

Abdul Azim Islahi
Economic Concepts of Ibn Taimiyah
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Reviewed by:

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This book falls into 286 medium size pages. It is divided into nine chapters which are subdivided into sections containing many subtitles and each chapter has its own references which reached 127 works in chapter I. A bibliography, a glossary of Arabic terms and an index are added at the end of the book.

Typically, a book review summarizes and comments on the book as a whole unit. However, in the case under consideration where the author is dealing in each chapter with a different economic concept of Ibn Taimiyah spreading across the discipline of economic body of knowledge, it is prudent to review the book chapter by chapter and then draw some general comments about the book as a whole at the end of the review.

Chapter I.

In this chapter the author dealt first with the political background during the age in which Ibn Taimiyah lived. The political situation, at all times, does affect all aspects of life especially the cultural life. Thinkers, philosophers and innovators are always affected by and at the same time affect the political situation in which they live. Ibn Taimiyah was born, generally speaking, in one of the most turbulent and instable political eras in the history of Islamic state with the exception of Baibars era (1309-1341) which witnessed relative stability compared to the other Mamluk regimes. Secondly, the author described the social life which was plagued by class distinction in which the topmost class was the Mumluks who were the rulers, then the government employees who were the link between the rulers and their subjects. The third class was the traders and merchants and the lowest class was the labourers, craftsmen, small shopkeepers, fallaheen and poor people. However, there were no guilds such as those prevalent in the Western World at that time.

This chapter ended by a presentation of the economic life at that time which is a more important factor in as far as innovation, creativity and all other cultural aspects are concerned. When the economic conditions at a certain place are favourable, cultural activities increase in both quantity and quality and vice versa. The Mamluks took great interest in the development of agriculture being the most important economic sector at that time. Industry also flourished during that era. Domestic and international trade was expanding. However, taxation was rather heavy and most of the public expenditures were not justifiable, most of the time.

Generally speaking, the author did very well introducing his book by presenting those very important aspects of life that affect the mentality and thoughts of the thinker he was studying. However, this material stayed rather isolated from the main subject matter of the book because with the exception of a few comments, the author did not show how these conditions affected the thoughts of Ibn Taimiyah in a specific way as it is expected from such an introduction.

Chapter II.

In this chapter, the author described Ibn Taimiyah's personality, including his family, his education and his personal character. He came from a family of scholars and educators. That is why he started studying at an early stage all the disciplines of jurisprudences, tradition of the Prophet (peace be upon him), commentaries of the Qur'an, mathematics and philosophy, in all of which he was far ahead of his contemporaries. He followed closely the Hanbali theology and jurisconsult. He also educated himself about all other schools of jurisprudence in addition to Islamic history and Greek language.

His character was that of generosity and so he was well liked by all classes of people. However, his firm and uncompromising support to right stands made him a number of enemies and his involvement in politics took him to prison many times. He struggled a lot for the sake of the truth and made Jihad. That gave him fame and he became a notable celebrity. In short, he was a great reformer in the sense of purifying the original Islamic teachings from un-Islamic practices (*bidat*), and advocated strongly the return to the fundamental priorities of Islam, serving the public by promoting economic justice and preventing exploitation and selfishness.

The author also presented Ibn Taimiyah's attack on philosophy and logic when they contradict with Islam and, like Kant, he didn't believe that reason could lead to the ultimate truth. The author went on talking about the style of Ibn Taimiyah in teaching, writing and his influence upon his disciples and his impact through the ages citing many examples of such impact even in today's legal code of some Muslim countries. This chapter is concluded by a brief idea about Ibn Taimiyah's economic views which is the main thrust of this book. He discussed economic problems in two books: *Al-Hisba fil-Islam* and *Al-Siyasah Al-shariyah fi Islah al-Rai wa'l Raiyah*. By this brief introduction to Ibn Taimiyah's economic views, the author paved the way to the following chapter (chapter III) where he started discussing this issue in more details.

Chapter III.

In this chapter, the author revealed the microeconomic ideas of Ibn Taimiyah. His ideas on just price, market mechanism and price regulation were carefully presented.

After explaining the meaning of the just price from the philosophical and ethical point of view in Ancient Rome and in the Hebrew, Hindu and Greek cultures, the author dealt at length with this concept during the Middle Ages before he introduced its definition according to Ibn Taimiyah and contrasted it with those of the scholastic philosophers in general and St. Aquinas in particular. The just price, according to him, is the price of the equivalent where one is not already in place, taking into consideration the subjective value of the object to the buyer as well as its subjective value to the seller. Ibn Taimiyah also introduced the concept of just wages or wages of the equivalent as well as the profit of the equivalent (the just profit). Then the author showed the relevance of those ideas to the society and advised that governments should adopt them.

As for the market mechanism, the author showed that Ibn Taimiyah had a clear grasp of how, in a free market, prices are determined by the forces of demand and supply. He talked about all the determinants of demand known in modern economic literature with the exception of income. The supply, according to him, is made up of both local production and imports. He even talked about the effects of shifts in both supply and demand upon prices, without actually calling them as such. He also prescribed a detailed policy of price control by the state which was one of the most controversial economic issues among Muslim scholars and schools of thought. After studying all the points of views of the four principal schools of Islamic law and other experts in jurisprudence, he formulated his own pricing policy. He distinguished two types of price-fixing: unjust and invalid; and just and valid. Prohibited and unjust price-fixing is that which has been done when a price rise is caused by the free play of competitive market forces: shortage of supply or an increase in demand. The just and valid price fixing is that which has been done at times of emergency such as war and famine. He also recommended it in cases when the rise in price is due to market imperfection. The author cited Paul A. Samuelson who approved price fixing during emergency times but it should not be allowed to stay for long.

Chapter IV.

In this relatively very short chapter, the author discussed the opinion of Ibn Taimiyah on property right. As he did in all the other chapters, the author began by a historical background of this concept which occupied the human mind a long time ago to date. He brought home the property right concept in the Roman law, the Greek philosophy and Christianity before he presented the Islamic point of view which asserts that all property belongs to Allah Who distributes it among people by His own will. In Islam, the individual, the society and the state can claim property rights and each should use it on behalf of Allah. However, the specific opinion of Ibn Taimiyah on this issue is that property rights is a power of varying kinds and degrees granted by the Islamic *Shariah* to make use of an object. He addressed all types of property right being for individuals, the society and state. He preferred wealth to poverty because there are

many religious duties that can't be performed without financial means. Furthermore, he imposed many restrictions and obligations upon the use of property so as it can't be used as a tool of exploitation.

Chapter V.

The author devoted this chapter to interest and money in which Islam has distinct and different views as compared to any other system. Before he presented the Islamic view point in general and Ibn Taimiyah's in particular on interest, which was and still is of the most controversial issues in history, he started with a good discussion of interest in different ancient systems including Judaism, Christianity, Greek philosophy and Roman law, as well as in the Middle Ages. The careful discussion of interest in Islam was well presented together with what distinguished Ibn Taimiyah's from other Muslim scholars in this respect. He also had his own point of view about money which he thought it shouldn't be traded on as if it is a commodity. The author explained how Ibn Taimiyah was ahead of his time regarding money and monetary policies. He mentioned something similar to Gresham's law a couple of centuries before Gresham himself. In fact, the author had shown how consistent Ibn Taimiyah's economic concepts are with modern economic concepts which were developed at later times some centuries after his death.

Chapter VI.

In this chapter, the author presented and discussed Ibn Taimiyah's views of partnership and other forms of economic organization. He first presented the Islamic point of view about economic activities and how it should be organized, after showing the economic life at the time of revelation which was characterized by trade as the most important economic activity. As he did in other chapters, he compared the Islamic outlook for trade in particular and the economy in general, by that of the Middle Ages. The author then, brought home all types of Islamic partnerships and how shares should be distributed between the owners of capital and land on one hand, and the owners of labour and experience, on the other. Although he formulated his own ideas about all these issues and others, he never deviated from the concept of "Halal" and "Haram" as determined strictly by the Quran and Sunna.

Chapter VII.

After delineating Ibn Taimiyah's economic concepts mostly related to the individuals (the private sector), in the previous four chapters, in this chapter he concentrated upon those concepts related mostly to the role of the state in economic life (the public sector). The author handled this question from the beginning when he discussed the need for a state, its goals, its power to achieve its goals, market regulations, economic planning, institution of "Hisbah", and the Islamic welfare state. In all of this, Ibn Taimiyah never lost sight of the integration of the 'economic and moral health of the society' as advocated by Islam.

Chapter VIII.

To reveal Ibn Taimiyah's views of public finance, the author started with a brief presentation of how it was in the early Islamic state. Sources of public revenue such as

Zakah, Ghanimah, Fai, Kharaj, and Gizyah and how it was expanded and administered from the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) till the time of Ibn Taimiyah. The most important new notion advocated by Ibn Taimiyah in public finance is that there should be financial obligations on the individuals other than Zakah. In this respect he is superseded only by Ibn Hazm. However, he was against heavy taxation especially if it would be spent on the rulers luxuries rather than for the benefit of the society as a whole and especially for the poor.

Chapter IX.

In this chapter the author logically concluded his book by an evaluation of Ibn Taimiyah's economic concepts. He started this by stating the obvious fact that the economic concepts and theories of Ibn Taimiyah and other Muslim thinkers are rooted in Islamic jurisprudence which touches every aspect of life including economics. When Islam spread over most of the then civilized world by the end of its first century, other civilizations started to have their impact upon the social life, business contracts, trade, commerce, etc. consequently, a number of schools of thoughts in jurisprudence emerged to address the new problems facing the Muslims.

The author then went on comparing the views and concepts of Ibn Taimiyah with other Muslim scholars in the most important economic concepts he handled. He also showed his influence on those scholars who came after him especially Ibn Khaldun.

This chapter was concluded showing the significance of Ibn Taimiyah's economic views. Because he was neither a pure theorist nor a pure economic historian, but rather a general practitioner, his economic concepts and views were quite relevant and valuable to the Muslim society including rulers and subjects. However, among his vast and varied scholastic works and contributions, his economic thinking is the least studied stated by the author.

The Islamic world today is on the threshold of a resurgence, economic issues have a special significance in this connection. That is why studying Ibn Taimiyah's economic concepts will have a great bearing to that end.

Comments

The author had really chosen a very important Muslim scholar to study and reveal to the readers his economic concepts, at the time Islamic Economics is getting very important both as a subject to study and as a system to apply. It is even looked at, by some, as an alternative to the ailing prevailing economic systems in the world. Although the author was quite successful in presenting the most important economic concepts of Ibn Taimiyah, he let them to be as part of the book rather than the whole book as the title implies. That is mainly due to his insistence to present a historical background on each and every economic concept he presented starting from the early Greek and Roman civilizations, passing through the Judaism and early Christianity eras, then the Middle Ages and the contemporary period to Ibn Taimiyah. Although the information the author presented in those historical backgrounds are quite useful, enlightening and could shed some light on Ibn Taimiyah's thinking, they made the

book as if it is a comparison between his economic concepts and the others who preceded him. That is why this book should have devoted a whole chapter in which he threw all the historical backgrounds and then devote the rest of the book to the economic concepts of Ibn Taimiyah referring only to those historical ideas relating directly to his economic concepts. This way he may have been able to get more details about those concepts and make the title of the book more consistent with its contents. Nevertheless, this book is an excellent contribution to the field of Islamic Economics for both research and teaching. For teaching purposes it could be a good reference book for subjects such as History of Islamic Economics, Islamic Public Finance and Islamic microeconomics; to name only a few.

As for the language, style and mode of expression the author did a very good job which made his book easy to read and follow. Writing in English will expose it to both Muslims and non-Muslims who know English which is a great advantage. Translating it into Arabic will be quite beneficial to all Arabic speaking people who are interested in Islamic Economics.

Reference

Seif el Din I. Tag el Din (1997), Conventional Growth Policy and The Forgotten Potential Resource: A Case for the Ethical Economic Resource, *Journal of King Abdulaziz University: Islamic Economics*, Jeddah, Vol. 9, pp. 3-28.