

Ibn Taymiyyah On The Need For A State

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Source: Economic Concepts of Ibn Taimiyah

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Ibn Taimiyah, like most Islamic thinkers regarded the institution of government as indispensable. Describing the need for a state, he says: "It should be noted that to regulate the affairs of people is one of the most important requirements (wajibat) of the religion (al-din).¹ Really speaking, al-din cannot be established without it. The well-being of the sons of Adam cannot be accomplished except through a well-organized society (ijtima') because they are in need of one another; and for such a society a ruler is indispensable."²

He gives two reasons for regarding the state and leadership as a religious duty. First, the saying of the Prophet: 'If three persons set out on a journey, they should appoint one of them their leader.' Citing this hadith, he argues: 'If a leader is considered necessary on a journey - a temporary association of a few persons - it is an instruction to have it in all kinds of greater associations'³ He further argues that the duty of commanding good and forbidding evil cannot be completely discharged without power (quwwah) and authority (imarah). The same applies to all religious duties, like holy war (jihad), justice, establishment of pilgrimage and prayers, helping those who are wronged and meting out punishment in accordance with the legal penalties (iqamah al-hudud).⁴ Since all these tasks cannot be carried on without government and power, the institution of government and state is necessary from the religious point of view.

It is worth mentioning here that, on the same ground, some eminent Muslim scholars of the present age have strongly advocated the view that political power is a necessary means to enforce Islam fully in personal and social life. Al-Mawardi (991-1058), Abu Ya`la al-Farra' (990-1065), al-Ghazali (1031-1111), Ibn Jama'ah (1241-1333) and Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) have all emphasized the need for the state and its religious character. Al-Mawardi, Abu Ya`la and Ibn Khaldun distinguish between two types of government, based on reason ('aqliyah) and the higher form of government based on revealed law (Shari`ah). The first merely guards against mutual injustice, discord and anarchy, and strives for worldly well-being, while the second provides for the positive enforcement of law and justice in mutual confidence and fellowship; above all, it takes into account the well-being of the community in the Hereafter as well as in this world.⁵

To Ibn Taimiyah authority is preferable to anarchy. Although he asks Muslims not to obey orders contrary to the commandments of Allah and forbids them to cooperate with an unjust ruler,⁶ he does not advocate open rebellion or encourage overthrowing him. He quotes the saying: 'Sixty years of an unjust imam (ruler) are better than one night without a sultan.'⁷ Al-Ghazali and Ibn Jama'ah also take the view that any effort to depose even a tyrannous sultan is liable to create chaos and lawlessness.⁸ Following the Greek philosophers, St. Thomas Aquinas also adopts this view, on which William Archibald Dunning has commented: 'In respect to individual action in slaying tyrants, he observes that it is more often bad men than the good that undertake such an enterprise, and that, since bad men find the rule of kings no less burdensome than that of tyrants, the recognition of the right of private citizens to kill tyrants involves rather more chance of losing a king than of being relieved of a tyrant.'⁹

Behind the view that an individual should not try to remove an established unjust ruler may have been the bitter

experience of these thinkers that the newcomer often proved a worse incompetent than the outgoing one. Moreover, the instability and chaos created by the overthrow of the regime always retarded economic growth and prosperity and affected adversely the social and academic institutions. However, it may be that these thinkers failed to suggest the proper way to get rid of a tyrant.

But this does not mean that for Ibn Taimiyah, as for the European mercantilists ¹⁰ of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the state was the be-all and end-all. As against the attitude of mercantilism in which 'the welfare of the state was substituted in place of the amelioration of the individual', ¹¹ Ibn Taimiyah emphasizes that the necessary objective of those in authority (wilayah) is to improve the material and religious conditions of the people in preparation for the life to come. ¹² He expresses the need for close co-operation between those in authority and the people. ¹³ By contrast, mercantilism was essentially amoral, as Hecksher explains: 'The mercantilists were amoral in a two-fold sense, both in their aims as also in the means for the attainment of their ends. This two-fold amorality arose from their widespread indifference towards mankind, both in its capacity as a reasoning animal, as also in its attitude towards the eternal.' ¹⁴ Mercantilist thinkers like Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Jean Bodin (1520-96) freed politics from all moral and ethical considerations and held the state accountable to no one. ¹⁵

In Ibn Taimiyah's view, the authority exercised by the state is not absolute. It is a trust (amanah) from Allah, and it is to be exercised in accordance with the terms laid down in the Shari`ah. He quotes a hadith of the Prophet, peace be upon him, to support his argument. Abu Dharr, a Companion of the Prophet, reported that he said: 'It (sovereignty) is a trust, and on the day of judgement it will be a thing of sorrow and humiliation except for those who were deserving of it and did well.' ¹⁶ Elsewhere, he observes that 'the government is a religious duty, to seek Allah's favour by fulfilling its obligations with all one's might is one of the noblest of good deeds (afdal a'mal al-salihah)'. He again quotes a hadith that 'to Allah the most beloved of His creatures is a just sovereign (imam 'adil) and the most hateful is a tyrannical one'. ¹⁷

Ibn Taimiyah believes that for appointment to a public office the most suitable person should be chosen on grounds of relevant competence (quwwah) and integrity (amanah), the two most necessary qualities. However, since it is not always easy to find a person who possesses both in equal measure, the most essential quality for the particular office should be determined. ¹⁸ Erwin Rosenthal comments: 'Ibn Taimiyah is realistic enough to suggest that ability to fill an office - courage and bravery in a war-leader, judgement and power of enforcement in a judge - is more important than piety and loyalty if nobody can be found who combines all requirements. In support he appeals to the Sunnah. Muhammad (upon him be peace) was always guided in the choice of a leader by the welfare of the ummah as the overriding consideration, even if his subordinates were to surpass him in knowledge and faith. If no one person is available who possesses in himself all the qualities needed for an office one has to appoint as many as together are endowed with them.' ¹⁹ And he goes on to observe: 'This idea is strongly reminiscent of al-Farabi and goes back ultimately to Plato, as does the idea of men forming an association to help each other to satisfy their need.' ²⁰ It is strange that Rosenthal should first say that Ibn Taimiyah derives his view from the Sunnah and then say the view is reminiscent of al-Farabi who, it is implied, got it ultimately from Plato, as if the true source of authority for Ibn Taymiyah were Greek. In fact, of course, that similar ideas are found in two different sources is not, without documentary evidence, proof that the later source is derived from the earlier one.

Footnotes:

1. By 'al-din' he means the religion of Islam, which provides not only a unique system of worship and moral rectitude but also a code of life. No aspect of man's behaviour, including politics and economics, is outside it. [back](#)

2. Ibn Taimiyah, al-Siyasah al-Shar'iyah (Cairo: Dar al-Sha'b, 1971), p. 184. [back](#)
3. Ibid., p. 185. [back](#)
4. Ibid. [back](#)
5. Cf. Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddimah (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), pp. 150-1; cf. Al-Mawardi, Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyah (Egypt: M. al-Babi, 1973), p. 5. [back](#)
6. Ibn Taimiyah, al-Siyasah at-Shar'iyah, op. cit., pp. 16, 61. [back](#)
7. Ibid., p. 185. [back](#)
8. Cf. Rosenthal, Erwin I. J., Political Thought in Medieval Islam (Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 44. [back](#)
9. Dunning, W. A., A History of Political Theories (Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1966), p. 200. [back](#)
10. Mercantilism developed at the end of the Middle Ages. According to the mercantilist writers it is very important that the state should be economically strong and powerful, and this can be done only through foreign trade. [back](#)
11. Heckscher, Eli F., Mercantilism, trans. by Shapiro. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962), Vol. 2, p. 286. [back](#)
12. Ibn Taimiyah, Al-Siyasah al-Shar'iyah, op. cit., p. 36. [back](#)
13. Ibid., pp. 42, 60. [back](#)
14. Heckscher, op. cit., p. 285. [back](#)
15. Gray, A. and Thompson, A., The Development of Economic Doctrine (New York: Longman, 1980), p. 56. [back](#)
16. Ibn Taimiyah, al-Siyasah al-Shar'iyah, op. cit., p. 22. [back](#)
17. Ibn Taimiyah, al-Hisbah, (Dar al-Sha'b, 1976), p. 11. [back](#)
18. Cf. Ibn Taimiyah, al-Siyasah al-Shar'iyah, op. cit., pp. 25-33. [back](#)
19. Rosenthal, Erwin I. J., op. cit., p. 54. [back](#)
20. Ibid., pp. 54-5. [back](#)