


# The Manichaean Gaze in Western Islamic Studies: Epistemic Filters, Selective Reception, and the Reconfiguration of Classical Muslim Thought

*Mehdi Berriah*

Institut français du Proche-Orient

m.berriah@ifporient.org  [orcid.org/0000-0001-8701-8905](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8701-8905)

## Abstract

In contemporary Western discussions of Islam, certain classical Muslim scholars are treated as symbols of rationality, tolerance, rigidity, or militancy. This article examines the historiographical mechanisms underlying such classifications. It argues that the reception of medieval Muslim thinkers has often been shaped by a Manichaean gaze that silently rates the Islamic scholarly tradition according to modern normative expectations. Modern categories such as ‘rational’, ‘mystical’, ‘normative’, and ‘fundamentalist’ selectively foreground some dimensions of a corpus while obscuring or problematising others. The trajectories of Ibn Rushd, Ibn ‘Arabī, and Ibn Taymiyya illustrate these dynamics. Ibn Rushd is often detached from his juridical commitments and institutional role and Ibn ‘Arabī from his positions on jihad, hijra, and the enforcement of shari‘a, while Ibn Taymiyya is approached primarily through the prism of modern radicalism. Recovering the plurality of classical Islamic thought requires closer examination of dimensions marginalised by contemporary interpretive categories.

**Key words:** Manichaean gaze, Orientalism, secularism, epistemic filters/categories, paradigms, reception, Ibn Rushd, Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyya, jihad, shari‘a

## Introduction

For more than a century, Western Islamic studies have developed approaches to classical Muslim scholars that, despite significant methodological shifts, remain largely structured by epistemological frameworks inherited from secular modernity, post-Enlightenment rationalism, and a Eurocentric conception of thought. This configuration produces a dual effect that is rarely made explicit. On one hand, it privileges scholars deemed compatible with modern intellectual categories and their corresponding values; on the other, it marginalises or disqualifies figures perceived as overly normative, doctrinal, or resistant to critical thought – itself a historical concept, devised in a European context and often applied anachronistically to the medieval Islamic intellectual tradition. The Manichaean gaze that emerges selectively sorts the Islamic scholarly tradition in a way that is frequently at odds with the historical and doctrinal complexity of the thinkers concerned. This diagnosis does not imply that Western Islamic studies are homogeneous, nor that all scholars operate within such a framework. It rather identifies recurring interpretive tendencies that, even when implicitly held, can shape patterns of reception.

This mechanism is visible in the differentiated reception of eminent figures of classical Islam. Authors such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) are often treated preferentially, as representatives of a philosophical, mystical, or rational Islam more readily translatable into modern academic categories. By contrast, scholars such as Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) are associated with a rigid, literalist, or authoritarian Islam, and incorporated into narratives that cast them as precursors of fundamentalism or religious obscurantism. Such categories are themselves historically rooted in modern Europe, in dialogue with particular readings of the Western Middle Ages and of the relationship between power, knowledge, and ecclesiastical authority. In both cases, the approach is selective. Certain dimensions of these authors’ works are foregrounded, while others – especially those belonging to juridical-normative, scripturalist, or traditionist registers – are muted or set aside.

This filtering rests on a series of implicit oppositions: philosophy versus theology, mysticism versus normativity, and rationalism versus scripturalism. Some of these draw on value-laden binaries shaped in the modern West – e.g., openness versus closure, tolerance versus intolerance – which are then projected onto medieval corpora. Over time, these contrasts solidify into interpretive frameworks, resulting in a partial reading of classical Islamic texts in which internal

coherence is sacrificed to pre-established categories. These categories then shape what is considered intelligible, legitimate, or problematic in the Islamic tradition.

Building on contemporary critiques of Orientalism – particularly those that highlight the structural character of modern regimes of knowledge production – this article shifts the focus to a more precise historiographical terrain: the conditions under which classical Muslim scholars are received in contemporary Western academia. It traces differentiated regimes of reception in public discourse, spaces of scholarly mediation, and specialised Islamic studies, under the central hypothesis that the Manichaean gaze does not stem from an explicit rejection of Islamic scholarship, but from a regime of silent selection.

This process of stabilisation is not limited to Islamic studies. In his critique of what he terms the “biographical illusion”, Pierre Bourdieu identifies a persistent tendency in scholarly and narrative practices to reconstruct lives and trajectories as coherent, unified wholes, retrospectively endowed with continuity and intelligibility. Such reconstructions often efface discontinuities, tensions, and contextual contingencies in favour of a linear narrative that makes sense from the standpoint of the present.<sup>1</sup> A similar mechanism exists in the reception of classical Muslim scholars: rather than being approached as historically situated actors whose works articulate multiple, sometimes dissonant registers, they are frequently reconstituted as stable intellectual figures – philosopher, mystic, jurist, or radical – whose coherence derives less from the internal logic of their corpora than from the expectations that structure their contemporary intelligibility.

This regime hierarchises intellectual figures according to their perceived compatibility with contemporary normative expectations and, according to context, renders certain dimensions visible while obscuring others.

## Methodology and Corpus

This article does not examine the reception of classical Muslim scholars within a single, homogeneous space. It begins from the premise that mechanisms of selection, accommodation, and disqualification vary, depending on where knowledge is produced and circulated. Accordingly, it focuses on differentiated regimes of reception: public discourse, spaces of scholarly mediation, and specialised Islamic studies.

The corpus is deliberately selective and qualitative, and is not intended to be exhaustive but to identify recurring interpretive frameworks. It includes works of scholarly popularisation, widely circulated media productions, and specialised

---

1 Pierre Bourdieu, “L’illusion biographique”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 62-63 (1986), p. 69.

academic studies when these have shaped the contemporary reception of the authors. In this way, the article sheds light on structural logics that become visible in emblematic cases. While counter-examples exist, the focus here is on identifying patterns, not cataloguing positions.

The analysis of Ibn Rushd concentrates on forms of reception outside Islamic studies, particularly in public discourse, historical or philosophical popularisation, and particular media contexts. These texts are not treated as representative of a specific academic discipline, but as indicators of stabilised interpretive frames that have contributed to shaping the author's contemporary image. In the case of Ibn 'Arabī, the analysis considers extra-specialised reception and Islamic studies scholarship to capture the differentiated processes of selection and reconfiguration at work. For Ibn Taymiyya, specialised academic reception is examined alongside extra-academic usage. The analysis proceeds from the observation that even nuanced scholarly studies that emphasise the complexity of Ibn Taymiyya's thought have a limited impact on his dominant image in public discourse and in broader synthesised narratives.

These contemporary appropriations are confronted with a focused rereading of the texts and their historical contexts, to highlight the mechanisms of selection, neutralisation, simplification, and reconfiguration that structure their reception.

The article comprises three sections. The first clarifies the epistemological frameworks and historical conditions that enable a Manichaean gaze. The second offers two case studies – on Ibn Rushd and Ibn 'Arabī – to show how certain figures are rendered compatible through processes of selection and attenuation. The third examines the contrasting treatment of Ibn Taymiyya, to elucidate the gap between the documented complexity of his work and his persistently polarised image, alongside the tendency to consign all three authors to modern categories.

## 1. The Manichaean Gaze: Epistemological and Historical Framework

The Western academic study of Islamic scholarly traditions is embedded in a long history of classification, hierarchisation, and interpretive projection. In its modern beginnings, the field was shaped by epistemic categories largely external to the intellectual worlds it sought to describe, informed by modern rationalism, a secularised understanding of religion, and the expectations of the European Enlightenment. These frameworks not only determined which objects

were deemed worthy of attention; they also helped define the criteria by which knowledge was recognised as legitimate, rational, or relevant in the study of learned Islam.

More broadly, critiques of Eurocentric historiography have emphasised the extent to which the European historical experience has been implicitly universalised. Jack Goody argues that world history has often been conceptualised on the basis of what occurred on the “provincial scale of Europe” before being projected onto the rest of the world, thereby transforming European history into a tacit norm for global interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective, Orientalism cannot be reduced to a collection of inaccurate representations or stereotypes about Islam. Extending Edward Said’s established critique in *Orientalism* (1978), Wael Hallaq asserts that Orientalism should be understood not as an isolated discursive bias, but as the symptom of a deeper epistemic disorder rooted in the structures of modern knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The issue lies both in the content of particular discourses and in the categories through which the Other becomes thinkable and intelligible. In this sense, even contemporary paradigms in Islamic studies, which are often presented as ‘decolonised’, continue to reproduce interpretive grids shaped by modernist assumptions: the implicit valorisation of autonomous reason, the historical-critical method, and normative ideals of emancipation.<sup>4</sup>

### *1.1. The Legacy of Orientalism and its Extensions*

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, Orientalist scholarship shaped an image of Islam structured around a binary opposition of thought: rational, philosophical, and universalist on one hand, and legalistic, dogmatic, and static on the other. This schema is particularly emblematic in its elevation of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) to a position of centrality in an ‘enlightened Islam’, or an ‘Islam of the Enlightenment’, compatible with Greek philosophy and, by extension, European modernity, often in contrast to literalist or traditionalist currents.

Although subsequent scholarship has widely deconstructed the colonial presuppositions underlying such readings, Hallaq’s contribution invites us to move beyond a purely moral critique of Orientalism as either hostile or benevolent to interrogate the epistemic structures that render certain interpretations possible

2 Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1-2.

3 Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. vii-viii, 4-10, 67, 98.

4 Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, pp. 138-178.

and others unthinkable.<sup>5</sup> The problem here lies in both the explicit valorisation or disqualification of particular authors, and the conditions of intelligibility that govern their integration into the scholarly canon.

At this level, a decisive shift occurs: Muslim scholarly figures cease to be objects of external classification, and become the vehicles of an internal hierarchisation of the Islamic tradition. Authors are implicitly divided into ‘acceptable’ and ‘problematic’ figures, not according to the internal coherence of their works, but because of their perceived translatability into the modern categories of rationality, critique, or spirituality.

### *1.2. Secularism and the Production of ‘Acceptable’ Religion*

The binary structure outlined previously is sustained by the frameworks of liberal secularism, which tend to define ‘acceptable’ religions in the modern public sphere. In this configuration, religion is conceived primarily as an inward, private matter, stripped of normative claims over law, politics, or social organisation.<sup>6</sup> Religious expressions that depart from this model by asserting juridical, moral, or political normativity become difficult to accommodate on the secular horizon of legitimacy.

Talal Asad has shown that Western secularism is not a neutral institutional arrangement, but a historically specific formation that shapes and produces the religious, the legitimate, and the extreme.<sup>7</sup> When applied to classical Islamic traditions, this framework privileges figures who can be read as mystical, philosophical, or spiritual, while marginalising those whose works assume explicit juridical, theological, or political normativity.

This mechanism helps explain why certain academic readings present Ibn ‘Arabī as an apolitical mystic, or reduce Ibn Taymiyya to a figure of scripturalist radicalism. Such interpretations reflect a process of selection shaped by a secularised image of the ‘acceptable’ Muslim thinker – one aligned with forms of religiosity recognised as legitimate in contemporary Western academia.

5 Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, pp. 65-137, 179-267.

6 Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 1-3, especially p. 2, where secularism is described as a form of “productive power” that shapes systems of meaning.

7 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

### 1.3. Post-Orientalist Grids and Persistent Biases

Despite a growing awareness of the mechanisms of reduction that have influenced the history of Islamic studies, contemporary paradigms – including some post-Orientalist variants – often reproduce epistemic filters shaped by historically contingent secular assumptions.<sup>8</sup> This persistence is particularly visible in the widespread use of interpretive categories that have become almost self-evident: rationalist, mystic, traditionalist, jurist, reformist, rigorist, and fundamentalist. This tendency is reinforced by the retrospective attribution of key values, such as rationality, freedom, and democracy, to a specifically European trajectory. Jack Goody critically examines this process, highlighting how such claims are projected onto history as uniquely Western achievements.<sup>9</sup>

By analogy, this set of labels is a historiographical paradigm in the Kuhnian sense, in that it organises the questions deemed relevant, and implicitly sets the boundaries of acceptable interpretation.<sup>10</sup> While such categories are convenient tools for classification, they can also oversimplify, and fix complex intellectual positions within rigid typologies.

Talal Asad drew attention to this type of categorisation in *Genealogies of Religion*, demonstrating how modern human sciences constructed oppositions between the ‘modern’ and ‘non-modern’, or the rational and the traditional, which played a central role in defining modernity itself:

The rejection of anthropology by Westernizing elites in former colonial countries is well known, and the reasons for it are not hard to understand. But the assumption that anthropology is culturally marginal to modern European society needs to be reexamined. It is true that anthropological theories have contributed very little to the formation of theories in politics, economics, and other social sciences. And yet, paradoxically, aspects of anthropology’s discourse on the nonmodern – those addressing “the primitive,” “the irrational,” “the mythic,” “the traditional” – have been of central importance to several disciplines. Thus, psychoanalysis, theological modernism, and modernist literature, among others, have continually turned for support to anthropology in their attempts to probe, accommodate, celebrate, or qualify the essence of modernity.<sup>11</sup>

8 Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, pp. 138-178.

9 Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11-18. See also Goody, *The Theft of History*, pp. 13, 34, 240-41, 290.

10 On the notion of paradigm as a framework that structures the questions and readings deemed legitimate in a given field, see *Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

11 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 23.

The dichotomy between a rational/mystical/spiritual and a supposedly normative/juridical/political Islam is therefore not an analytical discovery, but the product of a secularised epistemological framework that struggles to conceptualise religion, except on the condition that it be depoliticised. As Asad shows, modern religious categories are historically situated, and cannot be transparently applied to classical Islamic traditions. Their use tends to generate selective readings in which juridical, normative, and political dimensions are either marginalised or disqualified as premodern or problematic. The label ‘traditional’, for example, can be an implicit marker of irrationality, or resistance to modernity.<sup>12</sup>

Here Shahab Ahmed’s contribution is particularly useful. By insisting on the coherence of contradiction as a constitutive feature of historical Islam, Ahmed shows that the coexistence of apparently dissonant registers – juridical normativity, philosophical speculation, mysticism, and symbolic transgression – is part of the tradition’s internal logic.<sup>13</sup> The modern reluctance to examine this indissociability leads to the historiographical fragmentation of scholarly figures, whose works are divided along lines foreign to their own intellectual horizons.

From a historiographical perspective, dominant categories make it difficult to conceive a single author as simultaneously jurist and philosopher, mystic and theologian, rational thinker and traditionally rooted. This bias helps explain the partial reception of figures such as Ibn Rushd, reduced to his philosophical profile at the expense of his role as a Mālikī jurist and *qāḍī*, and Ibn ‘Arabī, confined to a disembodied mysticism. It also prepares the ground for the more radical disqualification of authors such as Ibn Taymiyya, whose complex thought is often condensed into a handful of supposedly problematic traits.

This difficulty cannot be reduced to isolated misunderstandings or contingent interpretive choices. It is more deeply rooted in an implicit paradigm, characteristic of modern intellectual life: disciplinary specialisation. As Wael Hallaq demonstrates, classical Islamic education was not structured around the segmentation of knowledge into autonomous fields, but around a dialectical circulation between disciplines in a system whose telos inseparably linked

12 “The story of how the ‘*ulamā*’ (divines) unsuccessfully opposed the introduction of radio and television into the country has often been told. Typically, a Western historian observes: ‘These episodes may serve to illustrate the traditional opposition of the ulama to modernization in the kingdom. Besides the question of harming religious values, the innovations could contribute to the creation of a new class of leaders, not of religious origin, and thus give rise to a direct threat to the ulama’” (Bligh 1985, 42). “What is interesting about such explanatory accounts is precisely the manner in which particular episodes of dissent are presented as illustrations of a self-evident general thesis; the Saudi ‘*ulamā*’ (sing., ‘*ālim*’), being traditional, reject any change in the status quo, because refusal to change is the essence of tradition. The implication is that this was not reasoned criticism but simply irrational rejection of everything ‘modern’” Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, p. 209.

13 Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 46-57; 113-245, 405.

intellectual formation and ethical purpose. In that context, scholarly polyvalence – combining law, theology, exegesis, philosophy, mysticism, and the rational sciences – was normative.<sup>14</sup> The retrospective application of modern disciplinary categories tends to fragment works conceived as internally coherent, isolating certain registers at the expense of others.

The hypothesis advanced here is that the modern paradigm of specialisation directly contributes to the Manichaean gaze cast upon medieval Muslim scholars, by encouraging selective readings that privilege one dimension of their thought while obscuring those that resist univocal disciplinary classification. The case studies in this article examine how this paradigmatic gap has shaped the reception of figures such as Ibn Rushd, Ibn ‘Arabī, and Ibn Taymiyya.

Some recent works have sought to move beyond reductive or essentialist readings, by emphasising the internal complexity of classical Islamic thought and its historical transformations. Ahmad T. Kuru, for instance, explicitly rejects essentialist explanations that attribute contemporary problems to Islam itself and post-colonial approaches that reduce them to external domination, highlighting instead the historical interplay between intellectual, political, and economic actors.<sup>15</sup> While such approaches contribute to a more nuanced understanding, they also illustrate how difficult it is to escape interpretive frameworks that reconfigure Islamic intellectual history through structured, and sometimes implicitly normative, analytical lenses.

---

14 Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, pp. 73-78; Hallaq, *Shari‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 172, 181-82, 125-26, 136. On the educational system in the medieval Muslim world, see: George Makdisi, *The Rise of the Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981); Jonathan Porter Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Daphna Ephrat, *Learned Society in a Period of Transition: The Sunni Ulama of Eleventh-Century Baghdad* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); and Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

15 Ahmet T. Kuru, *Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. XV-XVI, 15-31, and 161-163. While Kuru explicitly rejects essentialist and purely post-colonial explanations, his broader explanatory model is structured by a large-scale narrative of intellectual and political reconfiguration that assigns emblematic figures such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Khaldūn distinct places in a macro-historical account of decline and marginalisation.

## 2. Case Studies: Valued Figures and Selective Readings

### 2.1. *Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198): The Making of a Western-Compatible Figure*

Building on a recent study on Ibn Rushd,<sup>16</sup> this section briefly explains some of its central arguments, but shifts focus to the historiographical processes that have shaped his reception; it then introduces a number of complementary elements that give further nuance to his construction as a figure of philosophical compatibility. Ibn Rushd has not only been rediscovered and revalued in modern European thought; he has become a symbol of rationality, reform, and philosophical renewal in various strands of modern Arab intellectual history. Yet his role as a figure of compatibility between Islam and modernity has acquired a particularly strong symbolic force in Western public discourse and broader academic imaginaries, even if a number of studies have called for greater nuance.

Ibn Rushd's singular place in contemporary narratives about learned Islam cannot be explained solely by the scope of his oeuvre; it also derives from the role he has gradually come to play within the symbolic economy of European knowledge. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, his figure stabilised as a point of articulation between Islam and philosophical modernity. This was not the result of simple historical recognition, but the outcome of a process of selection that progressively fixed what Ibn Rushd was understood to represent.

Ernest Renan depicts Ibn Rushd as the embodiment of an exceptional Islamic rationality, almost marginal in what is portrayed as a predominantly theological or juridical Islam.<sup>17</sup> This gesture redraws the internal cartography of the Islamic tradition by hierarchising its components. As recent studies on 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalism show – notably Alain Messaoudi's work on French Arabists – such distinctions were embedded in broader intellectual and institutional frameworks. These set an 'Aryan genius', associated with rationality and philosophical speculation, against a 'Semitic genius', limited to religious or legal thought.<sup>18</sup> Here, philosophy emerges as the exportable, translatable, compatible element, while the less easily universalised juridical normativity recedes into the background.

In this context, Ibn Rushd was gradually elevated to become a central figure of an enlightened Islam, or an Islam of the Enlightenment, compatible with

16 Mehdi Berriah, "From Qāḍī to Philosophical Icon: Ibn Rushd and the Epistemic Reconfiguration of Islamic Studies in Europe", *Journal of Islam in Europe and in the Mediterranean World*, 2:1 (2026).

17 Renan, Ernest, *Averroès et l'avéroïsme. Essai historique* (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1852). See also: Alain de Libera, "Averroès: The bearded philosopher", *Administration & Éducation*, Selected Articles 3 (2016), III; Francesca Forte, "Averroès et la censure de l'histoire", *Doctor Virtualis*, 13 (2016), pp. 139-140.

18 Alain Messaoudi, *Les arabisants et la France coloniale. 1780-1930* (Lyon: ENS Editions, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.enseditions.3724>.

the Greek legacy and, by extension, European modernity.<sup>19</sup> This valorisation is in contrast to literalist, traditionalist, or juridically rigid currents, which are more readily associated with images of religious obscurantism. Even when not explicitly stated, this opposition creates a binary narrative in which philosophy signifies a universally exportable openness, and scriptural normativity is relegated to premodern isolation.

Majid Fakhry showed how Ibn Rushd's integration into a transnational history of Aristotelianism was accompanied by an effacement of his Andalusian and Islamic embeddedness.<sup>20</sup> By retracing the Latin construction of 'Averroes', Alain de Libera underscored the gap between the scholastic figure and the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup>-century Almohad jurist.<sup>21</sup> More recently, Stefan Schick highlighted the reconstructive dimension of Ibn Rushd's modern rediscovery, and showed how this reappropriation responded to intellectual expectations specific to the European context.<sup>22</sup> What emerges from this trajectory is a specific logic of framing. Ibn Rushd becomes legible primarily as a philosopher, because that dimension can be inserted into a European history of reason.

A more detailed textual study of his engagement with *fiqh* – notably in the *Bidāyat al-mujtahid*, *al-Faṣl al-maqāl*, and in relation to al-Ghazālī's *al-Mustasfā* – has been conducted elsewhere, and need not be repeated in this article.<sup>23</sup> The present concern is less with the doctrinal substance of his positions than with the historiographical conditions that have led certain facets of Ibn Rushd's work to be privileged over others.

In a previous study, I examined Ibn Rushd's engagement with jihad, particularly in the *Bidāyat al-mujtahid*. Those analyses will not be revisited here, but a few complementary remarks on his treatment of war will be added. First, Ibn Rushd's discussion of war in his commentary on Plato's *Republic* complicates his modern reduction to a philosopher of rational mediation. While Plato asserts that war arises from necessity, Ibn Rushd integrates it into a broader normative and pedagogical framework: when speech proves ineffective, coercion – and, in the case of certain nations, war – may lead people toward the virtues required by political order.<sup>24</sup>

19 Anke von Kügelgen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne. Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus im Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Anke von Kügelgen, "A Call for Rationalism: 'Arab Averroists' in the Twentieth Century", *Alif* 16 (1996), pp. 97-132; Forte, "Averroès et la censure de l'histoire", pp. 140-142; Fauzi M. Najjar, "Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and the Egyptian Enlightenment Movement", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 31:2 (2004), pp. 195-213. See also Malek Chebel, *Manifeste pour un islam des Lumières: 27 propositions pour réformer l'islam* (Paris: Fayard, 2011), p. 10, 20; and [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/actualites/article/averroes-ibn-rushd-et-l-islam-des-lumieres\\_49676.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/actualites/article/averroes-ibn-rushd-et-l-islam-des-lumieres_49676.html).

20 Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 283-284.

21 De Libera, "Averroës: The bearded philosopher", pp. I-VI.

22 Stefan Schick, "After the Enlightenment: The Rediscovery of Averroes by Tiedemann and Herder", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 33/1 (2023), pp. 113-139.

23 Berriah, "From Qādī to Philosophical Icon".

24 Averroes, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, pp. 11-13.

Second, this military dimension is not incidental. In Ibn Rushd's account of virtuous governance, political excellence depends not only on wisdom, understanding, and persuasive capacity, but also on the ability to wage war; and where these qualities are distributed across several individuals, the preservation of rule may rest on a combination of juridical and military functions.<sup>25</sup> Even within a philosophical commentary, governance is not conceived apart from law, hierarchy, discipline, and coercive capacity. Such elements point to dimensions of Ibn Rushd's thought that recede in modern receptions, where he is primarily viewed as a figure of rational compatibility and intellectual mediation. Philosophical inquiry, or the attribution of rationality to an author, does not in itself exclude sustained engagement with social phenomena, including violence such as war. Although warfare was not a central concern of most philosophers, Ibn Rushd devoted sustained attention to it. An earlier example can be found in the Muslim philosopher Abū al-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī (d. 381/992), who wrote an explicitly apologetic defence of jihad.<sup>26</sup>

Dominique Urvoy has described this aspect of Ibn Rushd's thought in bellicist terms,<sup>27</sup> but this formulation calls for qualification. Rather than expressing a valorisation of war as such, the passage integrates coercion and warfare into a broader normative reflection on political order and the formation of virtue. At the same time, the idea that religious scholars generally remained removed from warfare reflects a long-standing historiographical representation more than an established historical reality. Recent scholarship has instead highlighted the participation of *ʿulamāʾ*, Sufis, and other pious figures in jihad throughout the medieval period.<sup>28</sup>

Ibn Rushd's belonging to the Mālikī tradition, his activity as a *qāḍī*, and his participation in the juridical debates of his time are not ignored in specialised scholarship, but rarely constitute the core of his public or paradigmatic image. This asymmetry reflects an implicit hierarchy among registers of knowledge.

Here we encounter a central feature of the Manichaean gaze: rather than being openly rejected, the Islamic scholarly tradition is reconfigured. Certain expressions are elevated as compatible because they can be mobilised in contemporary

25 Averroes, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, pp. 105-106.

26 See: Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 382-385.

27 "Ce bellicisme, de la part d'un penseur qui, comme l'immense majorité des hommes de religion de son temps, n'a jamais participé à un combat effectif, est remarquable." Dominique Urvoy, *Averroès: les ambitions d'un intellectuel musulman* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 151.

28 Harry S. Neale, *Sufi Warrior Saints* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022); Harry S. Neale, *Jihad in Premodern Sufi Writings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 97-117; Mehdi Berriah, "Combattre par la plume, le prêche et l'épée: les représentations du rôle des ulémas dans l'effort du jihad mamelouk (moitié vii<sup>e</sup>/xiii<sup>e</sup> — début ix<sup>e</sup>/xiv<sup>e</sup> siècles)", in *Représentations et symbolique de la guerre et de la paix dans le monde arabe*, Sylvie Denoix and Salam Diab-Durantou (eds.), (Cairo: Ifao, 2024), pp. 261-270.

debates about rationality, tolerance, or modernity. Other dimensions, less easily translatable into these categories, recede into the background. The result is not a crude distortion, but a structured simplification.

In this configuration, Ibn Rushd provides balance: he authorises a narrative in which Islam can generate a universal philosophical rationality. This helps explain why the reading that reduces him to his philosophical profile has proven so durable. The issue is not that Ibn Rushd was a philosopher, although he undeniably was, but that in his modern reception this dimension has come to absorb the other registers of his scholarly activity.

This compatibilisation is not confined to academic discourse; it also appears in contemporary political rhetoric, where Ibn Rushd is invoked as a symbolic mediator between Islam and modernity. A recent example illustrates this dynamic. In a parliamentary hearing on 6 December 2025, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a member of the French National Assembly and founder of *La France insoumise*, referred to Ibn Rushd as evidence that “the spirit of the Enlightenment” owes a debt to Islam. In this account, Ibn Rushd is presented as the thinker who made the coexistence of faith and reason conceivable, and is inserted into a continuous genealogy that stretches from the Renaissance, through the French Revolution and the ‘French Enlightenment’, to the 1905 law on secularism:

Let me begin by saying that I know that the spirit of the Enlightenment – the current of thought that moved from the Renaissance to the great Revolution – owes a debt to Islam and to the scholars of the Islamic faith. I am thinking of Averroes – though that is not his real name; it is the Latinised name given to avoid having to cite an Arab in our sources. Averroes is the first to say – and our own intellectuals at the Collège de France tell us that he is among the founders of the Enlightenment. In my view that is somewhat exaggerated, but I understand what they mean. Why?

Because Averroes is the first to say, much to the consternation of Western Christians who, through the Crusades, came into contact with Muslims and brought back sciences they thought had sprung from their own minds – mathematics, physics, chemistry – they were astonished. How can there be two truths? One taught by the Book and religion, and another discovered through one’s own reasoning?

Well, Averroes resolves this problem. He says: Truth is one and indivisible, and it is accessed through different paths. He speaks of rhetoric, philosophy, and faith. And Averroes, drawing further consequences, extends this line of reasoning ... At the outset it is a religious judgement; it has nothing philosophical about it, yet it goes on to permeate and shape all emerging thought from the Renaissance onward. And in his time, being called an Averroist was not a compliment, since

certain Muslim schools considered him a heretic. That shows that within all religions there are many internal debates.

But Averroes fully belongs to the culture of the French Enlightenment. I say the French Enlightenment, because it is distinct from that of the Netherlands or other countries. The French Enlightenment led to the law of 1905, which is not a state atheism. We must therefore be capable, when we hear so many horrors spoken, of recognizing the intellectual ties that have shaped us as humanity, as we are today – all of us.<sup>29</sup>

What matters here is not to assess the historical accuracy of such a narrative point by point, but to observe the image of Ibn Rushd it installs and renders intelligible for a contemporary audience.

The passage foregrounds the philosopher who ‘resolves’ the problem of the two truths and affirms the unity of truth alongside multiple paths of access. It is this facet – readily reusable within a modern language of rationality and secularism – that is the primary entry point, to the extent that it concentrates the meaning attributed to Ibn Rushd. By contrast, an entire range of elements falls out of view: his status as a Mālikī jurist, his activity as *qāḍī*, the substantial portion of his work devoted to *fiqh*, and more broadly his manner of inhabiting a scholarly tradition in which such registers were not neatly divisible.

The significance of this example is how it confirms, in a different register from academic syntheses, the logic already described. To render Ibn Rushd accessible within a narrative of compatibility, what can be translated into familiar signs –

29 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzhJL7tjMF8>. In the original French: “Dans l’immédiat, je sais que l’esprit des Lumières, la pensée qui a cheminé de la Renaissance jusqu’à la grande Révolution, doit à l’islam et aux docteurs de la foi islamique. Je pense à Averroès qui n’a... Ce n’est pas son nom, c’est le nom qu’on a latinisé pour éviter d’avoir à citer un Arabe dans nos sources. Averroès est le premier qui va dire... Et nos intellectuels à nous au collège de France disent qu’il fait partie des fondateurs des Lumières. À mon avis c’est un peu exagéré, mais j’ai compris ce qu’ils voulaient dire. Pourquoi ? Parce qu’Averroès est le premier qui dit, à la consternation des Chrétiens d’Occident, qu’ils viennent, étant entrés par les Croisades en contact avec les musulmans, ont ramené des sciences qu’on trouvait de sa tête : les mathématiques, la physique, la chimie, ils sont consternés. Comment peut-il y avoir deux vérités ? L’une qu’enseigne le Livre et la religion, et l’autre qu’on trouve avec sa tête ? Hé bien Averroès règle ce problème et il dit : la Vérité est Une et Indivisible et on y accède par des chemins différents. Il cite la rhétorique, la philosophie et la foi. Et Averroès, avec d’autres conséquences, étend son raisonnement... Au départ il s’agit d’un jugement religieux, ça n’a rien de philosophique, qui va pénétrer et travailler toute la pensée naissante à partir de la Renaissance. Et ce n’était pas un compliment à l’époque de se faire traiter d’averroïste parce que il y a des écoles musulmanes qui ont dit : ce type-là est lui-même un hérétique. C’est dire que dans toutes les religions il y a beaucoup de discussions. Mais Averroès fait partie prenante totalement de la culture des Lumières françaises. Je dis bien des Lumières françaises parce que les Lumières françaises sont particulières, comparées à celles des Pays-Bas, comparées à celles des autres pays. Les Lumières françaises ont pu déboucher sur la loi de 1905 qui n’est pas un athéisme d’État. Hé bien, il faut que nous soyons capables, quand on entend tant d’horreurs, d’être capable de reconnaître les liens idéologiques qui nous ont bâti en tant qu’humanité, tels que nous sommes aujourd’hui, tous autant que nous sommes.”

Enlightenment, reason, tolerance – is foregrounded, while what complicates the picture is bracketed. This framing stabilises a public image, which is effective precisely because of its simplicity, and thereby reproduces the asymmetry between the dimensions of Ibn Rushd's work.

A close reading of his texts, however, shows that these registers do not map onto modern disciplinary boundaries. The gap between the internal structure of his oeuvre and its subsequent reception offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe the epistemic filters at work in contemporary Islamic studies.

Where Ibn Rushd's reception was largely constructed outside Islamic studies, Ibn 'Arabī offers a second vantage point: his circulation is more hybrid, yet it is marked by comparable selectivity.

## 2.2. *Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240): From Apolitical Mystic to Thinker of Jihad*

In Ibn 'Arabī's case, the Manichaean filter operates with force. Roger Arnaldez emphasizes that the sheer scale, diversity, and complexity of Ibn 'Arabī's oeuvre problematise attempts to interpret it in a unified or reductive manner.<sup>30</sup> In Western contexts, Ibn 'Arabī is generally presented as a Sufi master par excellence, a poet of divine love, universal tolerance, and inward spirituality, largely detached from juridical constraints and political realities. While this corresponds to a genuine and central dimension of his work, it obscures the aspect of his thought closely tied to the historical, political, and military context in which he lived. The scale and diversity of Ibn 'Arabī's writings, which encompass metaphysical speculation, Qur'anic exegesis, legal considerations, and reflections anchored in the socio-political realities of his time, resist such compartmentalisation.

This focus can be explained in part by the modern modes by which his writings are disseminated – particularly the translation and circulation of texts centred on love and metaphysical speculation – which have shaped a privileged entry point into his thought. In this framework, Ibn 'Arabī is evoked as the figure of a universalisable spiritual Islam, rather than a thinker engaged in the doctrinal and normative debates of his time.<sup>31</sup> This tendency is reflected in major reference works. William Chittick's entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

30 "L'œuvre d'Ibn 'Arabī est si vaste, si diverse et si complexe, qu'il est difficile, voire impossible, d'en donner une idée d'ensemble. Cette difficulté est d'ailleurs double, car elle est en rapport avec le problème de l'unité de la pensée d'Ibn 'Arabī d'une part, et avec le problème de l'unité de sa personnalité d'autre part, les deux étant évidemment liés." Roger Arnaldez, "Ibn 'Arabī et la gnose soufie", *Heresis*, 24 (1995), p. 43.

31 These representations circulate across a wide range of outlets. A brief glimpse can be found at: [https://lematin.ma/journal/2005/Mehdi-de-Graincourt--Ce-que-prone-Ibn-al-Arabi-est-l-amour-de-la-vie/57280.html#google\\_vignette](https://lematin.ma/journal/2005/Mehdi-de-Graincourt--Ce-que-prone-Ibn-al-Arabi-est-l-amour-de-la-vie/57280.html#google_vignette); and [https://www.saphirnews.com/Ibn-Arabi-ou-la-doctrine-de-l-universel\\_a28389.html](https://www.saphirnews.com/Ibn-Arabi-ou-la-doctrine-de-l-universel_a28389.html).

however, resists a reductive classification of Ibn ‘Arabī as a Sufi, and insists on the breadth of his engagement with the full range of Islamic sciences. The entry confirms how modern scholarship has long privileged texts such as the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*) and, through them, the metaphysical and mystical dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought.<sup>32</sup> Earlier scholarship laid the foundation for this interpretive framework. Roger Arnaldez, for instance, in his study of Ibn ‘Arabī’s mystical gnosis, foregrounded esoteric hermeneutics, symbolic interpretation, and the integration of gnostic and philosophical traditions, thus reinforcing a mode of reception in which metaphysical and spiritual dimensions are considered the primary points of entry into his thought.<sup>33</sup> As with Ibn Rushd, this is not a simple misreading, but a process of selective amplification that stabilises one dimension of a complex oeuvre at the expense of others.

### 2.2.1. *Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘Apolitical’ Mystic?*

The image of Ibn ‘Arabī as a purely mystical and ‘apolitical’ figure is the result of a long process of interpretive selection. A significant portion of Western scholarship privileges the esoteric dimension of his work, particularly through the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*) and certain sections of the *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Revelations*), which contain his metaphysical reflections on the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujūd*) and universal love. While such a framing is legitimate, it isolates Ibn ‘Arabī from the turbulence of his time, as though his historical experience and his embeddedness in a world marked by conflict exerted only marginal influence on his thought. This interpretive tendency is observed in standard reference works. Entries devoted to Ibn ‘Arabī in major encyclopaedias, such as the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, prioritise his mystical and metaphysical doctrines, and pay comparatively limited attention to the juridical, political, and contextual dimensions of his thought. Such asymmetries do not necessarily result from explicit bias, but reflect the persistence of implicit hierarchies in the organisation of knowledge about Islamic intellectual traditions.<sup>34</sup>

The frequently invoked theme of tolerance in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought further illustrates this selective reception. While his writings articulate a vision in which all beings retain a relation to divine truth, this perspective emerges from a complex theological framework in which error, truth, and guidance are intricately

32 William C. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/>.

33 Arnaldez, “Ibn ‘Arabī et la gnose soufie”, pp. 46-52.

34 Ahmed Ateş, “Ibn al-‘Arabī”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition Online (EI-2 English)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), [https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0316](https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0316).

articulated, and not from a simple affirmation of pluralism in the modern sense. As Arnaldez notes, Ibn ‘Arabī maintains that even erroneous beliefs preserve a relation to truth, insofar as they participate, albeit imperfectly, in the divine reality.<sup>35</sup> Detached from this doctrinal context, such passages reinforce the image of Ibn ‘Arabī as a figure of universal and apolitical spirituality.

Situating Ibn ‘Arabī in his context – Ayyubid Syria in the early 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century, as it faced the Frankish threat – significantly nuances this representation. The final decades of his life were spent primarily in Aleppo and then Damascus, a politically fragile environment in which the presence of Crusaders along the Syro-Palestinian coast was a constant strategic and symbolic reality. This background is essential for understanding certain of his doctrinal positions, particularly those concerning jihad and *hijra*.

### 2.2.2. *Ibn ‘Arabī, Jihad, and the Obligation of Hijra*

Contrary to the image of a Sufi exclusively oriented toward *jihād al-akbar* – the struggle against the ego and the passions – Ibn ‘Arabī accords in the *Futūḥāt* and other writings a significant place to *jihād al-aṣghar*, i.e., armed struggle against the enemy of the religion. This is not a marginal discursive aside; it is part of a coherent reflection directly linked to the political and military conditions of the time.

The post-Saladin Ayyubid situation, marked by the weakening of central authority, diplomatic compromises with the Franks – particularly under al-Kāmil (d. 635/1238), who restored Jerusalem to Emperor Frederick II (d. 648/1250) under the Treaty of Jaffa (Rabī‘ al-awwal 626/February 1229) – and the ongoing Crusader presence, provides an indispensable interpretive key. Ibn ‘Arabī, a contemporary witness living in Syria not far from the site of negotiations, perceived such concessions as signs of humiliation inflicted upon the religion, and this directly informed his normative pronouncements.

In a particularly explicit passage of the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn ‘Arabī exhorts Muslims living under Frankish rule to emigrate, and not to remain among non-Muslims, arguing that such a condition entails the humiliation of Islam and the elevation of disbelief over the divine word. He grounds this injunction in both Qur’anic and prophetic authority, presents migration as a religious obligation for those able to undertake it, and frames armed struggle as the means by which the supremacy of God’s word is to be restored.<sup>36</sup>

35 Arnaldez, “Ibn ‘Arabī et la gnose soufie”, p. 46.

36 Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (ed.) (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1999), vol. 8, p. 255.

Here, the concept of *hijra* is central. It is not limited to geographical relocation but carries a strong normative and symbolic charge explicitly linked to the Prophetic precedent. Ibn ‘Arabī draws a parallel between Muslims living under Frankish domination and the early Muslims who remained in Mecca before the Hijra, not primarily because of direct persecution, but because of the humiliation inherent in non-Muslim domination. He implicitly calls for armed struggle so that “the word of God be supreme”,<sup>37</sup> and does not employ the term *jihad*, which is semantically polyvalent, but *qitāl*, whose meaning – armed combat – is unambiguous.<sup>38</sup>

His use of the term *dhimma* to describe the condition of Muslims living under Crusader authority, and the emphatic warning introduced by the particle *iyyāka* (beware), underscores the gravity with which Ibn ‘Arabī viewed the situation. He goes so far as to declare that Muslims who remain among polytheists while capable of emigrating “have no share in Islam”,<sup>39</sup> which can be read as pronouncing *takfīr* upon them. To reinforce his position, he cites a prophetic hadith in which the Prophet dissociates himself from Muslims living among polytheists, followed by a Qur’anic verse urging believers to perform the *hijra*. These positions, rarely foregrounded in Western scholarship, are a decisive element of Ibn ‘Arabī’s normative thought.

### 2.2.3. Normativity, *Sharī‘a*, and the Rules of *Dhimma*

A similar logic appears in Ibn ‘Arabī’s views regarding the presence of non-Muslims in *dār al-islām*. While rejecting Christian domination over Muslim territories, he criticises any relaxation in the enforcement of the rules of *dhimma*. In a letter addressed to the Seljuk sultan Kay Kāwus I, Ibn ‘Arabī reproaches the excessive tolerance granted to Christians, including the public celebration of their rites and the neglect of regulations attributed to the caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644).<sup>40</sup>

Claude Addas notes that these positions are consistent with a broader vision, in which spirituality cannot be dissociated from rigorous observance of the

37 Expression drawn from a hadith. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Muḥammad Fu‘ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (ed.) (Cairo: Ibdā’, 2020), hadith 7458, p. 877.

38 The Qur’anic lexeme most frequently used to denote combat is not *jihad*, which occurs four times, but *qitāl*, which occurs thirteen times. This observation prompts further reflection on the nuances between these terms when they convey the idea of fighting.

39 Lā ḥaḥza lahu fī al-islām. Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. 8, p. 255

40 Giuseppe Scottolin, “Soufisme et Loi dans l’Islam: un texte de Ibn ‘Arabī sur les sujets protégés (ahl al-dhimma)”, in *L’Orient chrétien dans l’empire musulman. Hommage au professeur Gérard Troupeau suite au colloque organisé les 15 et 16 octobre 2004 à l’Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3 par le CRITIC, Centre de recherches sur les idées et les transferts interculturels*, Geneviève Gobillot et Marie-Thérèse Urvoy (eds) (Versailles: Éditions de Paris, Versailles, 2005), pp. 199-235.

*sharī'a*.<sup>41</sup> They stand in sharp contrast to the dominant image of Ibn 'Arabī as exclusively concerned with love and metaphysics, and invite reconsideration of his work in light of the conflictual context of the Crusades.<sup>42</sup> His hostility toward the Crusaders is not exceptional; it resembles that expressed by other contemporaries, such as Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233), a direct witness to the arrival of the Franks and the massacres they perpetrated.<sup>43</sup>

The point here is not to deny the central spiritual and mystical dimension of Ibn 'Arabī's thought, but to acknowledge that, for him, spirituality was articulated with a normative conception of Islam. Far from being absent from political and military concerns, he integrated armed jihad into a broader spiritual vision in which *jihād al-nafs* (struggle against the self) and *jihād al-'aduww* (struggle against the enemy) form complementary levels of a single path. The relative absence of this articulation in Western scholarship is a revealing indicator of the epistemic filters that shape the reception of learned Islam.

### 3. Marginalised Figures: Complexity Overlooked

#### 3.1. *Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328): The Scholar in the Storm*

The compatibilisation of Ibn Rushd and Ibn 'Arabī occurs primarily in spaces of cultural and intellectual mediation. The case of Ibn Taymiyya, however, reveals a different regime of reception. Here, simplifications and polarisations circulate in public discourse and, by processes of reiteration, in some synthesised scholarly narratives, despite the existence of more nuanced specialised studies.

If Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal is, in Sunni memory, a relatively consensual figure of doctrinal firmness, Ibn Taymiyya occupies a singular and far more contentious place in modern historiography. This is not the result of the fundamental differences in religious conviction or intellectual courage both figures share, but reflects the ways in which Ibn Taymiyya's thought has been read, interpreted, and instrumentalised by later generations. He is arguably one of the most cited, most invoked, and paradoxically least comprehensively read Muslim scholars.

41 Claude Addas, *Ibn Arabi et le voyage sans retour* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), p. 110.

42 For example: on the subject of Ibn 'Arabī's intolerance of transgressions of the sharia. For Claude Addas, the shaykh al-Akbar admits of no recourse to easy solutions even if they are licit. In addition, his ecumenism remains strictly subordinated to respect for divine law. Addas, *Ibn Arabi et le voyage sans retour*, pp. 122-126.

43 Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1987), vol. 9, pp. 13-21.

In a significant strand of contemporary Western Islamic studies, Ibn Taymiyya is reduced to the archetype of a rigorist, normative, and bellicose Islam, sometimes portrayed as a direct intellectual precursor of contemporary forms of violence and religious rigorism.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, an important body of specialised scholarship presents a more nuanced version of this image: the issue is less the absence of such studies, than the limited impact they have had on dominant synthesised narratives.<sup>45</sup> The historically and doctrinally complex line of continuity between Ibn Taymiyya's writings and modern militant movements is often asserted teleologically, without careful reconstruction of the intellectual, political, and social mediations involved.

Conversely, in parts of the Arab-Muslim world – particularly among Ash'arī scholars and in certain Sufi circles – Ibn Taymiyya is depicted as a relentless opponent of tradition, largely because of his polemics on divine attributes and specific cultural practices.<sup>46</sup> For others, he is an almost unassailable scholarly authority, a renewer of religion (*mujaddid*), and a seal of orthodoxy, frequently

44 In the first footnote of *Averroès: les ambitions d'un intellectuel musulman*, for example, Dominique Urvoay states: "Ibn Taymiyya, à la charnière des XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles, avait cru bon de consacrer une étude critique à l'œuvre théologique d'Averroès. Ce docteur du fondamentalisme était un homme d'une pauvreté intellectuelle préoccupante puisque tout se ramenait, pour lui, à l'exigence de suivre le texte transmis par le prophète et ses propres exemples. Mais il avait un sens politique très aigu – qui lui vaut une grande autorité auprès des réformistes de notre époque – lui donnant un flair remarquable pour déceler toute forme de pensée dont la richesse ne se laisserait pas couler au moule commun qu'il ambitionnait de réaliser." Dominique Urvoay, *Averroès: les ambitions d'un intellectuel musulman*, note 1, p. 215. See also: Gabriel Martinez-Gros and Lucette Valensi's presentation note, devoted to Ibn Taymiyya: "Théologien radical, Ibn Taymiyya (mort en 1328) est contemporain du désastre que constitue l'invasion mongole. Il dénonce tous les développements religieux post-coraniques, prône le retour le plus strict à la lettre du Coran, et recommande le djihad. Il est la référence constante de la pensée fondamentaliste", Gabriel Martinez-Gros and Lucette Valensi, *L'Islam, l'islamisme et l'Occident. Genèse d'un affrontement* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), p. 209, note 2. Gilles Kepel likewise places Ibn Taymiyya among the most rigorist 'ulamā', and describes him as a "jurisconsulte intransigeant". Gilles Kepel, *Fitna. Guerre au cœur de l'islam* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 193, 381. In other works, he is labelled "un inquiétant précurseur de l'islam" <https://orientxxi.info/un-inquietant-precursur-de-l-islam-radical,0759>, or a "figure centrale du fondamentalisme sunnite, d'un littéralisme forcené et assoiffé d'une volonté d'orthodoxie radicale". Gabriel Petitpont, "Ibn Taymiyya, figure centrale du fondamentalisme sunnite: origine et influence d'une pensée radicale", *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, 3/115 (2014), pp. 103-115. Such judgements, formulated by authors who are not experts on Ibn Taymiyya, are based on largely synthesised readings, and reproduce interpretive schemes that leave little room for nuance. These are value judgements that fall short of what Marc Bloch would call "historical impartiality" (Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien* [Malakoff: Dunod, 2020], pp. 197-203 [1st ed. 1949]); and Emmanuel Sivan presents Ibn Taymiyya as "the master theoreticians of the jihad in the late Middle Ages" (Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* [London/New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990], p. IX).

45 Mehdi Berriah and Arjan Post, "Rethinking the Taymiyyan Phenomenon: Contexts, Corpus and Reception", in *Ibn Taymiyya's Thought: Corpus, Reception and Legacy*, Mehdi Berriah and Arjan Post (eds.) (Leuven: KU Leuven University Press, 2026), pp. 7-9. See also: Elliott Bazzano, "Ibn Taymiyya, Radical Polymath, Part I: Scholarly Perceptions", *Religion Compass*, 9 (2025), 100-116; and Elliott Bazzano, "Ibn Taymiyya, Radical Polymath, Part 2: Intellectual Contributions", *Religion Compass*, 9 (2025), pp. 117-139.

46 For the reception of Ibn Taymiyya among Ash'arites and certain Sufi milieus, see: Binyamin Abrahamov, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition", *Muslim World*, 82/3-4 (1992), pp. 256-272.

invoked in the argumentation of currents such as Wahhabism, Madkhalism, jihadism, and certain forms of Salafism.<sup>47</sup> In these contexts, his name alone is a mark of authenticity. The modes of citation employed by ideologues in these movements construct the image of an authoritarian and rigourist theologian, devoid of spirituality. In all these cases, the historical individual disappears behind the (positive or negative) symbolism projected onto him.

A careful return to the sources invites a shift in perspective. Behind the symbolic image emerges a scholar whose trajectory and oeuvre resist univocal reduction. Ibn Taymiyya was at once a learned Ḥanbalī jurist and an engaged theologian, but also an independent thinker capable of opposing both adversaries and allies. His intellectual life oscillated between teaching, controversy, public intervention, and imprisonment. The positions he defended with uncommon vigour led to repeated incarcerations in Damascus and Cairo, culminating in his death in captivity. This conflictual dimension illuminates the conditions under which certain positions – later perceived as radical – were formulated, especially when their polemical targets and historical circumstances have been forgotten.

### 3.2. *Ibn Taymiyya and Sufism: Internal Critique and Normative Reinscription*

This complexity appears clearly in Ibn Taymiyya's relationship to Sufism, where his image as anti-Sufī par excellence does not withstand close reading of his works. In *al-Istiqāma*, he offers a critical engagement with the *Risāla* of Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 475/1072).<sup>48</sup> Rather than rejecting *taṣawwuf* wholesale, Ibn Taymiyya distinguishes between what accords with the Qur'an and Sunna and what he regards as problematic developments, noting, for example, a "deficiency (*naqs*) concerning the path (*ṭarīqa*) followed by the majority of God's perfected

47 Yahya Michot, *Ibn Taymiyya, Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 101-122; Yahya Michot, "Ibn Taymiyya's 'New Mardin Fatwa': Is Genetically Modified Islam (GMI) Carcinogenic?", *The Muslim World* 101/2 (2011), pp. 130-181; and Jon Hoover, "Ibn Taymiyya between Moderation and Radicalism", in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage*, Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (eds.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 177-203. See also: Johannes Jansen, *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat's Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East* (New York, Macmillan, 1986), pp. 159-234; Mehdi Berriah, "Ibn Taymiyya's Conception of Jihad: Corpus, General Aspects, and Research Perspectives", *Teosofi*, 12/1 (2022), pp. 44-45; and Mehdi Berriah, "Ibn Taymiyya as a Hermeneutical Paradigm: Reception and Reactivation of Medieval Islamic Thought in the Jihadist Discourse of Ayman al-Zawahiri", *Ijtihad Journal for Islamic and Arabic Studies* 2/4 (2025), pp. 21-68.

48 See: Kamal Gasimov, "Muslim Saints Contested: Ibn Taymiyya's Critique of al-Qushayrī's *Risāla*", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 34/2 (2023), pp. 153-211; and Mehdi Berriah, "Jinn-s and Exorcism in Ibn Taymiyya" in *Ibn Taymiyya's Thought: Corpus, Reception and Legacy*, Mehdi Berriah and Arjan Post (eds.) (Leuven: KU Leuven University Press, 2026), p. 26, note 33.

saints (*awliyāʾ Allāh al-kāmilīn*)”.<sup>49</sup> This stance does not reflect principled hostility toward Sufi spirituality, but rather expresses a desire to reinscribe it within a rigorous normative framework grounded in orthopraxy and fidelity to scriptural sources.<sup>50</sup>

This conception recurs throughout his work. Ibn Taymiyya explicitly recognises the legitimacy of *taṣawwuf* as a path of purification of the soul (*taẓkiyat al-naḥs*), and speaks approvingly of major early Sufi figures such as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), al-Junayd (d. 298/910), Abū Yaʿqūb al-Nahrjūrī (d. 330/941), ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), and ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1166). The Sufism he defends can be described as sober: ascetic, morally disciplined, grounded in prophetic imitation, and conceived as an integral dimension of religious life inseparable from law and theology.

His criticisms focus instead on specific practices and doctrinal formulations he considered contrary to Islamic norms, such as ecstatic *samāʿ*, which he rejected categorically.<sup>51</sup> Here again, the issue is not the rejection of spirituality as such, but the drawing of clear normative boundaries between inward experience, doctrine, and revealed Law.

The persistent image of Ibn Taymiyya as fundamentally hostile to Sufism is largely the result of posthumous dynamics of reception. The Wahhabi movement, opposed to various institutionalised forms of Sufism and to Sufi orders, drew extensively on Ibn Taymiyya as doctrinal authority. From this emerged an often implicit reductive inference that since Wahhabi authors claimed Ibn Taymiyya and opposed Sufi institutions, he himself must have rejected Sufism.<sup>52</sup> This reading has frequently been reproduced, or at least reinforced, in parts of Western scholarship, where his positions were retroactively interpreted through this lens, transforming targeted normative critiques into a general condemnation of Sufism.<sup>53</sup>

From Henri Laoust and George Makdisi to more recent scholarship, studies have convincingly shown that such a reading is historiographically untenable.<sup>54</sup>

49 Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitāb al-istiḳāma*, Muḥammad Rashād Sālim (ed.) (Riyadh: Dār al-Faḍīla, 2005), p. 89.

50 See: Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitāb al-istiḳāma*, pp. 89-166; and Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Qāsim and Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Qāsim (eds.) (al-Madīna: Majmaʿ al-Malik Fahd, 2004), vol. 11, pp. 7-70.

51 See: Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitāb al-istiḳāma*, pp. 168-422; and Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, vol. 11, p. 60. For more information, see: Jean R. Michot, *Musique et danse selon Ibn Taymiyya: le Livre du samāʿ et de la danse / compilé par le shaykh Muḥammad al-Manbijī; traduit de l’arabe, présentation, notes et lexique par Jean R. Michot* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1991); and Arjan Post and Sarah Van Eyken, “Ibn Taymiyya and His Circle on samāʿ: A Means to Purify Sufism? (with an Arabic edition of al-Wāsiṭī’s (d. 711/1311) *Bulgha*)”, *Islamic Law and Society* 31/1-2 (May 2024), pp. 30-59.

52 Berriah, “Jinn-s and Exorcism in Ibn Taymiyya”, pp. 25-27.

53 Mehdi Berriah and Arjan Post, “Rethinking the Taymiyyan Phenomenon: Contexts, Corpus and Reception”, in Mehdi Berriah and Arjan Post (eds.), *Ibn Taymiyya’s Thought: Corpus, Reception and Legacy* (Leuven: KU Leuven University Press, 2026), pp. 8-9.

54 See: Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques d’Ibn Taymiyya (661/1262–728/1328)* (Cairo: Ifao, 1939), pp. 89-93; Henri Laoust, *Le hanbalisme sous les Mamelouks Bahrides (658-784/1260-1382)*

Ibn Taymiyya appears not as an adversary of Sufism per se, but as a thinker engaged in an internal reform of *taṣawwuf*, preserving its spiritual dimension while contesting expressions he deemed deviant. The central question is therefore not why Ibn Taymiyya was anti-Sufi, but which conception of Sufism he defended, and according to which criteria, and in what articulation with law and theology. This is a complexity that past and present Manichaean readings struggle to capture.

### 3.3. *A Man of Crisis*

To understand the importance of jihad in Ibn Taymiyya's thought, his work must be viewed in the context of the late 13<sup>th</sup>- and early 14<sup>th</sup>-century CE Mamluk Near East, which was marked by almost continuous external military pressure. His lifetime (661/1263–728/1328) coincided with the prolonged conflict between the Mamluk sultanate and the Ilkhanate (658/1260–723/1323), and recurrent confrontations with the Franks and Armenians, sometimes in coordinated military alliances.

In Ibn Taymiyya's reading, the stakes went far beyond territorial defence: the collapse of Mamluk power would have signified the inability of the Muslim world to resist the Mongol threat. He considered other Muslim regions – from Yemen to the Maghrib, including the Ḥijāz and Ifrīqiya – too weak or politically unstable to withstand such danger. The Mamluks were therefore, in his view, the only force capable of protecting Islam and the Muslims.<sup>55</sup>

This near-permanent state of war, which Ibn Taymiyya experienced from childhood in his family's forced exile from Ḥarrān during the Mongol advance,<sup>56</sup> and which was reinforced by the destruction and massacres that marked Syria,

---

(Paris: Geuthner, 1960), p. 35; Henri Laoust, "Le réformisme d'Ibn Taymiyya", *Islamic Studies*, 1/3 (1962), p. 33; George Makdisi, "Ibn Taymiyya: A ṣūfi of the Qādiriyya Order", *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, 1 (1973), pp. 118-129; George Makdisi, *L'Islam Hanbalisant*, (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1983) pp. 52-53; George Makdisi, "The Hanbalite Islam", in *Studies on Islam*, Merlin L. Swartz (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 249-251; Thomas Homerin "Ibn Taymiyya's al-Ṣūfiyyah wa-al-Fuqarā", *Arabica*, 32 (1985), pp. 219-244; Sarrio, Diego R., "Spiritual anti-elitism: Ibn Taymiyya's doctrine of sainthood (*walāya*)", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 22:3 (2011), pp. 275-291; Qais Assef, "Le soufisme et les soufis selon Ibn Taymiyya", *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 60 (2012), pp. 91-121; Yahya Michot, "Ibn Taymiyya's Commentary on the Creed of al-Ḥallāj", in *Sufism and Theology*, Ayman Shihadeh (ed.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 123-136; Arjan Post, "A glimpse of Sufism from the circle of Ibn Taymiyya", *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 5:2 (2016), pp. 156-187; Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Da' ṭā'arūḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), p. 88 note 32; Post and Van Eyken, "Ibn Taymiyya and His Circle on samā: A Means to Purify Sufism?", 41-49; and Berriah, "Jinn-s and Exorcism in Ibn Taymiyya", pp. 25-27.

55 Mehdi Berriah, "The Mamluk Sultanate and the Mamluks Seen by Ibn Taymiyya: Between Praise and Criticism", *Arabian Humanities* 14 (2020), §24-28.

56 Emmanuel Sivan refers to such a state as a "refugee syndrome", Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam*, p. 96.

deeply shaped his intellectual trajectory and is key to understanding why he was among the scholars of his time who wrote most extensively on jihad.<sup>57</sup>

### 3.4. *Jihad, Commitment, and Normativity*

The sense of living under an unprecedented and ongoing infidel threat, combined with the fear of collapse, as expressed explicitly in one of Ibn Taymiyya's fatwas, contributed to a kind of pro-jihad militancy intended to defend Islam and Muslims against Mongol domination. The historical context in which Ibn Taymiyya lived and acted is therefore the key and framework for interpreting his conception of jihad.

Jihad was more than a theoretical concern: Ibn Taymiyya participated in several military expeditions alongside the Mamluk army and was deeply involved in mobilising resistance against the Mongols, particularly between winter 699/1300 and spring 702/1303. His engagement was both practical and ideological: he provided counsel and encouragement to Mamluk authorities, and developed theological arguments that were the intellectual spearhead of anti-Ilkhanid propaganda.

Ibn Taymiyya elaborated a conception of jihad attentive to the political and social realities of his time. Faced with Mongol rulers who had converted to Islam yet continued to govern according to pre-Islamic laws, he formulated the notion of *dār murakkab* ('composite abode'), which combined features of the abodes of Islam and unbelief.<sup>58</sup> His commitment found expression in numerous fatwas, epistles, and treatises, as well as in direct participation in military campaigns.

For Ibn Taymiyya, jihad was one of the most significant forms of worship, and a necessary means for sustaining a social order governed by divine law. Instituted in earlier prophetic communities, armed jihad was understood as a means of preventing greater destruction: rather than divine annihilation, it offered non-Muslims the possibility of enjoying a certain "religious freedom."<sup>59</sup>

His sustained interest in jihad and his militant posture cannot be separated from the trauma of Mongol invasion that marked Ibn Taymiyya's youth and continued throughout much of his life. His conception of jihad is therefore inseparable from the historical conditions of his time. This conception is far more complex than dominant representations suggest. Ibn Taymiyya's discourse

57 Mehdi Berriah, "Ibn Taymiyya's Conception of Jihad: Corpus, General Aspects, and Research Perspectives", *Teosofi* 12/1 (2022), pp. 48-51.

58 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, vol. 28, pp. 240-241. For more information on this fatwa, see Yahya Michot, *Ibn Taymiyya. Mardin*, 2004.

59 Berriah, "Ibn Taymiyya's Conception of Jihad", pp. 56-58.

on jihad is not monolithic; its reduction to a single militant register is one of the effects of the selective readings examined in this article.<sup>60</sup>

He was not alone in this regard. Contemporaries such as Badr al-Dīn b. Jamā'a (d. 733/1333) – author of several works dealing with jihad, including *Mustanad al-ajnād fi ālāt al-jihād* (*The Soldiers' Reference Book on the Instruments of Jihād*) and *Mukhtaṣar fi Faḍl al-Jihād* (*A Concise Treatise on the Merits of Jihād*) – Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), to name but a few, also showed an interest in and engagement with the question of jihad. Many others who were less well known took part in the Mamluk war effort, some dying in battle.<sup>61</sup> Rather than the “radical” or “fanatic” he is often portrayed as, Ibn Taymiyya should be understood as a man of his time, an era in which the Muslim world faced what he perceived as an existential threat. In that context, revitalising jihad was more a response to historical urgency than an expression of extremism. This is not an attempt to rehabilitate Ibn Taymiyya, but a methodological reminder that intellectual figures must first be read within the historical conditions that shaped their concerns and categories.

This internal complexity is not limited to Ibn Taymiyya's treatment of jihad. It reflects a broader intellectual posture, in which his engagement with sources is marked by a high degree of mobility across madhabs and doctrinal traditions, and relative independence from strict school affiliation.<sup>62</sup> Such features further complicate attempts to reduce his thought to a single, coherent ideological position.

### 3.5. Contemporary Decontextualisations and the Manichaean Gaze

Ibn Taymiyya is indisputably among the Muslim scholars most mobilised by jihadist actors.<sup>63</sup> Particular violent movements invoke him through ‘analogical decontextualisation’: extracting a fatwa from its historical setting and applying it,

60 For a detailed analysis of Ibn Taymiyya's thought on jihad, see Berriah, “Ibn Taymiyya's Conception of Jihad”, 43-70; and Berriah, “The Theology of Self-Sacrifice in Jihad”, pp. 174-219.

61 Berriah, “Combattre par la plume, le prêche et l'épée”, pp. 261-270.

62 al-Matroudi, *The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyya*, 2006; Bori “The Collection and Edition of Ibn Taymiyyah's Works”, p. 67; Bori “Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā'atuhu”, pp. 33-36; and Berriah, “Ibn Taymiyya's Methodology Regarding his Sources”, pp. 63-65.

63 Johannes Jansen, “The Creed of Sadat's Assassins. The Contents of the ‘Forgotten Duty’ analyzed”, *Die Welt des Islams*, 25, 1/4, (1985), pp. 1-30; Johannes Jansen, *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat's Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East* (New York: Macmillan, 1986); Johannes Jansen, “Ibn Taymiyyah and the Thirteenth Century: A Formative Period of Modern Muslim Radicalism”, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 5/6 (1987–1988), pp. 391-396; and Jon Hoover, “Ibn Taymiyya between Moderation and Radicalism”, in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage*, Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (eds.), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 177-203.

through superficial analogy, to contemporary situations.<sup>64</sup> This process involves selective citation; i.e., retaining what serves the argument while discarding what complicates it. Yet a comprehensive reading of Ibn Taymiyya's corpus shows that his thought on jihad cannot be reduced to a timeless justification of violence, but is deeply embedded in the crises and urgencies of his age.

This militant reception unfolds within a broader discursive environment. For several decades, jihad has been one of the most symbolically charged terms in discussions of Islam. It has even generated its own derivative, 'jihadism', which is now firmly embedded in Western political and media vocabulary. Acts of violence claimed in the name of jihad, recurrent attacks in both Muslim-majority and minority contexts, and the persistence of Middle Eastern conflicts have entrenched this lexicon at the centre of contemporary representations.

In such a climate, jihad risks becoming a master key of interpretation, and the lens through which Islam as a whole is read. The implicit reasoning is familiar: jihad equals violence, violence defines Islam, therefore Islam is intrinsically violent. Such equations – encountered in certain media narratives and scholarship insufficiently attentive to historical nuance – abstract the concept from the conditions of its elaboration.

Yet jihad is first a Qur'anic term, and subsequently a concept the *'ulamā'* elaborate in specific political, military, and doctrinal contexts. Its definitions and modalities have varied across legal schools, historical circumstances, and lived experiences. It is not a homogeneous conceptual block, but a category whose meanings have evolved over time. Contemporary readings often efface this historicity when isolating the term from its doctrinal depth and contextual anchors.<sup>65</sup>

Here, Ibn Taymiyya reveals a broader hermeneutical problem: when jihad becomes the dominant category, it retrospectively reorganises an entire oeuvre and fixes its meaning. The gap between the historicity of texts and their contemporary uses invites us to interrogate our analytical frameworks, and the ease with which we transform historically situated scholars into univocal figures.

64 Berriah, "Ibn Taymiyya as a Hermeneutical Paradigm", pp. 21-68.

65 See: Mehdi Berriah and Abbès Zouache, "Studying Medieval Jihad as a Multidimensional Phenomenon: Corpus, Holistic Approach, Temporalities and Contextualization", in *The Medieval Jihad: Texts, Theories and Practices*, Mehdi Berriah and Abbès Zouache (eds.) (Cairo: Ifao, 2025), pp. 1-9; Suleiman A. Mourad, Suleiman, "The Concept of Jihad in Medieval Islam: Some Reflections", in *The Medieval Jihad: Texts, Theories and Practices*, Mehdi Berriah and Abbès Zouache (eds.) (Cairo: Ifao, 2025), pp. 19-38; and Abbès Zouache, "Rethinking Warfare Concepts. 'Crusade', 'War of Religion', 'Counter-crusade', 'Jihad': the Words of the "Jihadocentrism", in *The Medieval Jihad: Texts, Theories and Practices*, Mehdi Berriah and Abbès Zouache (eds.) (Cairo: Ifao, 2025), pp. 39-66.

## Conclusion

Throughout the article, a phenomenon persists: in part of Western Islamic studies, authors are not read as situated thinkers with internal tensions, hesitations, doctrinal affiliations, and social uses, but as figures almost in the theatrical sense. They are then cast in a narrative that is not compelled by their texts, but made desirable by contemporary expectations. This is the Manichaean gaze, not because it is openly hostile, but because it repeatedly distributes the good and the bad, the acceptable and the unassimilable, the rational and the obscure, and the spiritual and the political, on a basis that is largely external to the logics of the corpora themselves. It is a gaze that simplifies not by rejecting, but by reorganising.

The three cases discussed here make this mechanism visible. Ibn Rushd is frequently invoked as the keystone of a genealogy of rationality, made to speak on behalf of a modernity yet to come. Meanwhile, whatever resists that reading – his anchoring in *fiqh*, his theological positions, his way of inhabiting a tradition sometimes at odds with the rationalism hoped to be found there – is softened, bracketed, or set aside. Ibn ‘Arabī follows a comparable trajectory: he is readily celebrated on the condition that he be rendered ‘harmless’; his universalisable mysticism is made visible, while the more normative, constraining dimensions of his work, or those tightly connected to an economy of law and authority, are neglected. By contrast, Ibn Taymiyya is frequently locked into a univocal reading. He is stabilised as the symbol of a rigid and conflictual Islam and a precursor of later radicalities, to the point that the diversity of his registers – juridical, theological, spiritual, polemical, and reformist – is flattened onto a single plane.

This does not simply relate to how individual works are evaluated, but how intelligibility is produced: elements that confirm categories already at hand are retained, while complicating factors are neutralised. The result is a reduction of the internal plurality of Islamic traditions to simple oppositions that become ‘self-evident’ through repetition. These oppositions, in turn, reshape what becomes canonisable, translatable, teachable, and citable, i.e., what comes to exist within the scholarly space. Such oppositions are not always consciously imposed, nor are they exhaustive in contemporary scholarship. Rather, certain inherited ideas of intelligibility orient what is salient, transferable, or problematic.

From this point, several extensions follow naturally. First, the robustness of this diagnosis should be tested on other figures and corpora (e.g., al-Ghazālī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and Ibn Khaldūn), to see whether the same mechanism of selectivity – conditional valorisation, the effacement of normativity, and implicit teleologies – reappear, and if so in what forms. It would also be fruitful to shift attention to the concrete devices through which such readings are stabilised, such

as anthologies, translations, introductions, textbooks, pedagogical formats, and even certain genres of scholarly popularisation. Finally, the categories themselves – i.e., rational, spiritual, political, and normative – should be interrogated not as descriptive givens, but as instruments that steer or pre-empt interpretation.

The aim of this research is not to rehabilitate or condemn authors, but to recover the conditions for a reading less captive to prefabricated narratives, which accepts that these traditions can be dense and rough-edged, and rarely align with our expectations. It is precisely for this reason that such authors deserve to be considered in their complete historicity and plurality.

## Bibliography

- Abrahamov, Binyamin, “Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition”, *Muslim World*, 82:3-4 (1992), pp. 256-72.
- Addas, Claude, *Ibn Arabi et le voyage sans retour* (Paris: Seuil, 1996)
- Ahmed, Shahab, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016)
- Arnaldez, Roger, “Ibn ‘Arabī et la gnose soufie”, *Heresis*, 24 (1995), pp. 43-52.
- Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)
- Asad, Talal, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993)
- Assef, Qais, “Le soufisme et les soufis selon Ibn Taymiyya”, *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 60 (2012), pp. 91-121.
- Ateş, Ahmed, “Ibn al-‘Arabī”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition Online (EI-2 English)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), [https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0316](https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0316).
- Averroes, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, Ralph Lerner (trans.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974)
- Bazzano, Elliott, “Ibn Taymiyya, Radical Polymath, Part I: Scholarly Perceptions”, *Religion Compass*, 9 (2015), pp. 100-116.
- Bazzano, Elliott, “Ibn Taymiyya, Radical Polymath, Part 2: Intellectual Contributions”, *Religion Compass*, 9 (2015), pp. 117-139.
- Berkey, Jonathan Porter, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)
- Berriah, Mehdi, “Combattre par la plume, le prêche et l'épée: les représentations du rôle des ulémas dans l'effort du jihad mamelouk (moitié viie/xiiiie—début ixie/xive siècles)”, in *Représentations et symbolique de la guerre et de la paix dans*

- le monde arabe*, Sylvie Denoix and Salam Diab-Durantou (eds.) (Cairo: Ifao, 2024), pp. 251-276.
- Berriah, Mehdi, "From Qāḍī to Philosophical Icon: Ibn Rushd and the Epistemic Reconfiguration of Islamic Studies in Europe", *Journal of Islam in Europe and in the Mediterranean World*, 2:1 (2026)
- Berriah, Mehdi, "Ibn Taymiyya as a Hermeneutical Paradigm: Reception and Re-activation of Medieval Islamic Thought in the Jihadist Discourse of Ayman al-Zawahiri", *Ijtihad Journal for Islamic and Arabic Studies*, 2:4 (2025), pp. 21-68.
- Berriah, Mehdi, "Ibn Taymiyya's Conception of Jihad: Corpus, General Aspects, and Research Perspectives", *Teosofi*, 12:1 (2022), pp. 43-70.
- Berriah, Mehdi, "Ibn Taymiyya's Methodology Regarding his Sources: Reading, Selection and Use. Preliminary Study and Perspectives", *Filologie medievali e moderne. Serie orientale*, 26:5 (2022), pp. 45-81.
- Berriah, Mehdi, "Jinn-s and Exorcism in Ibn Taymiyya", in *Ibn Taymiyya's Thought: Corpus, Reception and Legacy*, Mehdi Berriah and Arjan Post (eds.) (Leuven: KU Leuven University Press, 2026), pp. 17-44.
- Berriah, Mehdi, and Arjan Post, "Rethinking the Taymiyyan Phenomenon: Contexts, Corpus and Reception", in *Ibn Taymiyya's Thought: Corpus, Reception and Legacy*, Mehdi Berriah and Arjan Post (eds.) (Leuven: KU Leuven University Press, 2026), pp. 7-16.
- Berriah, Mehdi, and Abbès Zouache, "Studying Medieval Jihad as a Multidimensional Phenomenon: Corpus, Holistic Approach, Temporalities and Contextualization", in *The Medieval Jihad: Texts, Theories and Practices*, Mehdi Berriah and Abbès Zouache (eds.) (Cairo: Ifao, 2025), pp. 1-17.
- Berriah, Mehdi, "The Mamluk Sultanate and the Mamluks Seen by Ibn Taymiyya: Between Praise and Criticism", *Arabian Humanities*, 14 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.6491>.
- Berriah, Mehdi, "The Theology of Self-Sacrifice in Jihad: A Study of Ibn Taymiyya's *Qā'ida fī l-ingimās fī l-aduww wa-hal yūbāh*", *Arabica*, 73:1-2 (2026), pp. 174-219.
- Bloch, Marc, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien* (Malakoff: Dunod, 2020 [1st ed. 1949])
- Bonner, Michael, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)
- Bori, Caterina, "Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā'atuhu: Authority, Conflict and Consensus in Ibn Taymiyya's Circle", in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (eds.) (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 25-33.

- Bori, Caterina, "The Collection and Edition of Ibn Taymiyah's Works: Concerns of a Disciple", *Mamlūk Studies Review*, 13:2 (2009), 47-66.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, "L'illusion biographique", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 62-63 (1986), 69-72.
- al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī (ed.) (Cairo: Ibdā', 2020)
- Chamberlain, Michael, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)
- Chebel, Malek, *Manifeste pour un islam des Lumières: 27 propositions pour réformer l'islam* (Paris: Fayard, 2011)
- Chittick, William C., "Ibn 'Arabī", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/>.
- Crone, Patricia, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005)
- De Libera, Alain, "Averroës: The bearded philosopher", *Administration & Éducation*, Selected Articles, 3 (2016), I-VI.
- El-Tobgui, Carl Sharif, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)
- Ephrat, Daphna, *Learned Society in a Period of Transition: The Sunni Ulama of Eleventh-Century Baghdad* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000)
- Fakhry, Majid, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)
- Forte, Francesca, "Averroës et la censure de l'histoire", *Doctor Virtualis*, 13 (2016), pp. 135-152.
- Gasimov, Kamal, "Muslim Saints Contested: Ibn Taymiyya's Critique of al-Qushayrī's Risāla", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 34:2 (2023), pp. 153-211.
- Goody, Jack, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Goody, Jack, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- Hallaq, Wael B., *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018)
- Hallaq, Wael B., *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)
- Homerin, Thomas E., "Ibn Taymiyya's al-Ṣūfiyyah wa-al-Fuqarā'", *Arabica*, 32 (1985), 219-244.
- Hoover, Jon, *Ibn Taymiyya* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2019)
- Hoover, Jon, "Ibn Taymiyya between Moderation and Radicalism", in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage*, Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (eds.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 177-203.

- Hurd, Elizabeth Shakman, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008)
- Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (ed.) (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1999), 9 vols.
- Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1987), 11 vols.
- Ibn Rushd, *Bidāyat al-mujtahid wa nihāyat al-muqtaṣid*, Mājid al-Ḥamawī (ed.) (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2012), 4 vols.
- Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitāb al-istiḳāma*, Muḥammad Rashād Sālim (ed.) (Riyadh: Dār al-Faḍīla, 2005)
- Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Qāsīm and Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Qāsīm (eds.) (Medina: Majma‘ al-Malik Fahd, 2004), 37 vols.
- Jansen, Johannes, “Ibn Taymiyyah and the Thirteenth Century: A Formative Period of Modern Muslim Radicalism”, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 5:6 (1987–1988), pp. 391-396.
- Jansen, Johannes, “The Creed of Sadat’s Assassins. The Contents of the ‘Forgotten Duty’ Analyzed”, *Die Welt des Islams*, 25:1/4 (1985), pp. 1-30.
- Jansen, Johannes, *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat’s Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East* (New York: Macmillan, 1986)
- Kepel, Gilles, *Fitna. Guerre au cœur de l’islam* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004)
- Kügelgen, Anke von, “A Call for Rationalism: ‘Arab Averroists’ in the Twentieth Century”, *Alif*, 16 (1996), pp. 97-132.
- Kügelgen, Anke von, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne. Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus im Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1994)
- Kuhn, Thomas S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962)
- Kuru, Ahmet T., *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)
- Laoust, Henri, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques d’Ibn Taymiyya (661/1262–728/1328)* (Cairo: Ifao, 1939)
- Laoust, Henri, “La biographie d’Ibn Taymiyya d’après Ibn Kathīr”, *Bulletin d’Études Orientales*, 9 (1942–1943), pp. 115-162.
- Laoust, Henri, *Le hanbalisme sous les Mamelouks Bahrides (658-784/1260-1382)* (Paris: Geuthner, 1960)
- Laoust, Henri, “Le réformisme d’Ibn Taymiyya”, *Islamic Studies*, 1:3 (1962), pp. 27-47.
- Makdisi, George, “Ibn Taymiyya: A ṣūfi of the Qādiriyya Order”, *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, 1 (1973), pp. 118-129.

- Makdisi, George, *L'Islam Hanbalisant* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1983)
- Makdisi, George, "The Hanbalite Islam", in *Studies on Islam*, Merlin L. Swartz (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 216-274.
- Makdisi, George, *The Rise of the Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981)
- al-Matroudi, Abdul Hakim, *The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyya. Conflict or Conciliation* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006)
- Martinez-Gros, Gabriel, and Lucette Valensi, *L'Islam, l'islamisme et l'Occident. Genèse d'un affrontement* (Paris: Seuil, 2013)
- Messaoudi, Alain, *Les arabisants et la France coloniale. 1780–1930* (Paris: ENS Éditions, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.enseditions.3705>.
- Michot, Jean R., *Musique et danse selon Ibn Taymiyya: le Livre du samâ' et de la danse / compilé par le shaykh Muḥammad al-Manbijī; traduit de l'arabe, présentation, notes et lexique par Jean R. Michot* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1991)
- Michot, Yahya, *Ibn Taymiyya Against Extremisms* (Beirut/Paris: Albouraq, 2012)
- Michot, Yahya, *Ibn Taymiyya: Lettre à un roi croisé* (Lyon: Academia/Tawhid, 1995)
- Michot, Yahya, *Ibn Taymiyya: Mardin. Hégire, fuite du péché et "demeure de l'islam"* (Beirut: Albouraq, 2004)
- Michot, Yahya, *Ibn Taymiyya: Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Michot, Yahya, "Ibn Taymiyya's Commentary on the Creed of al-Ḥallāj", in *Sufism and Theology*, Ayman Shihadeh (ed.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 123-136.
- Michot, Yahya, "Ibn Taymiyya's 'New Mardin Fatwa': Is Genetically Modified Islam (GMI) Carcinogenic?", *The Muslim World*, 101:2 (2011), pp. 130-181.
- Morel, Teymour, "Deux textes anti-Mongols d'Ibn Taymiyya", *The Muslim World*, 105:2 (2015), pp. 368-397.
- Mourad, Suleiman A., "The Concept of Jihad in Medieval Islam: Some Reflections", in *The Medieval Jihad: Texts, Theories and Practices*, Mehdi Berriah and Abbès Zouache (eds.) (Cairo: Ifao, 2025), pp. 19-38.
- Najjar, Fauzi M., "Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and the Egyptian Enlightenment Movement", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 31:2 (2004), pp. 195-213.
- Neale, Harry S., *Jihad in Premodern Sufi Writings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)
- Neale, Harry S., *Sufi Warrior Saints* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022)
- Petitpont, Gabriel, "Ibn Taymiyya, figure centrale du fondamentalisme sunnite: origine et influence d'une pensée radicale", *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, 3:115 (2014), pp. 103-115.

- Post, Arjan, “A glimpse of Sufism from the circle of Ibn Taymiyya”, *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 5:2 (2016), pp. 156-187.
- Post, Arjan and Van Eyken, Sarah, “Ibn Taymiyya and His Circle on samā‘: A Means to Purify Sufism? (with an Arabic edition of al-Wāsiṭī’s (d. 711/1311) *Bulgha*)”, *Islamic Law and Society*, 31:1-2 (2024), pp. 30-59.
- Raff, Thomas, *Remarks on an Anti-Mongol Fatwā by Ibn Taymīya* (Leiden: Brill, 1973)
- Renan, Ernest, *Averroès et l’averroïsme. Essai historique* (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1852)
- Sarrio, Diego R., “Spiritual anti-elitism: Ibn Taymiyya’s doctrine of sainthood (*walāya*)”, *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 22:3 (2011), pp. 275-291.
- Schick, Stefan, “After the Enlightenment: The Rediscovery of Averroes by Tiedemann and Herder”, *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 33:1 (2023), pp. 113-139.
- Scottolin, Giuseppe, “Soufisme et Loi dans l’Islam: un texte de Ibn ‘Arabī sur les sujets protégés (ahl al-dhimma)”, in *L’Orient chrétien dans l’empire musulman. Hommage au professeur Gérard Troupeau suite au colloque organisé les 15 et 16 octobre 2004 à l’Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3 par le CRITIC, Centre de recherches sur les idées et les transferts interculturels*, Geneviève Gobillot and Marie-Thérèse Urvoy (eds.) (Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2005), pp. 199-235.
- Sivan, Emmanuel, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (London/New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990)
- Urvoy, Dominique, *Averroès: les ambitions d’un intellectuel musulman* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998)
- Zouache, Abbès, “Rethinking Warfare Concepts. ‘Crusade’, ‘War of Religion’, ‘Counter-crusade’, ‘Jihad’: the Words of the ‘Jihadocentrism’”, in *The Medieval Jihad: Texts, Theories and Practices*, Mehdi Berriah and Abbès Zouache (eds.) (Cairo: Ifao, 2025), pp. 39-66.

# Manihejski pogled u zapadnim islamskim studijama: epistemički filteri, selektivna recepcija i rekonfiguracija klasične islamske misli

## Sažetak

U savremenim zapadnim raspravama o islamu, određeni klasični muslimanski učenjaci tretiraju se kao simboli racionalnosti, tolerancije, rigidnosti ili militantnosti. Ovaj članak ispituje historiografske mehanizme koji leže u osnovi takvih klasifikacija. U njemu se tvrdi kako je recepcija srednjovekovnih muslimanskih učenjaka često bila oblikovana manihejskim pogledom koji prešutno ocjenjuje islamsku naučnu tradiciju prema modernim normativnim očekivanjima. Moderne kategorije poput „racionalnog“, „mističnog“, „normativnog“ i „fundamentalističkog“ selektivno stavljaju u prvi plan neke dimenzije korpusa, dok druge zamagljuje ili problematizuju. Trajektorije Ibn Rušda, Ibn Arebija i Ibn Tejmije ilustruju ovu dinamiku. Ibn Rušd se često odvaja od svojih pravnih angažmana i institucionalne uloge, a Ibn Arebi od svojih stavova o džihadu, hidžri i sprovođenju šerijata, dok se Ibn Tejmiji pristupa prvenstveno kroz prizmu modernog radikalizma. Obnavljanje pluralnosti klasične islamske misli zahtijeva pomnije ispitivanje dimenzija koje su marginalizovane savremenim interpretativnim kategorijama.

**Ključne riječi:** manihejski pogled, orijentalizam, sekularizam, epistemički filteri/kategorije, paradigme, recepcija, Ibn Rušd, Ibn Arebi, Ibn Tejmije, džihad, šerijat