might have associated

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 123-137.

Sufis with *al-falāsifa* such as Ibn Sīna or his thought without establishing direct connections between the both.<sup>99</sup> One should note that Ibn Taymiyya would frequently also associate these two with *‘ulama` al-kalām*.

When evaluating philosophers, the Damascene theologian is convinced that seeking the ultimate knowledge of God with the help of the imperfect human intellect alone is misleading. Therefore, most philosophical debates about religion and God’s words and nature are corrupted. He also strongly believes that Islam does not need philosophy to interpret its tradition and scripture. Thus, when he examined the work of philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā and others who have a Muslim background, he preferred to call them *falāsifa fi al-islām* (philosophers in Islam) not *falāsifa muslimūn* (Muslim philosophers). In other words, Ibn Taymiyya wanted them to be either philosophers, or Muslim thinkers, but they cannot be both. Therefore, for Ibn Taymiyya philosophers are following a corrupt path if they think that the human intellect can use philosophy independent of revelation to gain religious knowledge. That is generally the core of his polemics against philosophers. It appears that the Shaykh al-Islām established his criticism of philosophers based on his own notion that there should not be an absolute trust of the human intellect (*‘adam al-thiqa al-mutlaqa bil‘aql*).<sup>100</sup> However, he did not completely discredit philosophers for their knowledge in matters that did not include religion. Ibn Taymiyya stated, “Unlike their statements in natural sciences, their statements in theology are the most corrupted discourses.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Anna Akasoy, “What is Philosophical Sufism?,” in Peter Adamson (ed.), *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth Century*, (Warburg Institute: 2011), 233.

<sup>100</sup> Sa‘id ‘Abid Al-‘Azīm, *Manhaj Shaykh al-islām Ibn Taymiyya Attajdydy Assalafi wa da‘watahu al-islāhiyya* (The Salafist Modernist Approach of Ibn Taymiyya and his Reformist Missionary) (Alexandria: Dar al-Iman), 36.

<sup>101</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū’ Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: *Dar Alkuthb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 12, 154.

What attracted Ibn Taymiyya the most among the *'ulamā` al-kalām*, Sufis and philosophers are the thinkers of *wahdat al-wujūd* (Unity of Existence, or Unity of Being). He engaged with their work in details and discussed their doctrines from different angles. In brief, the basis of *wahdat al-wujūd* is that God as the Creator of the world is part of it. We can say that *wahdat al-wujūd* thinkers argued that we are not able to differentiate between the world and its Creator as He is being part of it.<sup>102</sup> By proposing this theory, *wahdat al-wujūd's* thinkers opened the door for questions such as, “Who is the Creator and who is the being created if the two are one in this case? Also, what is the source of evil in this world if God is part of it?”<sup>103</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī was the most important thinker of *wahdat al-wujūd* and his thought received “controversial views on theological and philosophical levels.”<sup>104</sup> Some called him the great master of knowledge and theology, and others referred to him as a *zandīq*.

Although, philosophy and *'ilm al-kalām* are different disciplines, Ibn Taymiyya still discussed scholars that he believed to be philosophers and *kalām* thinkers at the same time. On other occasions, his statements presented *mutakallimūn* as being influenced by philosophy. He does not actually draw a clear line between *'ulamā` al-kalām*, and philosophers who got engaged in debating the principles of *wahdat al-wujūd*. He would occasionally call the *mutakallimūn* and philosophers as *falāsifat-al-wujūd* (unity of existence philosophers). It appears that the Hanbali theologian had associated the main thinkers of *wahdat al-wujūd* such as Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Sab‘īn, Ibn al-Fārid, al-Qūnawī, and al-Tilmisānī with philosophy because he believes they were mainly influenced by Greek philosophy. He is also convinced that they were influenced by Zoroastrian,

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<sup>102</sup> Al-‘akhdar Quwaidrī, *muskilat al-itihād wa al-ta`ālī fī ‘aqīdat al-shaykh Ibn ‘Arabi* (The Problem of Unity and Transcendence in the Creed of the Shaykh Ibn ‘Arabi) (Damascus, 2010), 10-11.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

Jewish, and Christian ideas.<sup>105</sup> The most blunt statement he made against them, in which he reveals his general attitude is:

The thinkers of *wahdat al-wujūd* are *a`immat kufr* (leaders of infidelity) and they must be killed. And their *tawba* (repentance) should not be accepted if they announced it at the time of punishment. As the greatest *zanādiqa* (heretics) are those who pretend to be Muslim in public, while in private they are *kāfirūn* (infidels). [...] Everyone who followed them, or had mercy on them, or praised them, or praised their books, or helped them should be punished. [...] They have corrupted minds and religion.<sup>106</sup>

Although this statement reveals Ibn Taymiyya's general point of view of the "corrupted thought" of *wahdat al-wujūd* proponents, he still placed them in different categories. He does not view all of them on the same level of *zandaqa* (heresy) and corruption. In general, for those thinkers who were the backbone of the *wahdat al-wujūd*, he was in disagreement with them for their hypotheses, approaches, and conclusions.<sup>107</sup> He believed that the Qur'an and the *Sunna*, as ultimate sources, should guide to the correct path of knowledge if they were associated with the right hypotheses of human intellect. On the other hand, the hypotheses of *'ulamā' al-kalām* and philosophers are misleading because they are solely based on the corrupted use of the human intellect. For instance, Ibn Taymiyya commented on an important dispute between the thinkers of *wahdat al-wujūd* who held two opinions about whether the Qur'an is the words and voice of God or words created by God through the words of Gabriel. He affirmed that Ibn 'Arabī and other *malāhida*<sup>108</sup> and *falāsifa* in this matter claimed that the Qur'an's words are abstract words that were constituted in the mind of the Prophet through Gabriel, which means they were created

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<sup>105</sup> Please see Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: *Dar Alkutb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 2, and vol. 5.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. vol. 2, 131-132.

<sup>107</sup> Sa'id 'Abid Al-'Azīm, *Manhaj Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya Attajdydy Assalafi wa da'watahu al-Islāhiyya* (The Salafist Modernist Approach of Ibn Taymiyya and his Reformist Missionary) (Alexandria: Dar al-Iman), 36.

<sup>108</sup> Although *malāhida* is nowadays commonly translated as atheists, it does not have the same meaning here. Thinkers that Ibn Taymiyya called *malāhida* here such as Ibn 'Arabi did actually believe in Islam and its prophet.

by God and they are not His actual words. Ibn Taymiyya believes that this is *kufr* according to the consensus of Muslim scholars.<sup>109</sup> He also believes that this whole hypothesis is corrupted, thus, the conclusions are corrupted. He believes that although the Qur'an as the words of God was delivered to Muhammad by Gabriel, God had talked directly to other prophets such as Moses.

In his evaluation of the thinkers of *wahdat al-wujūd*, Ibn Taymiyya categorized them in two main groups according to two main bases of their beliefs. He believed that the creed of the first group reflects most of the Sufis' beliefs. For him "this is the group that was misled in the same way Christians were misled. And the most important names in this group are Ibn Sab'īn and al-Qūnawī."<sup>110</sup> For the second group, the main element of their creed is "*zandaqa falsafiyya* (philosophical heresy) such as their beliefs in *al-wujūd al-mutlaq* (Ubiquity), the nature of *al-nafs* (soul), *al-'aql*, revelation, and prophecy and other things that could be good, or corrupted."<sup>111</sup> The most important name here is Ibn 'Arabī. However, the Hanbali scholar believes that Ibn 'Arabī "is the closest one to Islam among them, while the worst one of both groups is al-Tilmisānī as he is *akfirun billāh* (does not believe in God)."<sup>112</sup> The Damascene theologian's comments here show some interesting parallels between the thinkers of *wahdat al-wujūd* and other groups. He believes that they were either affected by mystical Christian thought or corrupted philosophical ideas.

Among the Sufis, philosophers, and the scholars of *kalām*, Ibn 'Arabī received the most attention by Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn 'Arabī's great influence in his own and following times explains

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<sup>109</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdī (Beirut: *Dar Alkutb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 12, 514-516 & 555-557.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. vol. 2, 175.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 175.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 175.

this interest. He thoroughly examined Ibn ‘Arabī’s essays, particularly *Fusūs al-Hikam*. The Mamluk scholar perceives Ibn ‘Arabī much as a Sufī and *kalām* thinker who was influenced by philosophy. He states, “A group of philosophers believe that the perfection of *al-nafs* (the soul) is through knowledge. And this knowledge is the knowledge of metaphysics. [...] They were followed by others like Ibn ‘Arabī and Ibn Sab‘īn in their path to Sufism.”<sup>113</sup> In his critique of philosophical mysticism (*tasawwuf al-falāsifa*), Ibn Taymiyya saw Ibn ‘Arabī as someone who embraced doctrines that confused God with his creatures.<sup>114</sup> Nonetheless, Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion of Ibn ‘Arabī varies, as sometimes he considers his thought very corrupted, while at other times he sees some Islamic values in it. Ibn Taymiyya states, “The author of the book *Fusūs al-Hikam* (i.e., Ibn ‘Arabī) is like the others such as al-Qūnawī, Ibn Sab‘īn, al-Tilimsānī, Ibn al-Fārid, and their followers, and they are all of one creed, which is *wahdat al-wujūd*. [...] These are all *kāfirūn*.”<sup>115</sup> However, in another place of the same volume, Ibn Taymiyya claims that Ibn ‘Arabī is better than the other scholars of *wahdat al-wujūd*. He states “Ibn ‘Arabī’s book *Fusūs al-Hikam* is closer to Islam than the others’ books. This book still contains a lot of good things because the author does not adhere to the concept of *al-ittihād* (i.e., *wahdat al-wujūd*) all the time like others.”<sup>116</sup> So in the second statement, he argues that Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought is not corrupted all the time as he sometimes deviates from the creed of *wahdat al-wujūd*.

Ibn Taymiyya believes that Ibn ‘Arabī cannot explain the difference between God and the world in the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*. So, in this case and according to Ibn Taymiyya, “Ibn

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. vol. 2, 94-95.

<sup>114</sup> Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition* (New York: State University of New York 1998), 87-89.

<sup>115</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū’ Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: *Dar Alkuthb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 2, 123-129.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 143.

‘Arabī’s doctrine contradicts the main principles of Islam.’<sup>117</sup> In this regard, about Ibn ‘Arabī and other thinkers of *wahdat al-wujūd*, Ibn Taymiyya states:

They compare the existence of the Creator to the existence of His creatures. For them, all of creation’s good and bad characteristics the Creator must have. [...] In other words, they believe that since the creatures are part of the Creator and their existence is all one, so for them when praising any of God’s creatures is like worshipping Him.<sup>118</sup>

According to Ibn Taymiyya, these thinkers were not able to distinguish between God and the world in nature, existence, and power. In this understanding, they confused between God and the world that He created and they finally arrived at the biggest sin in Islam, which is *shirk*.

Ibn Taymiyya’s accusations against Ibn ‘Arabī have provoked different opinions among modern readers. Alexander Knysh argues that Ibn Taymiyya’s criticism of Ibn ‘Arabī’s mystical thought is wrong since it is based on Ibn Taymiyya’s own rationalist views.<sup>119</sup> So for Knysh, Ibn Taymiyya used the wrong strategies to examine Ibn ‘Arabī’s text in the first place. Could it be true that Ibn Taymiyya was not able to grasp the core of Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophical language and metaphors? Knysh believes that when dealing with Ibn ‘Arabī’s work, “we are dealing with the ‘Truth of the Subconscious Psyche’ expressing itself in the language of ‘Poetry and Prophecy,’ rather than with the ‘Truth of the Intellect’ whose natural medium, at least in the medieval period, is Metaphysics.”<sup>120</sup> However, Ibn Taymiyya’s notion of the correct path of Islam completely excludes the metaphysics that *wahdat al-wujūd*’s thinkers argued for. For Ibn Taymiyya, these metaphysics constitute a radical departure from the pious prospects of the

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<sup>117</sup> Abdullhaq Ansari, “Ibn Taymiyyah and Sufism,” *Islamic Studies* 24 (1985): 8-9.

<sup>118</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū’ Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdī (Beirut: *Dar Alkutb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 2, 123-129.

<sup>119</sup> Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition* (New York: State University of New York 1998), 87-89.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* 88.

authentic *salaf*'s thought. In other words, Ibn 'Arabī and Ibn Taymiyya have two completely different views when approaching the Islamic Scripture.

In addition to listing the wrongs of the *wahdat al-wujūd* philosophers and their debate about the nature of God's words and existence, Ibn Taymiyya gave more examples of their "corrupted thought and innovations." He stated, "Ibn 'Arabī and other philosophers like him, *ghalū* (exaggerated, or were extremist in their thought) in praising their masters. They considered *wilāya* (the legal authority of '*ulamā*' in leading the community)<sup>121</sup> higher than prophecy. In the same way they considered some of their highly ranked philosophers superior to the Prophet."<sup>122</sup> In condemning the extremism of the *wahdat al-wujūd* proponents, Ibn Taymiyya presented multiple opinions and it seems that his polemics on this issue are not well constructed. The particular "extremist" statements that he commented on are derived from "controversial poetry" by "extremist" Sufis, and philosophers such as al-Hallāj, Ibn al-Fārid, Ibn 'Arabī, Awhad al-dīn al-Kirmānī, Ibn Sab'īn, 'Alī al-Harīrī, 'Afīf al-dīn al-Tilīmsānī, and Ibn Isra'īl. Ibn Taymiyya holds them responsible for abominable heresies. Knysh argues that Ibn Taymiyya sometimes contradicts himself. "He proceeds to demolish the metaphysical premises upon which these mystical thinkers rested their 'heretical' tents. In the process, he completely forgets about the controversial sayings and poetics lines he cited earlier in his treatise."<sup>123</sup>

Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and other philosophers who followed him were accused of corrupting the religion according to Ibn Taymiyya's judgment. Ibn Taymiyya described him as a *mulhid*. The Hanbali scholar is convinced that Ibn Sīnā's efforts of interpreting some of the Qur'an's terms were shaped by corrupted Greek philosophical thought. For example, one of the

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<sup>121</sup> For more information on *wilāya* see Gerhard Bowering and Patricia Crone, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 548.

<sup>122</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: *Dar Alkuthb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 11, 363.

<sup>123</sup> Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition* (New York: State University of New York 1998), 90.



Qur'an's expressions that according to the Hanbali scholar Ibn Sīnā misinterpreted is the meaning of “*al-`afilīn*” (those that disappear) in the Qur'an verse (6:76).<sup>124</sup> He believes that Ibn Sīnā, and other philosophers, not only misinterpreted these terms, but also corrupted the Qur'an's general meanings. Ibn Taymiyya explains that they interpreted the meaning of “*al-`afilīn*” as the movements of the stars and planets. Their interpretations here were influenced by ancient religions' ideas of those who worshiped stars and planets.<sup>125</sup> He adds, “Some Sufis also followed the lead of these philosophers in similar corruptions of interpreting the Qur'an's words.”<sup>126</sup> However, in another place Ibn Taymyyia argues that the thought of Ibn Sīnā took a different direction when he learned more about Islam. The Mamluk scholar argues that Ibn Sīnā had been influenced by *al-malāhida*, eventually learned more about Islam, and ended up mixing between his old corrupted thought and his new religion. So “he somehow corrected his old corrupted philosophy. However, when his thought became known for the scholars of Islam, they revealed all of the contradictions in his ideas.”<sup>127</sup>

According to Ibn Taymiyya, Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī and other *kalām* theologians were also corrupted as their path of thought was corrupted. Of course, *Ihyā` 'ulūm al-dīn* (The Revival of the Religion's Sciences) is one of al-Ghazālī's main books that Ibn Taymiyya criticized, although his assessment of al-Ghazālī in *Ihyā` 'ulūm al-dīn* is generally positive when it comes to the acts of worship and good manners (*adāb*). Ibn Taymiyya believed that some of the Sufi shaykhs' words, in particular al-Ghazālī, are “in agreement with the Book and the *Sunna*.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> The full verse is, “So when the night covered him [with darkness], he saw a star. He said, ‘This is my lord.’ But when it set, he said, ‘I like not those that disappear.’ (6:76) The verse is about Abraham in his quest of looking for God as told in the Qur'an.

<sup>125</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdī (Beirut: *Dar Alkutb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 5, 547-549.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 550-551.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. vol. 9, 135.

<sup>128</sup> Yahya Michot, “An Important Reader of al-Ghazali: Ibn Taymiyya,” *The Muslim World* 103 (2013): 136.

When Ibn Taymiyya was asked about the worth of the concept of *Ihyā`*, Michot argues, that the Damascene scholar offered “an answer combining textual archaeology and comparative spirituality.”<sup>129</sup> Ibn Taymiyya thinks that al-Ghazālī in his treatment of Sufism in that book is “benefiting the enemies of Islam and his work is a work of a sick person infected by Ibn Sīnā.”<sup>130</sup> Nonetheless, one can say that Ibn Taymiyya’s evaluation of al-Ghazālī does not end on this negative note. Although he saw al-Ghazālī’s views on theology, prophetology, and eschatology corrupted, he still believed the book of the *Ihyā`* “remains of many benefits and contains more praiseworthy elements than things to be rejected.”<sup>131</sup>

In another book by al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), Ibn Taymiyya viewed al-Ghazālī as an Ash‘arite. He identified al-Ghazālī as a traditional Ash‘arite theologian proclaiming the exclusive power of God. However, he does not hold this view of al-Ghazālī all the time. “Ibn Taymiyya notes elsewhere that al-Ghazālī is not always an Ash‘arite occasionalist but adopts a position closer to the requirements of both reason and the religion, notably in the *Ihya`*.”<sup>132</sup> The parallelism Ibn Taymiyya drew between the Ash‘arites and al-Ghazālī is interesting keeping in mind that Ibn Taymiyya does not entirely accept the Ash‘arites’ thought. This is because the Hanbali scholar wanted to give al-Ghazālī credit for some of his thought that is still “uncorrupted and could benefit Islam” in the same way some of the Ash‘arites did.

In summary, Ibn Taymiyya does not completely reject philosophy. However, he believes that philosophers should not be involved in interpreting religion. This evaluation is based on his argument that we should not have an ultimate trust in the human intellect when interpreting the

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 137

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 138.

words of God. Ibn Taymiyya is convinced that philosophers who are Muslims, such as Ibn Sīnā, and the *mutakallimūn*, particularly the thinkers of *wahdat al-wujūd*, are influenced by the corrupted thought of Greek philosophy, and the corrupted theological thought of Jews and Christians. For Ibn Taymiyya, the human intellect by itself is not capable of reaching the right conclusions about religion. However, Ibn Taymiyya also believes that human intellect is still capable of following the lead of the Qur'an and *Sunna* in establishing correct theological positions and religious practices, rather than the converse, as the philosophers maintained. Ibn Taymiyya's judgments of philosophers, Sufis, and the *mutakallimūn* and the analogies he did in comparing them with the Christians and Jews, show the parallels of the same wrongs by all of these parties; the same wrongs in practice and thought that were structured in *tahrīf*, *taqlīd*, and *bid'a*.

## Chapter 3

### Ibn Taymiyya's Polemics Against the *Nusayriyya*

Ibn Taymiyya's polemics against the Nusayriyya came in a major *fatwā* that is historically the first one by a Sunni scholar against the Nusayriyya as a sect. In his polemics against them, Ibn Taymiyya placed the Nusayriyya outside of the Islamic faith. He repeated his polemics against them a few times later in his texts. The one discussed in this section is the major one as it is very detailed and it discloses Ibn Taymiyya's opinion of the sect's theology, history, and politics. In his *fatwā* the Damascene scholar first accused the Nusayriyya of carrying out *tahrīf* and *bid'a* that are dreadful enough to place them outside of the Islamic faith, or even outside of the Abrahamic religions altogether. Second, he accused them of *taqlīd* rituals that are similar to those of polytheistic religions. Ibn Taymiyya is convinced that their theology accommodates many examples of *kufr* that are worse than their parallels of the Christians and Jews. They also based some of their religious traditions on corrupted philosophical concepts and they attempted to relate that to the Islamic tradition. For example, Ibn Taymiyya argues, they believe that God first created *al-'aql* (the human intellect) and they argue that this is a *hadīth* by the Prophet. They do so to relate this concept to Aristotle's concept that knowledge came first in time.<sup>133</sup> Ibn Taymiyya drew other analogous judgments comparing the Nusayris's theological thought sometimes to corrupted philosophy and polytheist religions, and some other times to corrupted Christian thought. In this section, I will examine Ibn Taymiyya's accusations of *taqlīd*,

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<sup>133</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: *Dar Alkuthb Alhaditha*, 1980), vol. 35, 152-153.

*tahrīf*, and *bidaʿ* against the Nusayris' theological tradition and how his use of these tropes compares to the way he uses them to judge the other Muslim and non-Muslim groups.

## I) Who are the Nusayriyya?

The Nusayriyya emerged in the ninth century in the south of Iraq. The sect's founder was Muhammad ibn Nusayr al-ʿAbdī al-Bakrī al-Numayrī (d. 883), also known as Abū Shuʿayb.<sup>134</sup> He was a Shiite of Persian origins<sup>135</sup> who was close to the Eleventh Imām Hasan al-ʿAskarī in Iraq (d. 873). During the life of Imam Hasan al-ʿAskarī, Ibn Nusayr claimed that he was the door (*bāb*) of the Shiite Imam. The Twelver Shiites believe that there is a door to each of the Twelve Imams through which the followers can learn the rituals of religion. After the Imām al-Hasan al-ʿAskarī learned of Ibn Nusayr's beliefs, he repudiated him, telling his followers "I discharge (*abra`u min*) Ibn Nusayr and Ibn Bābā al-Qumī and I warn you and all of my followers and I inform you that I condemn them (*alʿanhumā*)."<sup>136</sup> By then, Ibn Nusayr had many followers who increased in number and developed into the Nusayriyya sect.<sup>137</sup> The Nusayriyya who are the target of Ibn Taymiyya's *fatwā*, are the Nusayriyya of Mamluk Syria, and currently referred to as *al-ʿAlawīyyūn* (the Alawites). They emigrated from Iraq to Syria after the emergence of the Nusayri creed and as a result of persecution of their faith there.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> See, Yvette Talhamy, "The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2010): 176. Also see, Muhammad al-Tawīl, *Tārīkh al-ʿAlawīyyīn* (A History of Alawites) (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1966), 204-205. Also refer to: Jaʿfar Al-Dandashī, *Madkhal `ilā al-Madhab al-ʿAlawī al-Nusayrī* (An Introduction to the Nusayri-Alawite Creed) (Casablanca: Afryqia al-Sharq, 2009), 14-16.

<sup>135</sup> Jʿafar Al-Dandashī, *Madkhal `ila al-Madhab al-ʿalawi al-Nusayrī* (An Introduction to the Nusayri-Alawite Creed) (Casablanca: Afryqia al-Sharq, 2009), 14-16.

<sup>136</sup> Muhammad al-Tawīl, *Tārīkh al-ʿAlawīyyīn* (The History of Alawites) (Beirut: Dar al-Anndalus, 1966), 58.

<sup>137</sup> Yvette Talhamy, "The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2010): 176. Also see: Muhammad al-Tawīl, *Tārīkh al-ʿAlawīyyīn* (The History of Alawites) (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1966), 204-205.

<sup>138</sup> Mahmūd Al-Sālih, *al-Nabaʿ al-Yaqīn ʿan al-ʿAlawīyyīn* (The Right Truth About the Alawites) (Damascus: Dār al-Mustaqbal, 1993), 14-17.

The Nusayriyya were also theologically connected to other Shiite sects in many aspects. After the death of the sixth imam, Imam Ja‘far al-Sādiq (d. 765 AD), a huge religious disagreement about the following Imam occurred. Some believed that Isma‘il ibn Ja‘far al-Sādiq was the Imam, followed by the last Imam, al-Mahdī. This group became the Isma‘ilis and, later, spawned another sect now known as the Druze. Others insisted that Mūsā ibn Ja‘far al-Sādiq was the Imam and these became the sect of the Ja‘fris who believe in twelve Imams and later diverged into other sects including the Nusayriyya.<sup>139</sup> An important aspect here when discussing the Shiite theology is *‘ilm al-bātin* as Ibn Taymiyya consistently referred to it in his polemics against the Nusayriyya. As some of the Shiites believe, *‘ilm al-bātin* refers to the inner (or the implicit) meaning and interpretation of the Scripture. In other words, according to proponents of *‘ilm al-bātin*, some interpretations of certain verses in the Quran require an esoteric interpretation that is only available to the Imams as the meaning is not explicit.<sup>140</sup>

## II) Ibn Taymiyya’s Nusayriyya *Fatwā*

Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics against the Nusayriyya came as a *fatwā* in response to an *istiftā’*. His *fatwā* is believed to have been issued either during or shortly after 1317 AD.<sup>141</sup> Although what concerns us from Ibn Taymiyya’s commentaries here are issues related to corruptions, innovations, and imitations related to the sect’s theology, he also commented on many other issues in his polemics against this sect. He listed in great details in his *fatwā* what Sunni Muslims should do to the Nusayriyya concerning issues related to daily life, marriage, social and political matters. Noticeably, the Hanbali scholar’s commentary reveals many political

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<sup>139</sup> Muhammad al-Tawīl, *Tārīkh al-‘Alawīyīn (A History of Alawites)* (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1966), 148-153.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 196-197.

<sup>141</sup> Yvette Talhamy, “The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2010): 179

concerns towards this sect, as well as some false historical accusations. The *istiftā`* itself is very detailed and can be abbreviated as follows:

What is the view of the noble scholars, the religious leaders, may God help them to reveal the truth about the Nusayriyya that allow drinking wine, believe in metempsychosis, the eternity of the world, deny the resurrection, heaven and hell? They believe that the five prayers a day are done by reciting the five names of ‘Alī, Hasan, Husayn, Muhsin and Fātima (i.e., ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib and his family members) [...] according to them God who created the world is ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib [...] and fasting for them is reciting the names of thirty men and thirty women. [...] Is inter-marriage between them and the Muslims allowed, is it allowed to eat from their slaughter [...] may they be buried in the Muslims graveyards or not [...] are we allowed to kill them and confiscate their money or not [...] is fighting them considered more important than fighting the Tatars (Mongols).<sup>142</sup>

It is believed that this *istiftā`* about the Nusayriyya was requested by one of Ibn Taymiyya’s students named Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad ibn Mahmūd ibn Mura al-Shāfi‘ī.<sup>143</sup> Clearly, the *mustaftī* (one submitting the *istiftā`*) displays some good knowledge of the sect’s theology, practices, and beliefs. In fact, some scholars argue that the first part of the passage, which is the *istiftā`* by Ibn Taymiyya’s disciple, shows “a great knowledge” of the Nusayris’s creed and rituals, more than Ibn Taymiyya’s actual *fatwā*.<sup>144</sup> The *fatwā* inquirer requested Ibn Taymiyya to reveal his opinion on certain religious practices and beliefs of the sect, but also to issue a ruling in regard to very specific political concerns, “is fighting them considered more important than fighting the Tatars.”

Ibn Taymiyya replied to this enquiry with a very extensive polemical commentary in which he answered the questions and commented on other issues related to the sect, as well as

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<sup>142</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu' Fatwa Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: Dar Alkutb Alhaditha, 1980), vol. 35, 145-149.

<sup>143</sup> Yvette Talhamy, “The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2010): 179.

<sup>144</sup> Yaron Friedman, “Ibn Taymiyya's Fatawa against the Nusayri-Alawi Sect,” *Der Islam* (2005): 351. Also see: Talhamy, “The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 82 (2010): 180.

other Shiite sects. In his commentary, the Hanbali scholar begins by situating the Nusayriyya in relation to other religions and sects:

Praise be to God the Lord of the worlds: those people called Nusayriyya, and the other kinds of the Batiniyya Qarāmita (Qarmatians), are more heretical than Jews and Christians and even more heretical than many of *al-Mushrikūn* (the polytheists) and their harm to Muhammad's *umma* (community) is greater than the harm of the infidel soldiers such as the Mongols, the Franks (*al-Firanj*), and others. They pretend to be Shiite and support *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the Prophet), while in truth they do not believe in God, or His Messenger (Muhammad) or in His Book (the Quran) [...] they do not believe in heaven or hell and they do not believe in any of God's messengers [...] they take the words of God and His Prophet that are well known among Muslims and they turn them (*yuhrifūnaha*) into an exegesis of esoteric knowledge [...]<sup>145</sup>

First, in his comparisons, Ibn Taymiyya placed the Nusayriyya in a position that is worse than the People of the Book in terms of religious thought. He even considers them worse than the polytheists. Second, Ibn Taymiyya accused the Nusayriyya of *tahrīf* as he believes they distorted the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* in order to turn them into something different like their own "esoteric knowledge." Ibn Taymiyya's criticism does not end there. He believes that as a consequence of their "*zandaqa* and *tahrīf*" (heresy and corruption) they do not qualify to be considered Muslim, or even considered among the Abrahamic religions. He thinks that they pretend to be Shiite Muslims to protect themselves, while, in fact they are even worse than *al-mushrikūn*. The compelling fact about the Mamluk scholar's polemics against this sect is that he is not only convinced that they are not Muslim, but they are even worse than the other groups discussed earlier in this essay. In his view, the People of the Book's religious traditions still have some

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<sup>145</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu' Fatwa Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: Dar Alkutb Alhaditha, 1980), vol. 35, 149-152.



values in spite of their corruptions and innovations. As for the Nusayriyya, most of their religious practices and beliefs stand outside the Abrahamic religions traditions.

According to his assessment of the Nusayris' theological practices and beliefs, their religious thought is corrupted. Ibn Taymiyya is convinced that their religious teachings are based on a combination of *taqlīd* to certain corrupted philosophy and innovations that are based on what they distorted from the Book and the Tradition. He states:

They distorted some of the Qur'an's words in order to make it agree with some of the philosophers' discourse that they follow in their religion. They also distorted some of the Prophet's sayings as did the authors of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Safā'* (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity) who are some of their leaders.<sup>146</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya argues that the Nusayris' religious teachings have no divine source. Sometimes they establish their religious rituals based on philosophical sources and polytheistic religions, he argues. In other cases they distorted some of the Islamic teachings to agree with their "own corrupted thought." Ibn Taymiyya also considers the *sources* of their religious thought to be corrupted. For instance, he associated the Nusayris with the *Ikhwān al-Safā'* (Brethren of Purity). It is worth mentioning here that Ibn Taymiyya considered the *Ikhwān al-Safā'* as esotericists whose doctrines contradict the religion of Islam.<sup>147</sup>

In revealing the Nusayris' theological wrongs, Ibn Taymiyya stated that other scholars had commented on their faith too. However, he did not mention any names of these scholars in his polemics.

They were also described by the '*ulamā'* as pretending in public to be *rāfīda* (a sect among the Shiites), while in private, infidelity is the heart of their creed. In fact they do not believe in any of the

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 153.

<sup>147</sup> For more information on the *Ikhwān al-Safā'* (Brethren of Purity), see *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Ikhwān al-Safā'", at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ikhwan-al-safa/>

prophets and messengers. They do not believe in Noah or Abraham or Moses or Jesus and they do not believe in their books either.<sup>148</sup>

Overall, a number of observations can be made about Ibn Taymiyya's response. First, he commented on multiple issues besides the sect's theology including their history, politics, and relationship to other Shiite sects. A number of scholars, who looked into Ibn Taymiyya's assessment of the Nusayris, believe that he lacked knowledge about the sect's history.

Aside from the theological factors in his criticism, Ibn Taymiyya points to specific historical accusations which most likely do not refer to the Nusayriyya, but confuse them with the activities of the Isma'ilis.<sup>149</sup> Some of these inaccurate accusations count against Ibn Taymiyya's opinions of the sect. For example, he mentioned that they ruled Egypt for two hundred years, although it was the Isma'ili Fatimids who ruled Egypt from 969 to 1171. He also accused them of killing pilgrims on their way to Mecca and stealing the Black Stone of Ka'ba, which are "deeds that were perpetrated by the Qaramita."<sup>150</sup>

In terms of the Nusayris' religious practices, Ibn Taymiyya pointed out some examples, which he believes to be corrupted rituals and thought. However, it seems that he may have confused them with other Shiite groups as well. He combined them all under the common Shiite concept of *'ilm al-bātin*. Recall that he stated in his *fatwā*, "those people called Nusayris, they and the other kinds of the Batiniyya Qarāmita (Qarmatians), are more heretical than Jews and Christians and even more heretical than many of the polytheists (*al-mushrikūn*).<sup>151</sup>" Ibn Taymiyya believed that all of these Shiite sects are related to each other based on the *Bātiniyya* concept, as he put them all under the same theological umbrella. Additionally, in the Mamluk

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<sup>148</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu' Fatwa Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: Dar Alkutb Alhaditha, 1980), vol. 35, 150.

<sup>149</sup> Yaron Friedman, "Ibn Taymiyya's Fatawa against the Nusayri-Alawi Sect," *Der Islam* 82 (2005): 353.

<sup>150</sup> Yvette Talhamy, "The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2010): 180.

<sup>151</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu' Fatwa Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya*, ed., al-Najdi (Beirut: Dar Alkutb Alhaditha, 1980), vol. 35, 149.

scholar's views, there are further reasons to consider the Nusayris "more heretical than Jews and Christians and even more heretical than many of the polytheists." He believes that they do not actually believe in God, His Prophet, and His Book. Ibn Taymiyya believes that the Nusayriyya and other *Bāṭiniyya* groups interpreted the main two references of Islam, the Qur'an and the *Sunna* of the Prophet, in ways that benefit their own interests. Some of Ibn Taymiyya examples that the Nusayris interpreted Islam in their own way include matters of obligatory duties for Muslims. For example he believes that they substituted the five daily prayers with learning of the esoteric knowledge of their theology. Additionally, they changed the duty of pilgrimage to Mecca to visiting their shaykh's shrines.<sup>152</sup> Ibn Taymiyya also states that some of their extremists say that 'Alī was a god (*ilāh*).<sup>153</sup> Some of the parallels of the innovations and corruptions in theology between the Nusayris and the Christians the Hanbali scholar makes here is that 'Alī is being considered a god by the Nusayriyya in like manner Jesus is being considered a god by Christians.

To sum up, the Damascenes scholar believes that the Nusayris presented themselves as an Islamic Shiite sect, while in fact he excludes them from the Islamic tradition based on their theological beliefs, which are corrupted and have no roots in the texts. He is convinced that they corrupted a lot of the Islamic revelation and endorsed corrupted non-Muslim theological beliefs and rituals in order to support their *bida'*. Additionally, the Hanbali Shaykh considered the Nusayris not only non-Muslims, but also non-*kitābīs* (People of the Book). Moreover, he considered them disbelievers and heretical. He elaborates on this matter insisting that the jihad against them, as the enemies within the lands of Islam, is a priority to fighting the invaders such as the Mongols and the Crusaders. However, it seems that drawing a line between who is a

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 150.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. 161.

Nusayri, an Ismaʿili, or any other Shiite sect follower was not so clear for him. In other words, he looked at all of these Shiite sects as one collective theological creed without paying attention to the religious divisions and the political disputes among them. In doing so, Ibn Taymiyya accused the Nusayris of certain historical incidents that were carried out by other sects. Overall, the tropes of corruptions and innovations in Ibn Taymiyya's criticism against the Nusayris are more polemical than those of the other groups studied in this essay. His polemics claim that the Nusayriyya's religious traditions cannot even be included in any of the Abrahamic religions.

## Conclusion

Certainly Ibn Taymiyya's judgments of Muslim and non-Muslim groups are polemical, however, he did not do so for the aim of being polemical per se. The fact is that he does not tolerate any mistakes in theology as a result of the imperfect human intellect not only by the followers of other religions, but also by Muslims. We have to note that when we study religious polemics in general, there is a tendency to focus on polemics against a certain religion or sect that is different from the polemicist's background. Our inquiries, however, confirm that Ibn Taymiyya's polemics against the followers of other faiths like Christianity and Judaism are connected with similar polemics against certain Muslim sects like the Nusayris and other Shiites. These in their turn are also connected to Ibn Taymiyya's polemics of the same nature against certain groups of his own Sunni sect but who follow different religious-intellectual schools like the *mutakallimūn*, Sufis, and philosophers.

Ibn Taymiyya used the tropes of *tahrīf*, *taqlīd*, and *bid'a* to address certain beliefs, rituals, and practices of these groups. When constructing his polemics, or evaluations, the Hanbali scholar essentially referred to the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. He also consulted Jewish and Christian scriptures, as well as philosophical methodologies and *'ilm al-kalām*. Although he was received by modern scholars as well as by his contemporaries as one of the most polemical Sunni Muslim theologians in history, he does not completely reject all of the groups or the fields of knowledge investigated in this essay. He placed the targets of his polemics on different levels on his scale of evaluation according to how theologically authentic, or fruitful their thought and practices were. Nonetheless, among the religious groups, the Nusayris received the harshest judgment by Ibn

Taymiyya. He placed them outside of the three Abrahamic religions, and he considered them the most heretical.

Tracking the tropes of corruption, imitation, and innovation in the Mamluk theologian's polemics, we notice that he systematically used them in his judgments with all of the groups investigated in this essay. Having looked into his texts through this wider scope, gave us the chance to expose deeper forms in his polemics. These forms show his concerns with certain faults that the followers of these different parties are making. These common faults among these different groups are reflected in the tropes of *taqlīd*, *tahrīf*, and *bid'a* as classified by Ibn Taymiyya. Also, these faults tend to have the same nature regardless of the theological and intellectual differences of the parties responsible for them.

In his inquiries, Ibn Taymiyya constructed his polemics of *tahrīf*, *taqlīd*, and *bid'a*, by comparing the thought and practices of Christians, Jews, Sufis, philosophers, *mutakallimūn*, and Nusayris to the Islamic revelation and tradition according to his own understanding. By doing so, Ibn Taymiyya gave the most legitimacy in measuring what is true and untrue in the three Abrahamic religions to Islamic scripture. He thus argued that Islam is the impeccable message of God that was revealed to Muhammad to affirm the right teachings of previous prophets and correct what human beings have corrupted. However, although he does not completely reject the Jewish and Christian scriptures, he still does not consider them completely authentic. Ibn Taymiyya is convinced that *tahrīf* and *bid'a* by the Christian and Jewish religious authorities had done a lot of corruption to the original teachings of the prophets Moses and Jesus.

As a general analytical strategy when accusing these groups of corruption, imitation, and innovation, Ibn Taymiyya did not accept the religious teachings and practices that were in discrepancy with the Book and Tradition, or were not confirmed as logically sound through

using reason and logic. He followed the same strategies when evaluating the thought and practices of the *mutakallimūn*, philosophers, and the Sufis who were associated with them. The Damascene scholar believed that their thought is corrupted and it accommodates plenty of innovations. The situation is so because they relied too much on the corrupt human intellect when interpreting the words of God and his messengers. Particularly, he does not approve of their means of acquiring religious knowledge, or their absolute trust in the human intellect's ability to interpret theology.

Ibn Taymiyya's rigid opinions targeted Sufism in the same ways as well. He did not entirely oppose Sufis if their practices did not contradict God's law and the prophetic traditions. The Hanbali scholar's stand comes from his conviction that the Sufis imitated some of the People of the Book's corrupt thought and rituals. Sufis were also influenced by philosophical concepts that contradicted God's religion, he claims. Certainly, Ibn Taymiyya mostly adhered to the literal interpretations of scripture in the same way he did when exploring Sufis' thought. Ibn Taymiyya's evaluation charged that the Sufis exaggerated in focusing on practicing certain rituals that he considered innovations. This they did because they were mostly influenced by the Christians who adhered to certain corrupted rituals by imitating their religious leaders.

Ibn Taymiyya's polemics show that philosophers and the *mutakallimūn*, particularly the thinkers of *wahdat al-wujūd*, are influenced by the corrupted thought of Greek philosophy, and "the corrupted theological debates" of the Jews and Christians. In addition to blindly following the corrupted arguments about God's nature and words, *falāsifa* and *mutakallimūn* ignored practicing and gaining knowledge about religion and primarily focused on their own corrupted debates about theology. In his analyses, the philosophers and the *mutakallimūn* failed to bring forth constructive interpretation of theological knowledge as they indulged in over-debating the

scripture in ways similar to the Jews. However, Ibn Taymiyya still sees value in philosophy and *'ilm al-kalām* as far as their scholars do not interfere in debating religion at all, or debating religion based on their corrupt theories. He instructs us not to have an unlimited trust of the human intellect when interpreting the words of God because it is unqualified if used alone.

When criticizing certain groups, or sects, especially the ones whom identified as Muslim such as the Sufis, the *mutakallimūn*, and the Nusayris, Ibn Taymiyya, in one way or another, compared them to the People of the Book, polytheistic religions, and Greek philosophy. His polemics against the Nusayris serves as a good example of this. He not only excludes them from the Islamic tradition, he also believes that they endorsed corrupted non-Muslim theological beliefs and rituals in order to support their own *bida'*. He built these connections of polemics between the groups he criticized according to the same ill behaviors and beliefs they committed.

Regardless of whether scholars' assessments of the Shaykh al-Islām Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya are fair or not, he is one of the most quoted medieval Muslim theologians. However, his work deserves more academic attention, as most of his texts have not been fully investigated yet. Also, one might admit that Ibn Taymiyya's opinions are polemical and diverse and his writings tackled many sensitive issues that ranged from religious to social and political matters in the context of the medieval and earlier eras of Islam.

Overall, due to the multiple religions, sects, disciplines, and issues he grappled with, Ibn Taymiyya's polemics are best fathomed if investigated from a wider scope. We should not look into his polemics against just one group or one field of knowledge, but rather by taking account of his polemical writings as a whole. Having studied some of his polemics against a diverse range of groups in this paper, I find that he used similar methods and arguments in his polemics against all of them. Despite the fact that the groups studied here have different theological and



intellectual backgrounds, Ibn Taymiyya accuses them of similar failures and occasionally of inheriting corrupted thought from each other. So, following the threads of his polemical tropes through different trends will give a better perspective of the nature of his views.

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