Ibn Taimiyyah and Militant Jihad

Munir Masood Marath

Abstract

This article while delineating upon definitional quagmire of religion in sociological perspective seeks to explore the distinct nature of Islam in terms of its non-secular character. It is in this backdrop that it focuses upon Ibn Taimiyyah's philosophy from three fundamental trajectories namely 'anti-secular approach to religion', 'Islamic legal system' and 'militant *jihad*' and further seeks to suggest that modern trends in contemporary political Islam owe a lot to his dynamic scholarship. However, it further argues that contemporary militants undertake a selective approach towards his philosophy to explore grounds to seek theological legitimacy to their acts of violence.

Key Words: Religion, Secularism, Jihad, Taqleed, Ijtihad, Shariah

Religion, despite its antiquity amongst different world phenomena, has not been able to come out of definitional predicament. It may have different meanings for different people. Some may be prostrating before the idols, some may be worshiping the different phenomena of nature, some may resort to solitary meditation, yet focussing on a common purpose - to achieve the essence of their respective belief system. Although the major area of academic interest has been the religions which believe in the existence of God, though with different metaphysical attributes, yet there are still such religious beliefs which do not give place to the idea of any supreme metaphysical authority and thus, render the quest for a universal definition of religion, a far cry. This definitional confusion emerges subsequent to classification of different belief systems on the basis of their approach towards different metaphysical phenomena. For instance, those who repose faith in supernaturalism believe in the presence of some

diffuse forces which determine the good or bad influence on the events of life whereas Animists believe in active and living spirits shaping their life events. Theists whether monotheists or polytheists believe in the existence of God whereas Buddhists believe in reaching higher state of conscience on the basis of sacred principles.[1]Anyhow, the sociologists define religion in terms of an approach to what one feels as supernatural[2]. The sociologists have been interested to discover the form of religion which may have unifying effects in a society and they call such religious belief system as Civil Religion.[3] The functionalist theorists like Emile Durkheim identify religion as a tool of human socialization instead of human-God relations[4]. There are still others like August Comte who believe in religion as an evolutionary stage with which the march of history has become redundant and believe that if in the advancement of history religion survived, it survived only as a religion of humanity, entirely secular in nature[5]. Since the terminology like 'sacred' and 'profane' occupies central position in the sociological explanations of the religion, therefore, sociologists focus on defining these terms with the purpose to find the universal values of all religions. They define the 'sacred' as something relating to supernatural phenomena which can be achieved through some rituals whereas 'profane' as something part of the ordinary life[6].

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[1] Ian Robertson, *Sociology*, (New York, 1987), 399-401.

[2] Ronald, Johnstone, *Religion and Society in Interaction: The Sociology of Religion,* (Eaglewood Cliffs,1975), 20. Also see: Paul B. Horton and Chester L. Hunt, *Sociology*, (Singapore, 1984), 265; Robertson, *Sociology*, 398.

[3] Robert N. Bellah, "American Civil Religion in 1970s", in *American Civil Religion,* ed. R.E. Richev and D.G. Lones, (New York, 1974), 255-272. Quoted in: Horton and Hunt, *Sociology*, 267.

[4] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Form of Religious Life*: *A Study of Religious Sociology*, (New York, 1912). Also see: Horton and Hunt, *Sociology*, 267.

[5] Ibid., 266-267.

[6] Durkheim, *The Elementary Form*. Quoted in: Robertson, *Sociology*, 398.

Notwithstanding the academic value of these sociological studies, Islam as a religion seems to be somewhat distinctive since it does not bifurcate between the spiritual and temporal life. Islam literally means submission to the will of God and since the will of God is all encompassing, covering all spheres of human activity, therefore, the life is taken as a compact whole in the chemistry of Islam. The non-secular contour of Islam becomes explicit from a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad wherein he is reported to have declared the whole earth a mosque[7].

It is in this theoretical perspective, drawing upon three political foci of Ibn Taimiyyah's philosophy namely, anti-secular approach to religion, Islamic legal system and militant *Jihad*, an attempt has been made to develop a case that being a blend of tradition and modernity, his philosophy proved out to be instrumental in modernizing the subsequent Muslim thought mainly through independent reasoning in the religious context but at the same time contemporary militant outfits follow a selective approach towards his philosophy to explore theological grounds to legitimize their violent actions.

Firstly, with Ibn Taimiyyah maintenance of justice is the foremost function of the government. State and religion are mutually inclusive and function in support to each other. Religion suffers in absence of the power of the state (*shawkah*) whereas without a disciplined body of the laws, the state becomes a symbol of tyranny[8]. Furthermore, he looks back to the following *Quranic* verse which not only explains the basis of his theory of *Jihad* but also underlines his non-secular approach towards religion: "He

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[7] *Tirmizi,* (Salat), *Nasai* (Ghusal), *Ibn Maja*.
[8] Richard Bonney, *Jihad: From Quran to Bin Laden,* (New York, 2007), 119.

(Prophet) orders them with that which is good and forbids them that which is bad"[9]. This verse reflects non-secular character of Islam as enjoining good and forbidding evil is not rituals specific rather covers all aspects of life. This feature of Ibn Taimiyyah's political philosophy has been carried through the ages by the Muslim scholars as well as the fundamentalist movements in the Muslim lands. A similar view point has been expressed by Dr. Muhammad Iqbal when he says that if religion is divorced from politics, the government whichever form it may have, will degenerate into naked tyranny[10]. On the practical side, we find different instances where anti-secular approach can be found even in the issues of constitutional import[11].

The idea of anti-secularism made Islam a potent ideological movement and went a long way in repelling the impact of Sufism which had crept into the Islamic philosophy, adversely affecting its dynamism. Modern Islamic movements opted for this idea as a driving force to accomplish their missions in the name of reviving the past glory of Islam. It is argued that the Prophet Muhammad returned from heavens to control the forces of history[12]. Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) and Jamaat-e-Islami developed

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[9] *Al Quran*, 7:157

[10] Muhammad Iqbal, *Bal-i-Jibreel*, (Taj Company,Lahore, 1935).

[11] We can cite the debate generated by secularism in the 1st Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on the eve of the presentation of the Objectives Resolution, 12th March, 1949 which aimed at making a reference to the Divine sovereignty in the Constitution of Pakistan. A Congressite member Mr B.K. Dutta criticized the Resolution on the plea that religion and politics were two distinct regions of mind and the Objectives Resolution was an attempt to intermingle them. However, a distinguished Pakistani professor responded this argument that 'religion to Muslims was not like a Sunday suit which can be put on while going to a place of worship and put off in daily life.' For details see: G.W. Chaudhary, *Constitutional Development in Pakistan,* 2nd ed (London, 1959), 39-41.

[12] Quoted in Dr Muhammad Iqbal, "The Spirit of Muslim Culture", in Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Oxford University Press, London,

their philosophies of *jihad* on the non-secular view of religion. Naturally, credit goes to Ibn Taimiyyah who, in the medieval period of history, highlighted this dimension of Islam and made it easy for the subsequent Muslim intellectuals to comprehend this idea otherwise terminology of political Islam might have been alien to us.

Secondly, Islamic legal structure owes a lot for its evolution to this Hanbalite theologian who challenged the finality of all four schools of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence and claimed the authority of *Mujtahid* for himself and thus, revolted to the idea of the blind following *(Taqleed)* of these recognized schools of jurisprudence. Anyhow, the prevalent degenerated conditions of the Muslims in the backdrop of the extinction of the Abassid Caliphate provided legitimacy to his ideas.[13] Needless to say that his opposition to *Taqleed* left everlasting imprints on the subsequent Muslim scholarship and opened the doors of modernization for the Muslim thought through *Ijtihad*. In 18th century, Ibn Abd al-Wahab regarded the blind following of any concept as a sign of the days of ignorance[14]. Likewise Shah Waliullah in India made denunciation of *Taqleed* and emphasized upon the rational reinterpretation of religion.[15] However, it still requires an in-depth inquiry to ascertain whether it was the influence of Ibn Taimiyyah working behind the approach of these religious scholars or it was the common tree of teachers in Madina which was behind the common thinking of both afore-mentioned scholars of 18th century. There

1934),   accessed   October   20,   2008, http://www.allamaiqbal.com/works/prose/english/reconstruction/index.htm.

[13] Muhammad Iqbal, "The Principal of Movement in the Structure of Islam" in Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought*.
[14] Ibn Abd al Wahhab, *Masail' Al Jahiliya,* Abu Maryam Isma'eel Alarcon, Trans., 3-28.
[15] Cited in Aziz Ahmed, *Studies in Islamic Culture and Indian Environment*, (Oxford, 1964), 201.

is no denying the fact that Muhammad Hayya Al-Sindi, one of the teachers of Ibn Abd al Wahab, had a profound influence on his student to denounce the commentaries of the four Sunni Imams.[16] Since, Shah Waliullah was the student of Abul Tahir Al-Kurani, a teacher of Al-Sindi, therefore, it may lead us to presume that the similarities between Ibn Abd al Wahab and Shah Waliullah had their roots in a common source of learning[17]. However, the fact remains that the 18th century puritanical view of religion depicts strong impressions of Ibn Taimiyyah's thought.

Ibn Taimiyyah's theory of law is based on the view that *Shariah* has a paramount position in the structure of Islamic government and it is beyond anyone's' mandate to make amendments in *Shariah* as is evident from the Quran itself[18]. Moreover, his law theory serves as a window to his views regarding the grounds of rebellion against those rulers who forgo *Shariah*[19]. The contemporary militants selectively subscribe to this content of his theory to ascribe justification to their acts of violence.

Thirdly, if fundamentalism is a devotion to the traditional basics of the religion, then Ibn Taimiyyah being nostalgic of the pristine glory of Islam and optimistic of its rejuvenation was a fundamentalist. In his views, the revival could only be possible if essence of Islam - enjoining good and forbidding evil[20] - which elevates its adherents to the status of the best

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[16] John Voll, "Muhammad Hayya Al-Sindi and Muhammad Ibn Abd al Wahab: An Analysis of an Intellectual Groupin Eighteenth-Century Madina", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 38, No. 1 (1975).

[17] Ibid.

[18] "Judgement rests with Allah alone - He has ordained that you should worship none but Him: This is the [one] ever-true faith; but most people know it not." *Al Quran*, 12:40. For Ibn Taimiyyah's views, see *Letter Seven* of Ibn Taimiyyah to Sarjawaz, the King of Cyprus.

[19] See (*Fatwa*) decree of Ibn Taimiyyah against the Mongol rulers.

[20] *Al Quran*, 3:110.

nation- is put in practice as a collective effort of the Muslim community. Since *jihad* is an instrument to attain this essence, therefore, the very nature of *jihad* itself becomes collective as every believer is supposed to perform this collective duty in one form or the other.[21] Ibn Taimiyyah refers to a tradition of the Prophet who is reported to have said: "Whoever of you sees wrong being committed let him change it with his hand (by force); if he is unable to do that, then with his tongue, and if he is not able to do that then with his heart."

To him, *jihad* being collective in its spirit provides grounds for the ideological bifurcation between the believers and non-believers and it becomes religious duty of the believers to enjoin good and forbid evil in the society[22]. Moreover, *jihad* surpasses even all religious rituals and obligations in importance for the attainment of essence of the faith.[23] However, for Ibn Taimiyyah, the militant side of *jihad (Qital)* was more important than the peaceful struggle. He, on the basis of having weak transmission-linkage, challenged the authenticity of the tradition of the Prophet wherein the Prophet was reported to have ascribed lesser importance to *Qital* as compared to peaceful and internal sort of

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[21] Though Jihad is *Fard Kafaya* but forbidding wrong by heart is the duty of every believer since it demands no extra effort. Ibn Taimiyyah, *Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil*.

[22] He refers to the Quranic verse: "Fight against those who - despite having been vouchsafed revelation - do not believe either in Allah or the last day, and do not consider forbidden which Allah and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth [which Allah has enjoined upon them] till they agree to pay Jizyah with a willing submission, and feel themselves subdued", *Al Quran*, 9:29. Also see Ibn Taimiyyah's *Letter Seven* to the King of Cyprus

[23] Ibn Taimiyyah, "Governance According to Allah's Law in Reforming the Ruler and his Flock" *(al-Siyasa al-Shariyya fi Islah al-Rai wal-Raiyya)*, in Bonney, *Jihad*, 116.

struggle.[24]In order to prove his contention he made reference to traditions of the Prophet highlighting the importance of militant *jihad*. The Prophet is reported to have said: "Fasting without interruption and spending the night in continuous prayer were the only acts equal to militant *jihad*."[25]

Anyhow, though having a puritanical view of religion, his theory of *jihad* is a blend of moderation and fundamentalism in modern sense of the term. According to Ibn Taimiyyah, *jihad* provides two-fold blessings to the one who wages it: victory in this world and martyrdom which is the best form of dying. It is the same source from which modern fundamentalists draw inspiration of militant *jihad*.[26] However, he lays down following principles in his theory of militant *jihad* as well:

 One, he views *jihad* as defensive not an offensive struggle. He takes reference from the Quran which says: "and fight in the way of God those who fight you but do not commit aggression: God loves not the aggressors."[27] If the Islamic state is attacked or threatened by the enemy forces, the status of *jihad* is changed from *Fard-e- Kafaya* to *Fard-e-Ayn* (obligation for all capable of it) as happened in the Battle of Trench (5 AH). Moreover, since enjoining good and forbidding evil is the basic assignment for which the Muslim nation has been raised so encouraging good should be done in a noble way and forbidding evil must not be

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[24] Ibn Taimiyyah, "The Criterion between the Allies of the Merciful and the Allies of the Devil", in Bonney, *Jihad*, 117.
[25] Bukhari, Muslim. Also see: Ibn Taimiyyah, "Governance According to Allah's Law in Reforming the Ruler and his Flock" *(al-Siyasa al-Shariyya fi Islah al-Rai wal-Raiyya)*, in Bonney, *Jihad*, 116.
[26] Ibn Taimiyyah, "Governance According to Allah's Law in Reforming the Ruler and his Flock" *(al-Siyasa al-Shariyya fi Islah al-Rai wal-Raiyya)*, in Bonney, *Jihad*, 116.
[27] *Al Quran*, 2:190.

executed in a corrupted manner.[28] It is in this context he advocated kind treatment to prisoners of war (POWs) and drew inference from the *Quranic* verse: "And who give food-however great be their own want of it-unto the needy and the orphan and the captive".[29]

Two, he developed general principle that the task of enjoining good and forbidding evil be performed provided the benefit outweighs the loss and the benefit and loss be calculated in terms of *Shariah*.[30]

Three, since, the implementation of punishments on those violating the limits prescribed by Allah constitute a part of forbidding wrong, therefore, it is the duty of the scholars and the rulers (those in authority) to ensure the enjoining of good and forbidding of evil. It is the duty of those in authority to ensure the enjoining of good and forbidding of evil and in return it is their right even if they happen to be unjust that they be obeyed until they maintain prayers.[31] Anyhow, obedience of those in authority will be conditional to their obedience to the God.[32] Briefly speaking, as have been discussed earlier, Ibn Taimiyyah developed a general principle by issuing a decree against the Mongol rulers that if rulers forego *Shariah* and do not maintain prayers, *jihad* against them becomes obligatory as they no longer deserve to command obedience of the Muslims. In modern history, Anwar

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[28] Ibn Taimiyyah, *Enjoining Right and Forbidding Wrong,* Salim Abdallah Ibn Morgan, Trans.,3-4.
[29] *Al Quran*, 76:8.
[30] Ibn Taimiyyah, *Enjoining Right and Forbidding Wrong,* Salim Abdallah Ibn Morgan, Trans.,6-10.
[31] Tradition of the Prophet in *Muslim*.
[32] Ibn Taimiyyah made reference to the address of Abu Bakr, the first caliph on being elected to the office of caliph: "O'people! The strongest among you is the weak as far as I am concerned until I take peoples right dues from him (and give to the rightful owners). Obey me as long as I obey Allah and if I disobey Allah, I have no right to your obedience".

al-Sadat, the Egyptian President, was killed on this premise by the militants. Nevertheless, this pretext of his assassination was dismissed by Grand Mufti of Al Azhar Shaikh Jadd-ul-Haq on the grounds that Ibn Taimiyyah's decree was in a particular context which was developed by him on the basis of his observation of a Mongol army camp where he found no arrangements for prayers and even no *Muaddin* and Imam to lead the prayers.[33]

The fact remains that Ibn Taimiyyah had an enormous influence on the subsequent Muslim movements especially since the dawn of 18th century. Though Ibn Abd al Wahab distanced himself from his theory of right to rebel against the rulers, not following *Shariah* but later on the Wahabi movement attracted towards his philosophy when they felt to overthrow their rulers labelling them as unbelievers.[34] His views that since the purpose of *jihad* is to establish the word of Allah, therefore, whoever obstructs should be fought against, still provide pretext to the militants to resist the rulers in the Muslim countries as they accuse them of following the line of the unbelievers instead of establishing *Shariah*. Moreover, reference to Ibn Taimiyyah by the contemporary militants testifies that his philosophy, though selectively, is still providing grounds to search for legitimacy to their acts of violence. For instance, Bin Laden referred to his philosophy many times in his statements.[35]

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[33] Bonney, *Jihad*, 290-292
[34] Natana DeLong Bas, *Wahabi Islam. From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, (New York, 2004), 256. Quoted Bonney, *Jihad*, 121.
[35] Bonney, *Jihad*, 122-123.

Conclusion

To sum it up, three broad conclusions may be drawn; Firstly, his political theory is embodiment of moderation and fundamentalism. He laid down certain principles of militant *jihad* on the one hand and challenged the practice of blind following of four recognized schools of Muslim jurisprudence and thus opened the doors of *Ijtihad* on the basis of independent reasoning on the other. Secondly, his political theory provided a ground for the subsequent movements like Wahabi movement to develop their theory of right to rebel against the rulers in the Muslim lands who do not follow *Shariah* in its entirety. Thirdly, notwithstanding their selective approach, modern fundamentalist movements draw on his theory of *jihad* in search of legitimacy for their acts.

The author is a graduate from London School of Economics (LSE) and has done PhD in Political Islam. He can be reached at munirmarath@yahoo.co.uk.