

IBN TAYMIYYA AND HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD THE SUPHIS

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Abridged and Translated

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Characteristics of his age :

Ibn Taymiyya lived in an age overflowing with events most critical to the Islamic world in the political, social and intellectual spheres.

Politically, factors of decay had been operative in the Abbaside empire long before his day. With the weakening grasp of the caliphal power virtual rule fell in such hands as those of the Buwayhids and the Turkish Seljuks. This continued until the fall of the Abbaside Caliphate at the hand of the Tartars in the year 656 A.H. On the other hand the Crusaders had already set firm feet in Syria (**Ash-Sham**), conquered all its forts and towns and occupied Jerusalem long before Sultan Saladin, the Ayyubid, could recover it back from their hands.

However, war continued on with ups and downs on both sides, Muslims and Crusaders, and the Tartars came once more to invade Syria during Ibn Taymiyya's lifetime.

On the social level the peoples of both Egypt and Syria (Ash-Sham) consisted of different ethnic groups with variant customs, norms, traditions, languages and beliefs. Social stratifications and the wide gaps among individuals in authority or wealth led to a state of insecurity and disorder in people's life. This, in turn, had a serious effect upon the political, intellectual and judiciary climate. There was widespread moral and social dissolution. Social atrocities and heretical doctrines spread.

As for the intellectual side we can stand up to the fact that that was an age of learning, famous scholars and remarkable contributions in Islamic sciences : Interpretation of the Quran, Tradition, Jurisprudence, Language or History. However, the marking characteristic was the concentrated analysis of the past Arab and Muslim heritage in different branches of knowledge without any departure from the old spirit, namely the conclusions arrived at by Muslim religious jurisprudents and theologians. It happened that **Idjtihad**⁽¹⁾ had come to a standstill since the fourth century A.H. Theologians confined themselves to interpret or summarise the literature of the four schools '**Madhahib**'. Theologians rigidly adhered to the **Ash'arite**⁽²⁾ doctrine which was of intermediate stand between the '**Salafiyya**'⁽³⁾ school and the **Mu'tazilites** especially after Sultan Saladin, the Ayyubid, and his sons after him in Egypt and Syria, embraced the tenets of that school up to the age of the Mamluk state wherein Ibn Taymiyya lived.

On the other hand Suphism gained much ground and Suphi figures high prestige during that age. Al-Ghazali's two books '**Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din (The Restoration of Religious Sciences)** and '**al-Munkidh min al-Dalal (The Saviour From Delusion)** had far-reaching effects in glorifying Suphism as the right path to God Almighty. **In that tempestuous age full of conflicting political trends,**

variant ideas, contradicting doctrines and theologies and divergent Suphi ways Ibn Taymiyya lived and was deeply involved. Whereas he availed himself of the knowledge of his famous contemporaries and of the foregoing generation he bitterly condemned the dull theologians of his time who just copied ideas without true knowledge especially those who took a rigid stand in favour of the Ash'arite doctrine. His attitude also applied to the Suphis who introduced non-Islamic teachings devoid of true evidence or sound proof. This attitude of Ibn Taymiyya towards the Suphis, his argument of their doctrines and his refutation of their ideas is our main concern in these pages. I have taken care to quote Ibn Taymiyya himself, consult his essays 'rasa'il' and 'fatwas'⁽⁴⁾ in order to make clear the thought and method of that outstanding scholar in his study of one of the most important issues that occupied the Muslim mind throughout Muslim history, namely the question of mysticism or 'Suphism'.

IBN TAYMIYYA'S APPROACH IN HIS ARGUMENT WITH THE SUPHIS

1. To get equipped with knowledge and grasp the meaning of the Suphi doctrine :

Before his arguments with the Suphis Ibn Taymiyya was in complete grasp of the Suphi doctrine. His method was based upon comprehensiveness, accuracy, precision, investigation, inference and logical and rational demonstration. As modern research-doers manage to have a complete cognizance of a certain theory and be acquainted with its pros. and cons. before they could start on discussing, exploding or embracing that theory, So Ibn Taymiyya was intent on having his attitude towards the Suphis stand on solid ground. He read extensively through the writings of his age.

grasped its creeds, philosophy, theology and Suphi doctrines. His father was a reputable Hanbalite, a religious scholar, verifier, and learned man. He had a permanent place in the Mosque where he used to deliver his Friday Speeches. His grandfather, Majd al-Din, was a Hanbalite jurist, traditionist, grammarian, interpreter and famous reciter of the Quran. Ibn Taymiyya lived in that pious atmosphere abounding in knowledge and books. His father's library contained the best books in the interpretation of the Quran, Tradition, jurisprudence, language, biographies, Suphism, history, philosophy, theology, religious doctrines, and astronomy. He availed himself of the rich resources of that library. He expected that he, one day, would be forced to launch a campaign against his adversaries. So he set to be in full control of the argument tools and debating devices of logicians, philosophers, theologians and Suphists in order to stand up to their arguments and invalidate their ideas.

In his book **'al-Hudjadj al-Nakliyya wa al-'Akliyya Fima Yunafi al-Islam min Bida' al-Jahmiyya wa al-Suphiyya'** (Quranic, and Sunnite Textual and Rational Evidences Against The Misguiding Novelties of The Jahmites and Suphis) Ibn Taymiyya quotes examples indicative of the doctrinal teachings of the Suphis like **Nadjm al-Din Ibn Israel, Muhyi 'l-Din Ibn 'Arabi, Kutb 'l-Din Ibn Sab'een, Rab'a al-'Adawiyya, Abi Mansour al-Halladj, Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, Sheikh Ali al-Hareeri, Ibn al-Farid, al-Talmasani,** and others.

Needless to say that the refutation of such mystical doctrines required a thorough understanding by Ibn Taymiyya of Suphi writings. These doctrines included, Ibn Taymiyya maintained, two false basic ideas alien to the religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The first is that of **'hulul'**, **'Ittihad'**, and **'Wahdat al-**

Wudjud', (Infusion into and union with the Divine Nature and of Pantheism). The second false basic idea is the Suphis' claim that they could not help committing sins because they were destined to have no free will, a mere justification of their deviations from Islamic orders and prohibitions.

In his book '**Hakikat Madhhab al-Ittihadiyyun aw Wahdat al-Wudjud...**' (The Reality of the Monist Doctrine or Pantheism...) Ibn Taymiyya displayed a complete understanding of the Suphi doctrine of monism. He denounced its adherents as ignorant, hypocrite, inconsistent, deluded and with no grasp of what they say or mean. To him they only follow the creations of their own fancy. The comprehension of their writings is made more difficult by their use of equivalent terms for different meanings. Therefore they were dispersed into groups with no guiding characteristics to distinguish between them.

In that same book Ibn Taymiyya deals, in the first essay, with Ibn 'Arabi's Suphi doctrine as exposed by his two works '**Fusus al-Hikam**' (The Gist of Wisdom) and '**al-Futuh al-Makkiyya** (The Meccan Revelations), namely the doctrine of pantheism.

Ibn Taymiyya relates Ibn Arabi's doctrine and those of his followers to ancient Greek philosophical origins copied from Aristotle, or to other Christian philosophies as Nestorianism and Jacobitism. He came to a conclusion that Ibn Arabi doctrinal ideas are destructive to the basic foundations of Islamic faith. He regarded them as heretical, disdainful of the sacred rank of the Prophets and even as a denial of their messages.

2. **Moral courage in expressing his opinions with no prejudice or rigidity:**

The second characteristic of Ibn Taymiyya's approach, as rightly remarked by some of his contemporaries, is his vehemence in disproving and depreciating the Suphi doctrine and warning against the danger the Suphis represent to the Muslim mind and heart. He was said to have used in his attacks upon his adversaries, such violent expressions and daring words, that other scholars, before or after, refrained from using.

On this point Ibn Radjab said in his '**Tabaqat**' (Generations) : "It is probable that Sheikh '**Emad al-Din al-Wasiti** and some of his closest friends have disapproved of **Sheikh Ibn Taymiyya's** harsh attacks upon some venerable '**Imams**' and Suphis, but the Sheikh, however, was only seeking righteousness and the supremacy of truth."

On the same point **al-Dhahabi** said : "I disagree with him on basic and secondary issues. In spite of his comprehensive knowledge, daring courage, proper mind, and his veneration of Divine orders and prohibitions he was subject to intense bursts against his adversaries which cultivated hatred against him and brought him the enmity of others. If it were not for that his sayings would have aroused in them no objections, for the most erudite of those adversaries recognized his boundless knowledge and invaluable treasure of thought. They were only resentful against some of his sayings and deeds."

It is my conviction that **Ibn Taymiyya** was not prejudiced or fanatic in his attitude towards the Suphis. He was but bold, open, with free mind and thought and unyielding in basic matters of faith or of his moral dignity. This is natural in people with unique messages they believe in and fight for. He only sought, as **Ibn Radjab** said - righteousness and the supremacy of truth."

Unfortunately, this course of thought and deeds against the Suphis has brought **Ibn Taymiyya** much suffering and culminated in his arrest and imprisonment until his death.

However, it is noteworthy to point out a fact familiar to those acquainted with Ibn Taymiyya's writings. He did not condemn all Suphis but only those mercenary Suphis who abandon useful work, detach themselves from public life and subject themselves to religious confinement where they receive, for their living, regular payments. To **Ibn Taymiyya** they were more dangerous to the Muslim community than the enemy invaders for they corrupt people's religion and hearts without any previous need for land conquest. To expose them and warn against their way of life is a duty of all Muslims.

Ibn Taymiyya, however, recognized the merits of some Suphis. **Junaid**, he maintained, was teaching his disciples that the real path to Suphism is a thorough knowledge of the Quran and the Sunna (**Tradition**). **Suhrawardi's** sayings were quoted by **Ibn Taymiyya** with veneration and respect especially his words on the prodigies of pious figures '**Karamat**'. He even defended some Suphis and rejected as false some heretical sayings attributed to **Rab'a al-'Adawiyya** (a famous Suphi woman) during her pilgrimage to Mecca.

Ibn Taymiyya rejected the Suphi inclination to a kind of monastic life forbidden by the Prophet's saying "No monasticism in Islam". The pious ascetics of old, he maintained, were fighters in the holy war against the infidels. They did not retire from public life or live in isolation. They were Suphis in the sense of abandoning worldly vanities. Their sole object was the welfare of the Muslim community, the prosperity of their land and the defence of the Muslim frontiers. They never thought of withdrawing from communal life to religious seclusion or indulge in that scandalous

course of songs, dances, cries, whirling and falling to the ground and rolling in the dust with loss of the senses. **Ibn Taymiyya** was pitiless in his attack upon this kind of Suphi people as well as those who assume that a Suphi can reach a stage of mystic communion with Divinity, without the aid of the intermediate archangel as in the case of the Prophet.

3. Investigation and logical and rational demonstration :

Ibn Taymiyya adopted, in his argument of the Suphi doctrines, the rational and logical method in the absence of any Quranic or Sunnite text. But in his rational and logical investigations he never departed from the Quran and Tradition. He completely differed from the Muslim intellectuals as the Mu‘tazilites who gave superior prominence to reason and subjected all questions of faith and religion to rational judgment. To them reason was the arbitrator between right and wrong, good and evil . They went so far as to make allegorical interpretation of some Quranic and Sunnite texts ‘**Ta’wil**’ if their meaning seemed contradictory to their rational and logical calculations. But **Ibn Taymiyya**, in his researches, did not adopt that symbolic interpretation if the text at hand did not cohere with rationality. He used to hunt for and adopt the scriptural evidence in the Quran and Tradition. He differentiated between ‘**Ta’wil**’ as understood by the old pious ancestors ‘**as-Salaf Assalih**’ and that maintained by the Suphis. To the pious of old it meant the proper and acceptable explanation of the Quran and the Sunna. As for that of the Suphis, **Ibn Taymiyya** maintained, ‘It is the disregard of the direct and intended meaning of the text for the sake of another different meaning.’

Ibn Taymiyya, in different places of his books, emphasised the fact that the whole meaning of the Quran and the Sunna is consistent with proper reasoning, a conclusion, he said, he came to

after a long survey, investigation and meditation. "He who grasps the words and meaning of the Prophet's sayings would be well-acquainted with Islamic Law 'Shari'a' . . . The Quran has indicated the rational approach to God, the Creator, to His oneness, Divine Essence, the truthfulness of His Messengers. In the Quran the roots of Islamic faith are clearly demonstrated and comprehensible to the simple mind much better than well-versed scholars try to explain.

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To sum up, Ibn Taymiyya, in his arguments with the Suphis, did not adopt the allegorical method of interpretation of the Quran or the Sunna excessively used by the Suphis. However, this should not imply a disregard, on his part, of the rational approach. He only allowed rationality no final say in the interpretation of the texts. Rational judgments, in matters of faith, should be, to him, within the boundaries of the Islamic law 'Shari'a'.



- (1) Independent theological judgment based on the four schools of Islamic Law (translator).
- (2) A religious school founded by al-Ash'ari.(translator).
- (3) Loyal to the says and deeds of the old pious ancestors.(translator).
- (4) Formal Islamic Opinions (translator)