

REVIEW

Abdul-Hakim Al-Matroudi: *Exonerating the Distinguished Jurists: Ibn Taymiyyah's Raf' al-Malām 'an al-A'imma al-A'lām in Translation*

Sheffield: Equinox, 2023. ISBN 978 1 80050 171 3.

Jon Hoover

University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Email: jon.hoover@nottingham.ac.uk

The Muslim jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) is well known for his reformist call to return to the Quran, the Sunna of the Prophet, and the interpretations of the earliest Muslims (*salaf*). He was concerned that the four Sunni schools of law had usurped authority rightly belonging to the original sources of the religion and that assertions of later juristic and communal consensus were too easily wielded against the clear testimony of earlier texts. Whereas the Sunni jurists of Ibn Taymiyya's day sought to stabilize the legal system through conformism (*taqlid*) to the methodologies and precedents of their respective schools, he insisted that the founders of the law schools Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik, al-Shāfi'ī, and Ibn Ḥanbal, relied upon fallible independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) that was always subject to correction by an earlier text.

Despite this, Ibn Taymiyya did not wish to impugn the law schools and their founders entirely. *Ijtihād* deserved its reward, one reward for the effort and two for getting a ruling correct. Ibn Taymiyya wrote *Raf' al-malām 'an al-a'immat al-a'lām* (*Exonerating the Distinguished Jurists*) to explain diversity within the juristic tradition and exonerate the four Sunni law school founders of wrongdoing when their rulings opposed *ḥadīth* reports. According to Ibn Taymiyya, none of the school founders intentionally opposed a relevant *ḥadīth*. Instead, they may have thought the *ḥadīth* did not actually derive from the Prophet Muḥammad or that the *ḥadīth* was not relevant to the case at hand. Or perhaps they thought that the *ḥadīth* had been abrogated. In *Raf' al-malām* Ibn Taymiyya details the many ways that jurists might innocently fall into conflicting views, but he also maintains that a *ḥadīth* known to be authentic trumps the views of opposing scholars even if they are very knowledgeable. With this, Ibn Taymiyya gently relativized the legal schools to make space for his own scripturalist approach to religious authority.

The book under review reprints the introduction and revises the translation found in Al-Matroudi's article, "The removal of blame from the Great *Imāms*: an annotated translation of Ibn Taymiyyah's *Raf' al-Malām 'an al-A'immat* [sic] *al-A'lām*", *Islamic Studies* 46/3, 2007, 317–80. There is unfortunately no mention of this fact in the book. The introduction underlines Ibn Taymiyya's expertise in *ḥadīth* and highlights his flexibility and tolerance of juristic difference. This emphasis on Ibn Taymiyya's tolerance is appropriate to a point, but it must be balanced with his view that a definitive text holds final authority over all diverging juristic opinions.

The translation in Al-Matroudi's 2007 article is serviceable, but the book version does make improvements to the English style and idiom. For example, the book reads on page

76, “We believe that [the scholar] who did not act upon a given text is not only excused but even rewarded [for his *ijtihād*]. This, however, does not prevent us from following the authentic *ḥadīths...*”, which is more direct than the translation in the article: “Having said that [the scholar] who did not act upon a given text is not only excused but even rewarded [i.e. for his *ijtihād*], this does not prevent us from following the authentic *ḥadīths...*” (p. 351). In another example, the book translates, “This position is even worse than the opinion of the Khārijīs...” (p. 148), which is an improvement upon the article’s translation: “This claim is uglier than the opinion of the Khārijīs...” (p. 379). The word “uglier” translates the Arabic *aqbaḥ* literally but not idiomatically.

Apart from linguistic improvements to the translation, the primary value added by the book is the Arabic text printed on facing pages to the English translation. The Arabic is based on the edition of *Rafʿ al-malām* published in Riyadh by Al-Riʿāsa al-ʿamma li-idārat al-buḥūth al-ʿilmiyya in 1413/1992–93. The book also adds a brief preface, division of the translation into sections with headings, footnotes to the Arabic text, a bibliography, and an index. All in all, the book with the translation and Arabic text together provides a useful tool for undertaking a close reading of this important treatise.