

IBN TAYMIYYAH AND THE CRUSADES: AN INQUIRY

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Upon preliminary research, it becomes apparent that the involvement of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1325 A.D.) with the Crusades was indirect. For, while he was a contemporary of the Eighth Crusade (on Tunisia), his career at that time was largely in jurisprudence. Geographically, too, he was at that time a resident of Damascus and of Cairo, and thus was remotely interested in the actual military activity against the Crusaders.

That being the case, it is understandable that a conclusion such as that of Emmanuel Sivan could be reached, namely, "*Les grands recueils du XIVe siècle (celles d'Ibn Taymiyyah et d'al Subkī) ne contiennent pas de fatāwā ayant trait aux guerres contre les Croisades.*" Literally, it is true that Ibn Taymiyyah's *fatāwā* contain no pronouncements which authorize war against the Crusaders, for the very reasons of distance of time from the major Crusades, and space from the contemporary minor one. But, it could not be inferred, however, that Ibn Taymiyyah's thought was entirely unconcerned with the causes or the effects of the Crusades. In what way, then, was Ibn Taymiyyah to be related to the Crusades? My thesis is that he participated to a noticeable extent in an Islāmic ideological reaction to the Crusades, which came to be called by the historiographers of the era as "Counter-Crusade."

The historian has aptly given us a perspective of the impact of the Crusades on Islām and of the veritable Islāmic reaction. We recognize from that perspective that by the time of Taqīyy al Dīn Ibn Taymiyyah, the Ḥanbalī jurisconsult of the 13th-14th Century, the Crusades had passed their peak, much of their damage had been extensively wrought as well as impressively countered, and that Islām had arrived at a point where its thinkers could reflect meaningfully, in ideological terms, on

what stance should be considered appropriate for the development of a world-view which could maintain the principles of its counter-crusade attitude, but more positively, a stance expressive of Islāmic ideological durability. Such an ideological durability is often inseparable from, if not indeed the direct result of, a military power for which, admittedly, Islām did not always show its preparedness in the face of the Crusades; nevertheless, in spite of the inconstancy of military preparedness, and with the assistance of the reigning Mamlūks of Egypt, Islām not only proved unconquerable but showed a decided capability in countering both the military and ideological attacks of the Crusading West. It is in this latter context that the thought of Ibn Taymiyyah may be related. In order to do this with any semblance of adequacy, however, a cursory historical review may be pertinent.

Taqiyy al Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah was primarily a jurist, although he played an active role in the military defense against the Tatar invasion of Syria. He was not directly involved militarily in the Crusades, having just missed the excitement of the Sixth Crusade against Mesopotamia which was vanquished by the Mamlūk Baybars. Yet he was a historical contemporary, though geographically removed, of the seventh and eight Crusades of Louis IX.

In spite of the *geographical* indirectness of the relation between Ibn Taymiyyah and the Crusades, it is important to note two historical facts which may be considered significant: one, the impact of and the reaction against the preceding Crusades were already present in Ibn Taymiyyah's formative processes; and, two, the Mongols' (or Tatars') devastation was an existential reality for Ibn Taymiyyah, a reality which may not be overlooked as unrelated to the Crusades.

The Crusades, the historians tell us, had begun in the middle of the eleventh century; and it is said by some that the historical occasion for their coming to the East was in response to a summoning by the Shī'ī Fāṭimīs of Egypt who had feared a potential invasion by the already mighty Saljūq Empire, which had taken over Syria and was moving west toward Egypt. A century and a half later, the Barbarians of the East, under the fearless leadership of Hulagu, moved in on Syria, causing unprecedented destruction and immeasurable bloodshed. It was no accident that it was also the Shī'ah of Syria, as well as the Christians, who had been spared the terrors of the Crusaders, that facilitated the entrance of the Tatar into Mesopotamia.

Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of *Jihād*, or "Holy War," is clearly a reaction against both those who reject the preaching of Islām, and those who cause its internal division. For him, the entire goal of *Jihād* is that "genuine and whole religion be God's religion, that is Islām; and that the Word of God be uppermost."

« أن يكون الدين كله لله وأن تكون كلمة الله هي العليا »

Whosoever was to interfere with the accomplishment of this objective was to be fought, according to the consensus of Islām.

Ibn Taymiyyah sought to mobilize the then divided and frightened Muslims into the recognition that the Holy War was indeed a divine imperative for them. Furthermore, he asserted, its virtues were more than could be enumerated. Therefore, it was by consensus, he said, the highest “voluntary obligation” for the Muslim. By the testimony of the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth, he said, it was more worthy than the pilgrimage and than prayer, and more honorable than fasting.

Who was to be the object of the Jihād? According to Ibn Taymiyyah, he whose evil ravages the land. «المفسد في الارض», i.e., the ungodly «الكافر», the enemy of God and His Prophet. He who has heard the preaching of the Prophet, and the call to the religion of Allah who had sent him, but responded not was to be fought “in order that there may be no disunity, and that religion be wholly God’s.” The implication of this theory of Holy War arose with Ibn Taymiyyah out of a concrete theology of unity that shows itself in his conception of the Islāmic Community.

Against the background of Islāmic fragmentation, Ibn Taymiyyah called for a Community, or an *ummah* whose principal characteristic is solidarity. No doubt he was aware of the achievements of Nūr Al Dīn and Ṣalāḥ al Dīn, who capitalized entirely on an idea of unity without which the earlier Crusades could not have been successfully encountered. Here, building not only on the examples of history, but more importantly and fundamentally on Qur’ānic directives, Ibn Taymiyyah summoned the Muslims to stand up together in the firmness of their faith against their enemies.

The Muslim Community (*al ummah al Islāmiyyah*, or *jamā’at al Islām*) is defined in terms of an all-inclusive commonwealth, so to speak, which is held together by its faith in God and conformity to the words and the example of his Prophet Muḥammad. Though, ideally, this Community is one, in actuality it had become subject to division due to regional particularisms and to the non-Arab factions of Islām as represented by *al shu’ūbiyyah* as early as the third century after the Hijrah. By the time of Ibn Taymiyyah, not only was the Muslim Commonwealth divided into a multitude of independent Islāmic states, but also internal religious and racial conflict was abundantly evident in the Syro-Egyptian alliance, except insofar as the advent of the Crusades and the invasions of the Tatar had necessitated a unity of forces against common dangers. This need for such union, discipline, and mutual understanding served to accentuate the originality of Ibn Taymiyyah’s concept of the Muslim Community.

One important element in understanding Ibn Taymiyyah’s concept of

the Community is the meaning of solidarity (*ta'āwun*) of the Muslims. He exposed a prevalent form of "solidarity" that was inconsistent with the Islāmic idea: namely, a partisan kind of "solidarity of action" which, in the name of promoting a united front, served to underscore multiplicity over against unity, and to advance the part over the whole. Ibn Taymiyyah's chief criticism of that sort of solidarity which was advanced either for ethnic or for ritual reasons, was precisely that it tended to militate against the greater unity of Islām; indeed it impeded the exercise of good social and political life. He pointed to the debilitating influences of such a notion upon the functions of the state; the partiality with which governors and agents were appointed by the Sultān, the injustice with which the wealth of the communities was distributed, the complacency with which interceded requests (*shafā'āt*) were granted by those in authority to win the favor of their political, ethnic, or sectarian constituents. Ibn Taymiyyah likened the rigidity of doctrinal particularism to the exclusivism of the Rawāfiq who placed an excessive importance (*ghuluww*) on one component of a totality, and who put within the Community an element of dissension that was capable of handicapping the expansive force of Islām. Such was the "solidarity" exhibited by tribal groups who, when they were Islāmized, continued to show dogmatic arrogance, notably through their esoteric views, and often placed themselves above the law of the state.

Ibn Taymiyyah, on the other hand, explained *ta'āwun* on the contrary in terms of the solidarity that binds together all Muslim believers from Muḥammad to the Final Judgment, in a spirit of unity and brotherhood, in the same ideal and for the same ends. It is by this solidarity that the Community formed is, therefore, a grand entity, where each part is strengthened by the whole, where each generation, in the continuous tradition of strict narrow morality, owes a debt of regard to that which preceded it, and has an obligation of trust to transmit to that which follows; and where each group, ethnic or racial, is legitimately tolerated for what it contributes to the total entity.

Thus the concept of solidarity appears to have two distinct forms in Ibn Taymiyyah's thought, although he himself does not designate them by two special terms. It is constituted by the recognition of the one God, the same Prophet, and an adherence to a common body of doctrine. Such a solidarity he calls a solidarity "of righteousness and of piety" (*birr* and *taqwā*). For Ibn Taymiyyah, one of the worthy principles of the (early) Muslim Community (*Ahl al Sunnah wa al Jamā'ah*) lies in the unity of their doctrine, which principle he puts forward in his refutation of the contradictions of the philosophers, logicians, and scientific positivists. Even the problematic of the existence of four major schools of *fiqh* interpretation is explained as possessing a basic,

underlying unity as did the interpretations of the Companions who were themselves divided on certain points of doctrine. The actual divergences of the *madhāhib*, to which Ibn Taymiyyah devoted an entire treatise under the title *Ikhtilāf al Ummah fi al 'Ibādāt* is explained by the fragmentary knowledge of the texts on the part of the *ulamā*, by their tendency to attach excessive importance to certain elements (ghulūww), and, in a more general way, by their errors in *ijtihād*, which in themselves are not reprehensible except as they become, and they do become, imposed upon the community as truths. Moreover, these errors are less weighty, at least theoretically, if one is to succeed in rediscovering for oneself the verse or the hadīth which would correct the error. Ibn Taymiyyah further contends that such errors are not ultimately of great significance since the interpretations never concern themselves with the requirements and prohibitions (*wājibāt* and *makrūhāt*) of religion, nor are they uniquely such prescriptions that may be recommended alone. And it is for these very reasons that Ibn Taymiyyah urges mutual sympathy and reciprocal tolerance among the followers of the *madhāhib* for the sake of the great unity which ought not to be compromised.

In this regard, Ibn Taymiyyah's conclusion is the same: the very existence of the Islāmic Community depends on a kind of solidarity that is larger than the solidarity of its segments against one another. He reminds all Muslims of the Qur'ānic exhortation, "Hold ye all to the bond of God and be not divided," « *واعتصموا بحبل الله جميعا ولا تفرقوا* » and places before them the Prophet's model for the unity of *Ummah*: "The believers' mutual friendship, kindness, and caring is like unto that of the members of one body, wherein if one complained, the others suffer with fever, and rush in with attentive watching." The Prophet's commandment is therewith reiterated, "Do not separate yourselves (from one another); do not conspire (against one another); do not harbor mutual hatred; do not nurture mutual envy (or jealousy); (but) be God's servants and (one another's) brothers, as God has commanded you." Ibn Taymiyyah's notion of "solidarity," however, goes beyond a geographic, ethnic, doctrinal or linguistic solidarity. For him, it is an organic unity that supposes a common goal (*maqṣūd*), and the participation of every member of the community in the realization and fulfillment of that goal, within his limitations and without the distinction external responsibility. It is that goal of this Community which will distinguish it as the greatest of all communities and nations, for it is a community of justice which commands the good and denounces evil (*al amr bi al ma'rūf wa al nahy 'an al munkar*). It is the duty of each member of the community, as an expression of this solidarity, to uphold his fellow when he does good, and, insofar as he

has the influence, to correct him when he violates the law of the Community through verbal admonition and, in the event that he is not able, through the firm intentions of his heart. Each member of the Community is held responsible, as he sees the need, to offer good counsel (*naṣīḥah*), fraternal corrective direction (*wa'z*), and an invitation to the right (*da'wah*). This latter duty, namely the mission of every Muslim in which is seen by Ibn Taymiyyah the element of "prophetic calling" (*nubuwwah*), is of utter necessity to the life of the Community, if it is to achieve cohesion. This moral solidarity which is required of the faithful is the element capable of making this Community God's witnesses on earth (*shuhadā' Allah fī al arḍ*). This for Ibn Taymiyyah, is the meaning of the Prophet's analogy of the "one body" wherein each member shows care for the other. It is the same idea inherent also in the analogy of an edifice, wherein the elements reinforce one another, and all adhere together by the Prophet, as the fingers are connected to and through the hand. Mutual expectations of Muslims are listed, not by way of enumeration, but for the demonstration of inclusiveness, in the Prophet's saying, "Five obligations are owed by the Muslims to his fellow Muslim: To greet him if he meets him, to visit him if he falls ill, to wish him victorious joy over his enemies if he sneezes, to answer him if he calls, and to escort him (to his final resting place) when he dies." Again and again, the Prophet is quoted as supporting the seriousness of this point. He said, "By Him in whose hand is my soul, no one of you is a believer until he desires for his fellow what he desires for himself," and he said, "The Muslim is the brother of the Muslim: he shall neither abandon him nor oppress him." This bond commands mutual service and mutual support. The exhortation is repeated,

« وإعتصموا بحبل الله جميعا ولا تفرقوا »

and the Prophet declares his innocence of those who are divisive in the Community of faith, thus excluding themselves from it,

« إن الذين فرقوا دينهم وكانوا شيعا لست منهم في شيء . إنما أمرهم إلى الله . »

The entire doctrine of the *ummah*, or the Community, therefore, is set within the context of moral solidarity which is to be in clear contradistinction from the division which existed in the face of the Crusaders and Tatars. This moral solidarity is founded on the unity of God's purpose to advance the good and to refrain from evil. When some men depart from any portion of God's commandment, division and hostility set in among them, Ibn Taymiyyah says. And when men are divided, they become corrupt and perish; but if they band together for a common end, they are reconciled and prosper. In solidarity there is salvation (*raḥmah*), in division destruction (*'adhāb*).

To do good and to refrain from doing evil, to exhort others to do

good and to admonish them against doing evil, is the task before which all members of the Community of faith and justice stand equally responsible and are mutually accountable. Before this divinely-assigned task, all distinctions are rendered of little consequence.

This definition of the Muslim Community is but one example of Ibn Taymiyyah's ideological reaction to the effects of the two terrors from the East and from the West. Time would not allow a detailed treatment of all his other ideas that appear to be elaborated in either direct or indirect opposition to the values and doctrines of the foreign invaders, especially those which are perhaps easier to identify — such as the construction of his doctrine regarding the visitation of the graves of saints, or the other customs and rituals of the Crusaders.

Suffice it to say that Ibn Taymiyyah's theological principle of unity, as applied to God as well as to doctrine and to the Islāmic Community, was uncompromising, and it must have been the chief influence in his resistance against the infiltration of un-Islāmic elements into the fabric of ideals of his Community, and in his insistence that if such foreign ideas prevail, nothing less than the sword may be acceptable in defending the unity of community and its doctrine.