

# Salvation from the Point of View of Ibn Taymiyya

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## Abstract

A major problem discussed by Muslim intellectuals is that of salvation—that is, the deliverance from sins. Ibn Taymiyya's response to the problem accounts for some of the behaviors of contemporary Muslims and the current events of the Islamic world. We argue that Ibn Taymiyya conceives salvation in one of two forms: (i) only the followers of Islam attain salvation, and followers of other religions will achieve it only if they convert to Islam. From this form, we may conclude that Ibn Taymiyya believed in "religious exclusivism," which given the principles of Islam and those of Ibn Taymiyya's thought, can be portrayed as against religious prejudice and violence and as compatible with tolerance as well as learning from other religions—a suggestion made by Stenmark for prejudiced exclusivist leaders. (ii) Given the factors leading to wretchedness, such as disbelief, heresy, and polytheism, Ibn Taymiyya's circle of salvation does not even encompass all Muslims but is limited to one Islamic sect. This is an interpretation of Ibn Taymiyya's view adopted by excommunicative (*takfīrī*) Salafists, to which we shall refer in this paper as "sectarian exclusivism." This version of exclusivism is not plausible because it tends to lead to violent practices, as we have seen in the practice of Salafis in recent years. This article emphasizes that the first version is more consistent with evidence from the works and even practices of Ibn Taymiyya, which demonstrates that his own line of thinking does not confirm the excommunication approach of some of the contemporary sects.

**Keywords:** salvation, deliverance, Ibn Taymiyya, faith, excommunication (*takfīr*), exclusivism.

## 1. Introduction

There are groups that commit acts of violence against both Muslims and non-Muslims, rationalizing their actions by claiming that these people are outside the circle of deliverance and salvation, and therefore deserving of death. They purport to have derived their belief from the views of religious intellectuals or *ulama*, such as Ibn Taymiyya, which were grounded in the authentic texts of the early Islamic and the righteous "*salaf*" (i.e. predecessors). This raises a question: What is Ibn Taymiyya's view of salvation? Is the present construal of salvation consistent with what is found in Ibn Taymiyya's work? To answer these questions, we need to inquire into Ibn Taymiyya's view on the factors contributing to, and the

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obstacles on the way of, salvation and deliverance. The circle of salvation has been drawn by philosophers, mystics, theologians, and jurists (*fuqaha*) in different ways, but they all agree that salvation is available to all Muslims. However, Ibn Taymiyya seems to disagree with them both in theory and in practice. His account is susceptible to various interpretations, which have not been expounded so far, which is what this paper seeks to accomplish.

## 2. The Role of Ibn Taymiyya's Intellectual Principles in His Theory of Salvation

Ibn Taymiyya formulates certain theoretical principles concerning the nature of reason and transmitted or testimonial (*naqlī*) evidence, which plays a crucial role in his discussions. These principles include the sensory or material character of all beings (Ibn Taymiyya 1406 AH, 1:247), deployment of transmitted methods, and avoidance of reason (1401 AH, 4:422), restriction of knowledge to religious knowledge (1436 AH and 1401 AH, 13:364), superficialism about Quranic verses and hadiths (1401 AH, 15:178 and 1998, 1:270), and inclusion of reason in impulses or instincts (1424 AH, 227).

Following Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taymiyya believes that only transmitted evidence or testimonials—that is, the Quran and hadiths—are authoritative sources of beliefs. The method rests upon the Salafi testimonialism (i.e. primacy of the transmitted evidence) and antagonism towards philosophy, logic, and theology. Ibn Taymiyya believes that philosophy and logic are fruitless generalities, which have since their spread among Muslims led to atheism (1401 AH, 4:422).

Ibn Taymiyya's methodology is directly related to his epistemology. Testimonialism (primacy of transmitted evidence) in epistemology has led him to the preference of hadiths. There are fifty cases in his *Risālat al-fatāwā al-Hamawīyyat al-kubrā*, where Ibn Taymiyya asserts that superficialism—that is, the sufficiency of superficial or *prima facie* meanings of the Quran and impermissibility of any interpretations of it—is established by the high frequency (*tawātur*) of transmitted evidence (1436 AH). In his view, the reliable source of knowledge is the Quran, and if there is confusion and ambiguity therein, then one should rely on the Prophet's tradition (1401 AH, 13:364), and the third reliable transmitted source of knowledge is the Sahaba's exegeses of the Quran (1401 AH, 13:322ff). For example, the reason why he rejects esoteric interpretations is that the Sahaba never engaged in such interpretations (1401 AH, 15:178).

Proponents of testimonialism are led to a materialistic ontology, which culminates in many contradictions (for instance, in their accounts of religious doctrines concerning angels, human-God relations, and the like), which result in failure to provide a unified theory about issues such as salvation. Thus, what primarily stands out when studying Ibn Taymiyya's work are conflicts and even contradictions in his own words.

### 3. Ibn Taymiyya's Account of the Grounds of Salvation

Just like other Muslims, and in accordance with Islamic texts, Ibn Taymiyya believes that the main tenets of salvation are faith and righteous actions, supplemented by repentance and intercession (*shifā'a*) (Ibn Taymiyya 1417a AH, 145, 152; 1396 AH, 66, 131; 1408 AH, 68). The first two are essential in that they encompass all human actions, particularly in terms of Islamic texts. According to Ibn Taymiyya, the weak-willed would inevitably ignore the faith and would be occasionally disinclined to righteous deeds, while true servants of God would sometimes "omit what is better" (*tark al-ūlā*). Such intentional or unintentional deficiencies can eventually be compensated by repentance and the request for forgiveness. In certain circumstances, people may be blessed by intercession (Ibn Taymiyya 1417b, 124). Thus, for Ibn Taymiyya, the four essential tenets of salvation include faith, righteous actions, repentance, and intercession).

#### 3.1. Faith

Ibn Taymiyya makes a distinction between faith (*imān*) and Islam, maintaining that salvation is achieved through faith, and not through mere conversion to Islam, although every Muslim is deemed faithful, regardless of whether or not the truth of faith is established in his heart. In this picture, we may say that, within Ibn Taymiyya's intellectual system, the degree of Islam is indeed "faith in the general sense," and the degree of faith as established in one's heart is "faith in the specific sense."

Faith in the general sense can be seen as one's verbal endorsement of Islam as a whole, believing in it as a means of salvation and deliverance from divine suffering or as a way out of worldly impasses. The faith in the specific sense, however, is an act of heart or an ingrained inner belief (Ibn Taymiyya 1406 AH, 23, 45-46, 132-38, 152, 155-56, and 176).

Ibn Taymiyya believes that faith consists of three components: belief by heart, action, and verbal assertion. This is the faith highlighted by the Quran and hadiths. He holds that, of these three components, the most fundamental is belief by heart, where the heart plays the main role: "indeed, the main part is the heart" (1416 AH, 155-56).

Ibn Taymiyya's use of the term "the process of perfection" (*istikmāl*) indicates that, for him, faith is essentially graded; that is, it has various degrees in which it is instantiated (1416 AH, 176). His view is objectionable in that, on the one hand, he believes that faith is a matter of degrees, asserting that the faithful should not be expelled from the public domain of believers, and on the other hand, he curses, expels, and excommunicates his opponents on different occasions. For instance, he says that philosophers are more disreputable than the Jews and Nazarenes, reproaching them because they restrict happiness to knowledge (1422 AH, 103). He goes on to explicitly and harshly excommunicate heretics, particularly the

philosophers (from al-al-Fārābī to al-Suhrawardī and Ibn al-‘Arabī), characterizing them as atheists (1422 AH, 131-35).

In his book, *Ṭibb al-qulūb* (The cure of the hearts), Ibn Taymiyya offers the following characteristics for true faith, such as afterlife reward (Saberī 1388 Sh, 1:334-39; Izutsu 1383 Sh, 124), removal of doubts (Ibn Taymiyya 1416 AH, 123-43), composure (1416 AH, 11, 142-56), emancipation from attachment to this world (1411 AH, 91; 1406 AH, 123), insight and knowledge (1416 AH, 135), the right attitude toward this world and the afterlife, and so on.

### 3.2. Righteous Actions

The second factor leading to salvation is righteous action; that is, any deed that leads to one’s perfection, development of moral characters, closeness to God, and the progress of the human community in all respects. In fact, the Quranic term “righteous deed” includes morality and obedience to God. More broadly, every action that is in the human interest counts as righteous in Islamic thought. Since Ibn Taymiyya is a proponent of testimonialism, his definition of righteous actions falls within the domain of Islam: “and the righteous action is beneficence, which consists in doing the good deeds, which is what is commanded by God, and what is commanded by God is what is legislated by God, and this is what aligns with the Book of God and the tradition of His Messenger” (1396 AH, 75-76).

Following the Quran, Ibn Taymiyya emphasizes that faith should be accompanied by righteous actions. Moreover, the Quran asserts that truly faithful people are those who also invite others to the faith and righteous deeds. This is the social aspect of Islam. In fact, Islam as a religion aims not only at saving individuals, but also at saving the entire community. This is why the Quran gives pride of place to enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong (*al-amr bi-l-ma’rūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*) as a righteous deed (Ibn Taymiyya 1408 AH, 68; 1396 AH, 66).

According to Ibn Taymiyya, righteous actions reinforce one’s insights and elucidate the practical role of religion in human life. Persistence in action and joining the community of the faithful bring one’s life closer to religious goals. For Ibn Taymiyya, things may work out with the combination of justice and disbelief, but they do not work out with the combination of injustice and Islam (1396 AH, 40).

Finally, one may suggest that advantages of the conjunction of faith and righteous actions in Ibn Taymiyya’s work indicate the close tie between the two. For Ibn Taymiyya, the conjunction of faith and righteous actions results in the following:

- (a) Elimination of the sins
- (b) Peace and happiness
- (c) Inner beauty and spiritual serenity.

According to Ibn Taymiyya, the conjunction of faith and righteous actions shows that one cannot be faithful (that is, one cannot benefit from the advantages of faith) unless he verbally expresses his faith (1416 AH, 156). In fact, he sees faith as the critical point at which one receives the truth, which cannot be accomplished without proper beliefs and actions in accordance with the Sharia (1411 AH, 264).

He construes “Islam” as submission to, and turning one’s face toward, God, which will lead to salvation (1396 AH, 71-72). In his view, this shows the deficiency in the practice of the People of the Book since they fail to cultivate Islam and true faith in their hearts.

On this account, Ibn Taymiyya (1417a AH, 156; 1396 AH, 71-72) sees conversion to Islam as a condition of genuine faith in God and the day of resurrection (“this is the general Islam, nothing other than which God accepts from anyone ... and Islam has two meanings: one is submission and obedience so that you are not arrogant, and the second is purification”), which is why he believes that the People of the Book are outside of the circle of salvation and deliverance. His analogies about the Muslims whom he has excommunicated from Islam reveal his view of the People of the Book as well. As an example, he says about Muslim philosophers and mystics that their disbelief is even worse than that of the People of the Book, which shows that he does not see the latter as faithful (Ibn Taymiyya 1396 AH, 77: “disbelievers from Jews and Christians are more honorable than philosophers with respect to knowledge and action” Also see Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH: “they [philosophers] are among the extremely inferior people, and disbelievers from Jews and Christians are in many ways more honorable than them with respect to knowledge and action”).

### 3.3. Repentance

In Ibn Taymiyya’s view, repentance paves the path to salvation for believers who have committed injustice and sins. If one commits a sin, then one will be described as a disbeliever, unfaithful, and vicious in proportion to his repertoire of good deeds. Ibn Taymiyya believes that a person who does both good and bad deeds will count as vicious, although he can repent and compensate (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 46). People who repent are not all of the same type, as they can be classified in terms of what they have done and what they seek. There are different aspects of repentance:

- (a) Repentance from sins
- (b) Repentance from what one saw as good and then turned out to be wrong, such as heresies
- (c) Repentance from the illusion of independence from God (Ibn Taymiyya 1414 AH, 34).

All people are generally required to repent, as can be inferred from Quranic verses and hadiths. The Quran generally addresses all the faithful: “Rally to Allah in repentance, O faithful, so that you may be felicitous” (Q 24:31).

Since people are always vulnerable to sins and satanic temptations, and they may make mistakes inadvertently, repentance to God is pivotal to compensation of such impurities. In fact, repentance is an opportunity for compensating one’s deficiencies. Ibn Taymiyya scrutinizes repentance and its effects, including the recovery of one’s character, being loved by God, forgiveness of one’s sins, transformation of misdeeds to good deeds, and eternal salvation (Ibn Taymiyya 1414 AH).

In fact, repentance can be subsumed under the righteous deeds that compensate for the deficiencies in other human deeds, preparing the ground for human salvation.

### 3.4. Intercession

Another noteworthy factor in salvation is intercession (*shifāʿa*). Contrary to what is commonly believed, Ibn Taymiyya does not deny intercession. Indeed, he sees it as a factor contributing to salvation. This will be helpful in the last stage of worldly life and during afterlife calculations. Intercession may be revisited in terms of repentance since it is possible only if one has failed in the past, asking a divine saint to intercede and act as a mediator asking for his forgiveness (Ibn Taymiyya 1426 AH, 161-74; 1417 AH, 124). It should be noted, however, that intercession should be requested from God, rather than the mediators (1414 AH, 47).

Direct recourse to the interceders as mediators in creation was an attitude of Christians and pre-Islamic polytheists, and its recurrence in the Islamic world, particularly among Shiites, is viewed by Ibn Taymiyya as re-emergence of polytheistic thoughts (1421 AH, 32-43). What leads to deviation is to think of divine saints as independent in their intercession, which is why Ibn Taymiyya issued the fatwa that going to Medina with the intention of visiting the Prophet’s mausoleum counts as polytheism, since the Prophet’s mausoleum should not be treated similarly and equally to the Kaʿba (1426 AH, 161-97). What is acceptable in the case of divine saints and prophets is to recourse to them during their lifetime and ask for their good prayers (1426 AH, 161-70; n.d. 3, 39). This is because when divine saints die, one can no longer ask for their intercession, and one will have no way of being connected to them. After their death, one can only consult their practical tradition, which is highlighted by Ibn Taymiyya, and all emotional and inner connections to them will be severed in such cases since they have left this world (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 1:132).

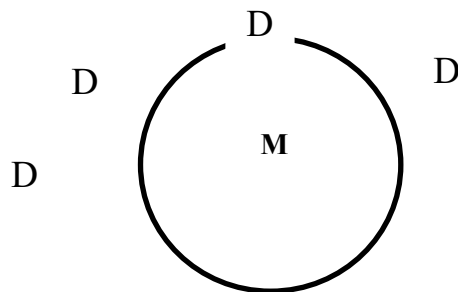
## Objection to Ibn Taymiyya's View

### 4. The Place of Disbelief in Wretchedness and the Significance of Having Criteria for Excommunication

When it comes to factors contributing to salvation, Ibn Taymiyya's theory of salvation is not different from that of his contemporaries. The difference emerges in his account of the factors of wretchedness. To elucidate the difference, let us point to the background of excommunication (*takfīr* or accusation of disbelief) among Muslims.

What is agreed upon about disbelief is that it consists in denying the essential doctrines of Islam. Muslim jurists believe that the relation between disbelief and faith (or belief) is that of disposition and absence (*al-'adam wa-l-malaka*), regardless of whether the disbelief arises from "denial" or ignorance and skepticism. For example, in his *al-'Urwath al-wuthqā*, al-Sayyid al-Yazdī maintains that disbelievers of all types count as impure (al-Sayyid al-Yazdī 1409AH, 1:68). As pointed out by al-Fakhr al-Rāzī, it is difficult to provide a theological definition of disbelief, but when we consider the definitions provided by theologians, we find that their definition is the same as that of jurists; that is, just like jurists, theologians construe disbelief as against Islam, accounting for the relation between the two in terms of "disposition and absence." Having said that, theologians have also distinguished "culpable" (*muqasssir*) and "incapable" (*qāṣir*) disbelievers, maintaining that the latter are in fact disbelievers, but they are excused and exempted from punishment. Al-Sayyid al-Murtaḍā (1389 Sh, 534) and al-Fakhr al-Rāzī (1405 AH, 37-38) have provided definitions of disbelief in which it is contrasted to the faith as the denial of an essential doctrine of Islam.

*Kufr* (disbelief) and *īmān* (faith), and their cognates, are two significant Quranic terms, pivotal to the entire Quranic thought. Izutsu believes that the Quranic system provides a very simple structure of disbelief and faith:



As this diagram indicates, all Muslims are members of the *Umma* and are within the circle of salvation, while there are people outside of the circle. The diagram decisively divides people into Muslims and disbelievers. No disbeliever is allowed inside the circle unless he "surrenders," which is the

literal meaning of “Islam.” Many people whose faith was questionable could easily enter the circle and become parts of the *Umma* simply by asserting the “two testimonies”—testifying to the oneness of God and to the prophethood of Muhammad (Saberī 1383 Sh, 1:334-39; Izutsu 1965, 30-40). This gave rise to debates and intellectual movements, such as Khawārij, since suspicious people entered the Islamic circle just by verbally asserting the two testimonies. In this way, the question of disbelief and faith extended to the Islamic *Umma* as well. People and their property used to be safe within the circle of Islam, but after the emergence of Khawārij, they became vulnerable, as even very pious Muslims could be subject to accusations of disbelief.

Since this historical period, the term “disbelief” came to have a more complicated sense. Thus, its implication subtly changed from “non-Muslim” to “heretic.”

After major conquests by Muslims, disbelievers outside of the Islamic circle, who used to count as the greatest threat to the Islamic community, were marginalized. What mattered then were Muslims who converted to Islam with their various cultural backgrounds. Now the main threat came from apparent Muslims who interpreted Islamic principles in line with their own purposes and motives. Thus, excommunication began with Khawārij in a deadly way—with the murder of so many Muslims—and it continues in one way or another until the present day. It was discussed and variously accounted for in Islamic jurisprudence, theology (*kalām*), philosophy, and mysticism. In this way, excommunication was deployed as a weapon to exclude the opponents. Consideration of cases of excommunication both by Sunnis and Shias may reveal two points. First: such excommunications were sometimes biased since the excommunicated people had all the qualifications of being a Muslim, and according to the Quran, it was wrong to excommunicate them. Second: some cases of excommunication were based on inadequate information about the views of a group. Thus, their words were construed as denial of an essential religious doctrine. For example, excommunications of philosophers and mystics were mainly due to the complexity of their words, which led to misunderstandings.

Muslims began to seek solutions to this problem. Eventually, Muslim intellectuals, both Sunnis and Shias, proposed that it is forbidden to excommunicate a Muslim without regulations, and if one does so, then he will count as a disbeliever himself (Rajabī 1388 Sh, 1-30). On this proposal, if Islamic sects hold to a belief about monotheism, prophethood, and the like, it does not count as an essential religious doctrine. Indeed, they should be treated as theoretical issues the denial of which would not lead to the rejection of the religion, since the denial of non-essential issues does not lead to apostasy.

Ibn Taymiyya was aware of the background as he acknowledged that excommunication should be regulated. He frequently warned that excommunication itself is a religious ruling. Thus, not everyone is qualified to



excommunicate others. In fact, conditions should be met and obstacles should be ruled out in order for one to be able to excommunicate someone else. He contends that excommunication is an exclusive right of God, which is why he never excommunicates his opponents, seeing this as a characteristic behavior of heretics. Interestingly, he (1401 AH, 12:467; n.d.1, 1:18) believes that most cases of excommunication among Muslims were based on misunderstanding, admitting that many such cases would be prevented if people had an adequate understanding of what their opponents said. The following are the regulations and conditions under which excommunication is legitimate:

**(A) Those with the right to excommunicate:** the first condition is that excommunication is an exclusive right of God, which is delegated to certain people. Thus, only the scholars who are properly appointed as judges have the right to excommunicate, since any kind of judicial judgment about people is a task of judicial judges.

Interestingly, Ibn Taymiyya frequently asserts that this principle is accepted by Sunni Muslims: they only excommunicate those who deserve to be excommunicated, never following their personal whims on the matter (Ibn Taymiyya 1420 AH, 2:698).

Ibn Taymiyya sees Sunni people<sup>4</sup> in contrast to heretics who would permit the excommunication and execution of Muslims such as Khawārij, Rāfiḍīs, Mu‘tazila, and Jahmīs. He believes that heresy comes from disbelief, as disbelievers would fight the believers, and if they do not have the power to do so, they would act in a hypocritical way. Sunni people, however, do not rape, murder, or excommunicate their opponents when they have power over them. They treat them justly in accordance with the commands of God and the Prophet, just like the way in which ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz treated Ḥarūriyya and Qadariyya, similarly to ‘Alī’s practice (Ibn Taymiyya 1420 AH, 2:698).

Moreover, Sunni Muslims never excommunicate someone just because he has excommunicated them, rejecting the way of people such as Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī and his followers. He said “we do not excommunicate anyone except those who have excommunicated us”<sup>5</sup> since it is wrong to lie to someone who has lied to us. It is wrong to curse the prophet of Nazarenes when they curse ours; and it is wrong to excommunicate ‘Alī just because Rāfiḍīs curse Abū Bakr and ‘Umar (Ibn Taymiyya 1406 AH, 61 and al-Buḥayrī, n.d.2, 1:129).

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4. For Ibn Taymiyya, the Sunna (tradition) which must be followed, the one whose advocates are praised and whose opponents are blamed, is the tradition of the Prophet in matters of beliefs, worships, and other religious matters. For him, this is only known through the hadiths transmitted from the Prophet about what ought or ought not to be said or done. See al-Buḥayrī, n.d.2, 1:128)

5. This is Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretation of the views of some Sunni Muslims about excommunication. One example he presents is Isfarāyīnī’s view that a person is excommunicated only if they excommunicate others. This is grounded in the following hadith: “any Muslim man who excommunicates a Muslim man, then if that man is a disbeliever [then there is no problem]; otherwise, he will be a disbeliever himself” (Sijistānī 141 AH, 2:409, hadith no. 4687).

**(B) Disbelief and transgression are judicial rulings:** Reason cannot judge disbelief and transgression on their own, because they are subject to judicial rulings. This implies that disbelievers and transgressors (*fāsiq*) are identified in accordance with what God and the Prophet have determined, just as the circle of faith and Islam are determined by God and the Prophet. What is deemed wrong by reason does not necessarily count as disbelief in the religion. Accordingly, Sunni Muslims never excommunicate anyone just because of misinterpreting a religious doctrine. They just disprove each other (Ibn Taymiyya 1406 AH, 63).

**(C) Issuance of an ultimatum:** According to Ibn Taymiyya, even if someone has the conditions for being excommunicated, he will not be excommunicated before an ultimatum is issued to him. Moreover, a person who contradicts himself and is deceived does not count as a disbeliever. For example, as to those who believe that God and His creatures are not separate (the unity of existence), he suggests that although their belief implies the falsification of the Prophet and counts as a disbelief, but they should not be excommunicated merely by saying what counts as a disbelief. First of all, an ultimatum should be issued to them. Moreover, there are many contradictions in the belief in inseparability of God and the creatures, which is why it should not count as a disbelief (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 50:307).

Not everyone who opposes part of this belief will necessarily be an inhabitant of the Hell. (1401 AH, 3:179)

Islamic sects such as Khawārij, Rāfiḍīs, and Qadarīs have excommunicated others just because they did not understand what they said (1401 AH, 12:467), without observing the rules and maxims of excommunication, which led to disturbances in the Islamic community. In order to show that his own excommunications are principled, Ibn Taymiyya says that he never excommunicates a Muslim because of errors in their positions, such as the permissibility or impermissibility of visiting the Prophet's mausoleum in Medina or to greet him only (Ibn Taymiyya, n.d.2, 1:18).

**(D) General excommunication:** another condition for excommunication as laid out by Ibn Taymiyya is avoidance of excommunicating a particular person. Thus, if it is determined that a person should be excommunicated, this should be done in general terms. To excommunicate a particular person, precautions must be taken, and the excommunication should be issued after making sure that the conditions are met, the obstacles are removed, and an ultimatum is issued (Ibn Taymiyya 1403 AH, 1:163). He believes that the reason for general excommunication lies in the Quran, the Tradition, and consensus: "and the reason for this consists in the Book, the Tradition, the consensus, and validity" (1403 AH, 12:489).

Ibn Taymiyya claims that he complies with this principle and that those who know him up close confirm that he was always opposed to the excommunication of particular persons since God forgives the mistakes of the Islamic *Umma*. Moreover, he believes that this was the practice of his predecessors: although they disputed over many issues, they never accused each other of disbelief, transgression, and sins; although they criticized each other, they never excommunicated one another, and when they excommunicated someone, they just did so in a general way without mentioning any particular person. Instead, they just said if someone says such and such, then he is a disbeliever (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 3:229). Yahya Michot, professor of Islamic studies at Hartford University, defends Ibn Taymiyya against charges of Islamic radicalism, noting that his criteria for excommunication mark his moderation. In Michot's assessment of Ibn Taymiyya's work, contemporary Muslims are said to face the "neo-ignorance" threat—that is, extremism—for which Ibn Taymiyya's views might be helpful. Michot takes account of Ibn Taymiyya's utilitarianism in ethical-religious issues, and hence, introduces him as a moderate theologian who holds that it is necessary, and indeed the Prophet's manner, to evaluate all interests and harms of religious practices (Michot 2013, 238-41).

Ibn Taymiyya's view of the factors of wretchedness—the failure to achieve salvation—is different from the majority view. In his discussion of the faith, he often considers Quranic verses and hadiths, without contributing his own sectarian or personal opinions to the discussions.

## **5. Ibn Taymiyya's Contradictions of His Own Maxims of Excommunication (An Assessment)**

Ibn Taymiyya's views of the factors contributing to wretchedness have attracted many critiques. In fact, he was accused of prejudice and even undue excommunication. Moreover, his misunderstanding of the theories of other sects, his exclusive reliance on his own jurisprudential theories concerning disbelief and faith, and his failure to adopt a rational and theological view of disbelief and polytheism led him to espouse unconventional views of the matter. These views have paved the path for extremists, excommunicationist interpretations by some of his followers. Despite Ibn Taymiyya's efforts to formulate plausible criteria for excommunication and his avoidance of excommunicating Muslims, he himself violated these criteria in practice. In what follows, we will raise certain fundamental objections to Ibn Taymiyya in accordance with his own asserted maxims to reveal his contradictions.

(a) He arbitrarily applies the maxims and principles of excommunication to certain sects and groups, which has led him to contradictory positions about Islamic sects. He has made excuses to excommunicate certain sects, whereas he refuses to do the same with others although they exhibit similar characteristics. Some of these are in order.

When it comes to the Shias, Sufis, and philosophers, for instance, Ibn Taymiyya instantly issues verdicts of excommunication without allowing for an alternative interpretation, whereas in his encounter with certain other sects, such as the Mu'tazila and Kilābiyya, he allows for possible alternative interpretations, and hence, refuses to excommunicate them (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 3:135; Mash'abī 1418 AH, 1:337). This is despite the fact that the Mu'tazila believed that the Quran was created and Kilābiyya rejected many volitional attributes of God, and Ibn Taymiyya believed that both of these positions led to disbelief. In fact, he excommunicated a number of people because of their adherence to such beliefs (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 2:342-43).

Ibn Taymiyya has particularly talked about the disbelief, polytheism, and transgression of Shias. He uncharitably defames and accuses this Islamic denomination of disbelief, while such practice is by no means consonant with his own maxims of excommunication. It is indeed an obvious contradiction of his own principles. Thus, he says the following about the Shia:

The heretics including hypocrites and zandaqa are disbelievers, and there are many of these among the Rāfiḍa and Jahamīs. Therefore, their heads (i.e. heads of Rāfiḍa and Jahamīs) are hypocrites and zindiqs. (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 3:353 and 12:479)

This is in spite of the fact that he also said elsewhere that people who level such accusations against their opponents promote divisions. For example, in his critiques of Khawārij, he characterizes them as heretics in their practices of excommunication in that they permitted the shedding of the blood of Muslims by excommunicating them:

Khawārij were the first heretics in Islam who excommunicated Muslims and permitted the shedding of their blood (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 3:20).

Moreover, he believes that no one becomes a disbeliever just by doing a blasphemous act or saying a blasphemous word. The ruling here varies with circumstances and people. In fact, excommunication should not be trumped by any obstacle. This is why no sector can be generally excommunicated.

(b) One motivation behind Ibn Taymiyya's maxims and principles for excommunication is to avoid undue and unreasonable cases. One of his maxims is the proper understanding of the views of people and sects, and then issuance of an ultimatum to them before excommunication. This maxim is yet another piece of evidence for contradictions in Ibn Taymiyya's writings and practice. He excommunicated many Islamic sects under various labels. To illustrate, some of the groups excommunicated by Ibn Taymiyya are as follows:

- (1) Those who appeal to intermediaries or interceders between them and God. (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 1:88, 27:72, 17:471)
- (2) Those who abandon all essential practices of Islam. (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 20:89)
- (3) Those who refuse to endorse what is established by the Quran and the Tradition. (1401 AH, 7:302, 303, 2:78, 11:171).

- (4) Those who oppose a consensual view or a frequently cited hadith. (1401 AH, 1:106, 7:38, 19:270).
- (5) Those who deny essential Islamic doctrines. (1401 AH, 1:106, 10:434; 2012, 3:272)
- (6) Those who curse or deride God, divine signs, or prophets. (1401 AH, 7:558)
- (7) Those who permit judgment in accordance with something other than what is revealed by God. (1401 AH, 24:202; 1406 AH, 5:130)
- (8) Those who negate divine attributes or names or assimilate God to His creatures or describe God with an exclusively divine attribute. (2012, 3:58, 1:54)
- (9) Those who fully resemble disbelievers. It is just forbidden to less fully resemble disbelievers. (1401 AH, 3:160, 11:482)
- (10) Those who believe that the Jews and Christians are not disbelievers or have reservations about their disbelief or believe that it is permissible to follow their religions. (1401 AH, 2:368, 12:338)
- (11) Those who are friends with, and help disbelievers. (1401 AH, 28:500)
- (12) Those who believe that it is permissible to murder a Muslim because he is a Muslim: a Murji'a sect that believes that faith is knowledge. (1406 AH, 4:505)
- (13) Philosophers. (1424 AH, 1:253; 2012:1:9, 3:87)
- (14) Jahamīs. (1401 AH, 20:186)
- (15) Bāṭinīs, Sufis, and those who believe in the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). (1401 AH, 2:471)
- (16) Naṣīriyya who, according to Ibn Taymiyya, believe in the divinity of 'Alī and follow Abū Shu'ayb ibn Muḥammad ibn Nāṣir al-Numayrī. (2012, 2:329)
- (17) The Twelver Imamī Shi'a. (1401 AH, 28:500)
- (18) Qadarī exaggerators (*ghulāt*) who deny divine knowledge. (See Mash'abī 1418 AH; 1401 AH, 12:485, 3:345; 1422:49)
- (19) Ismā'ilīs who believe in the Imamate of Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il ibn Ja'far. (1417a AH, 67)

(c) One of Ibn Taymiyya's maxims for excommunication is to avoid condemning a certain person. However, he has specifically excommunicated individual Muslims without issuing an ultimatum and without understanding their views or considering possible obstacles. Most of these people are philosophers and mystics, and the main reason for their excommunication is the complexity and misunderstanding of their philosophical and mystical views. These people include Avicenna (Sarḥān 1387 AH, 50; Ibn Taymiyya 1424 AH, 143), Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (Ibn Taymiyya 1391 AH, 5:159), Ibn al-'Arabī (1391 AH, 1:167), Ibn Sab'īn (1401 AH, 2:366), Ṣadr al-Dīn al-

Qūnawī (1401 AH, 2:92), Khwāja Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (1401 AH, 93), Tilmisānī (Ibn Taymiyya 1391 AH, 2:361 and 1401 AH, 2:92 and 2:471), Ṣadr Rūmī (1401 AH, 2:474), and Suhrawardī (1401 AH, 2:57 and 1391 AH, 1:185, 1:310, and Sarhān 1387 AH, 59).

Notwithstanding all these critiques, Ibn Taymiyya still has a rather moderate approach to excommunication. In fact, he cannot be regarded as a radical excommunicator as will be elaborated in what follows. As he makes it explicit, he did not seek to widely excommunicate Muslims, and he also prohibits others from doing so. Most of his excommunications are directed at philosophers and mystics who were excommunicated by other sects and people as well. However, even in the case of philosophers and mystics, Ibn Taymiyya's positions are contradictory. His major problem with them seems to be that he does not accept their method, preferring the Salafī method over theirs. In general, he treats other sects as heretics, and he does not believe that heretics are *ipso facto* disbelievers. John Hoover provides a similar picture of Ibn Taymiyya, maintaining that drawing extremist beliefs from his views is often a misinterpretation on the part of extremist Salafī (Hoover 2016, 177-203). Put in a nutshell, John Hoover suggests that, as much as possible, we should separate exclusivists of past centuries from excommunicationists, because on certain views of the principles and ancillaries of the religion, particularly in past centuries, exclusivism was inevitable, but in practice, we see that exclusivists practiced tolerance toward the followers of other sects and religions. By providing an account of the tolerance of exclusivists such as Ibn Taymiyya and separating them from excommunicationist, we can see the same practical results that are expected from pluralism (Hoover 2016, 177-203).

## 6. Two Versions of Exclusivism in Ibn Taymiyya's Theory of Salvation

Given the above account of Ibn Taymiyya's position on different Islamic sects as well as disbelief and heresy, it can be concluded that he believes in exclusivism, rather than inclusivism or religious pluralism. Inclusivism, in turn, comes in two forms: extra-religious and intra-religious. Extra-religious exclusivism is the view that only the followers of Islam achieve salvation. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya believes in exclusivism about salvation and deliverance at the scale of different religions. Some of his remarks such as "the disbelief of such and such people is worse than that of the Jews and Nazarenes" imply that he restricts salvation to Islam. Moreover, he believes that Islam is the only legitimate religion. His exclusivism is consonant with the views of many Muslim scholars, particularly those who view salvation in theological and jurisprudential terms, and the exclusive legitimacy of Islam is agreed upon by all contemporary scholars.

This version of exclusivism, which is coupled with tolerance toward the followers of other religions, has its advocates among intellectuals of other religions as well. For instance, scholars such as Plantinga (2000, 437-57) and

Stenmark (2006, 66) believe that certain versions of exclusivism are plausible and indeed compatible with peaceful coexistence of the followers of diverse religions, without a need for inclusivism or pluralism and their implications such as relativism about truth.

There is Quranic evidence for exclusivism, although the Quran limits legitimacy to Islam, while it extends salvation to the followers of other religions under certain conditions. The view is supported by religious scholars such as Mullā Ṣadrā (1981, 5:205), Motahhari (1368 Sh, 1:341, 289).<sup>6</sup>

A stronger exclusivist reading of Ibn Taymiyya's view of salvation might be gleaned from his remarks about the wretched, which is sectarian or intra-religious exclusivism. This means that only a particular group of Muslims who satisfy certain conditions will achieve salvation and deliverance. In other words, his criteria can only be satisfied by one Islamic sect, and other sects are dismissed as heretics, polytheists, and disbelievers. Such a reading of Ibn Taymiyya's view, which was developed by his students and followers in the subsequent centuries, has social and political repercussions, leading Muslim societies to sectarian disputes and civil wars. Moreover, this is incompatible with the general Quranic view of salvation. In sectarian exclusivism, only one sect of religion is entitled to salvation, and the followers of other sects will achieve salvation only if they join that sect; otherwise, they will be dismissed as disbelievers. In this way, their life, property, and family will be in danger. Recent instances of sectarian exclusivism are seen in the practice of Muslim excommunication groups such as ISIS and Taliban. This version of exclusivism is not plausible. It was criticized in that, according to Yagi and Rasheed (1997), it is not reasonable to ignore the possibility of the legitimacy and salvation of other traditions, and according to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, it is morally impossible to tell intelligent people that we are right when we believe that we know God, but when you say that you believe in God, you get it all wrong (Smith 1976, 99). This is the version that led thinkers such as John Hick to religious pluralism as a way out of sectarian conflicts.

This latter reading of Ibn Taymiyya's view is not supported by strong evidence, and the first reading is thus preferable. Moreover, he is not an excommunicator. To the contrary, he opposes the excommunication of Muslims under labels such as heresy, and his own personal cases are rare and along with the practice of other Muslims, such as his excommunication of certain philosophers, Sufis, Ismā'īlīs, and exaggerators (*ghulāt*) as they were already excommunicated by many other Muslims. The same is true of accusations of heresy he leveled against his opponents. He does not believe that heresy in the sense of alternative interpretations of beliefs leads to disbelief (Ibn Taymiyya 1401 AH, 3:345). Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya's words about laypeople who follow one of these "unacceptable" sects—that they are not culpable—are also evidence for the first reading of his views. The second reading was merely highlighted by

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6. For more, see Poorrezagholi, et al. 2016.

certain excommunicative groups. Thus, in terms of his excommunicative principles and his account of faith, righteous deeds, repentance, and intercession, Ibn Taymiyya believes that Muslims will attain salvation, and this is compatible with his exclusivism. On this account, contemporary excommunicative groups, such as Wahhabis and Salafi excommunicators, have in fact contradicted and failed to fully grasp the principles propounded by Ibn Taymiyya as a prominent Salafi figure.

## Conclusion

Given our account of the theoretical criteria of salvation and misery, Ibn Taymiyya counts as exclusivist because, in his view, every person who confesses the belief in Islam can attain salvation, while the followers of other religions cannot achieve salvation because they lack a general faith. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya's theoretical exclusivism allows room for peaceful and respectful coexistence with the followers of other religions. His theoretical perspective on the criteria of salvation is very close to Quranic principles and the views of other Muslim intellectuals about salvation. As for the criteria of misery, particularly disbelief, Ibn Taymiyya tries to keep Muslims outside of the domain of excommunication. The criteria he enumerates are consistent with his moderate exclusivism.

Despite the cogency of Ibn Taymiyya's theoretical treatment of the issues of salvation, his practice of excommunicating certain Islamic sects and even figures, coupled with denominational or sectarian biases, has paved the path for extremist interpretations of sectarian exclusivism and salvation. This has resulted in the rise of contemporary sects such as Wahhabism and ISIS who believe that all other Islamic sects are disbelievers and their life and property can be taken. This has led to tragic slaughters of Muslims in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. This version of exclusivism is not tenable. However, the weight of Ibn Taymiyya's own view on salvation lies in the criteria of excommunication and avoidance of widespread arbitrary excommunication of Muslims. His rejection of excommunicating heretics and his emphasis on overcoming misunderstandings about Islamic beliefs provide further evidence for the salvation of all Muslims. Accordingly, it seems that the attribution of sectarian (intra-religious) exclusivism to Ibn Taymiyya is not grounded in his own views as much as it is grounded in the interpretations of the views offered by his students and followers. A scrutiny of their interpretations goes beyond the scope of this article..



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