

Inquisition in Early Islam : The Competition for Political and Religious Authority in the Abbasid Empire, by John P. Turner (Library of Middle East History, 35) (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), xvi + 228 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78076-164-0, £56.00 (hb)

The dramatic events surrounding the *miḥna* (inquisition) have been the subject of immense academic interest over recent years. It is frequently acknowledged that their historical unfolding represents a key milestone in the history of early Islamic theological thought; and many scholars link the political fortunes of the early ‘Abbāsīd empire to the episode. Imposed by the caliph al-Maʾmūn (ruled 198-218/813-833), during the *miḥna* the class of learned scholars was compelled to submit to the doctrine that the Qurʾān was created; it became a salient point of contention in theological discourses with proto-Sunnī orthodoxy defining itself through opposition to the policy. Despite the death of al-Maʾmūn, shortly after its imposition, the policy was continued during the successive caliphates of al-Muʿtaṣim (ruled 218-227/833-842) and al-Wāthiq (ruled 227-232/842-847). Al-Mutawakkil revoked it in 232/847. Challenging some of the commonly held perceptions about the *miḥna*, the book under review sets out to examine its origins and the reasons why it was imposed, gauging its importance within the context of broader historical periods. The book also examines the role of caliphs and the ‘*ulamāʾ*’ as contributors to the synthesis and elaboration of questions of faith and dogma. Critically, the key argument which defines John Turner’s study of the *miḥna* is the contention that although within contemporary scholarship there exists a general acceptance that the *miḥna* stands out as an anomaly and watershed event, culminating in the failure of the caliphs to impose their will, there is ample evidence to suggest that this is not the case. Turner argues that the *miḥna* stood out not because it proved to be a decisive turning point in the struggle for religious authority or indeed for its theological distinction as a point of dispute, but due to its being manipulated as an historical narrative by adherents of the Ḥanbalite school. He argues that this was part of their strategy to assert their orthodox credentials and thereby gain legitimacy as a school. They reshaped its narratives and

topoi, situating Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) as a staunch defender of orthodoxy and champion of the episode.

Reviewing the events of the *miḥna* within a broader vector of interlinked events, the book's arguments are structured around six chapters. The first of these offers an evaluation of the issues which lay at the core of the *miḥna* and introduces its main protagonists; this includes a synopsis of recent studies on the subject (pp. 14-21). The conclusions reached in many of these studies with regards to the *miḥna* representing a defining moment in early Islamic history are qualified. In the second chapter the focus switches to the 'polemics of naming' and the 'rhetoric of heresy' with the objective of showing that historical paradigms existed for the type of intervention witnessed during the *miḥna* (pp. 29-35); it is reasoned that such instances of intervention were commensurate with the socio-political role of the caliphs. In Chapter Three attention turns to the design of the doxographical works of al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935), al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), and al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) and the case is made that the authors of these texts were not furnishing objectively neutral accounts of heresy and heretical movements, but rather seeking to vaunt their own credentials as steadfast representatives of normative orthodoxy (p. 43). The suggestion is that such forms of writing were strategically employing the 'polemics of naming' and the 'rhetoric of heresy' to gain legitimacy and favour. Continuing this focus on the identification of heresy, the chapter offers an examination of the correspondence ascribed to al-Ma'mūn, which it is argued, mirrors the dynamic of the 'rhetoric of heresy' found in the doxographical literature. The underlying assumption is that such materials were aimed at defining the boundaries of orthodoxy (p. 59); significantly, it is posited that apropos the *miḥna*, there is nothing novel in the intervention of al-Ma'mūn in his capacity as Commander of the Faithful, and that both the correspondence attributed to him and the discussions found in the doxographical materials share common goals: the quest to define and appropriate the territory of orthodoxy.

In Chapters Four and Five an examination is provided of the trials of al-Ḥārith ibn Sa'īd (d. 79/698 or 80/699) and Ghaylān al-Dimashqī, who were prosecuted during the rule of the Umayyad caliphs and those of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and Aḥmad ibn Naṣr al-Khuzā'ī (d. 231/846), who were central figures during the period of the *miḥna*. Turner does argue that the accounts of these trials were insidiously

doctored and reworked with the final narratives being manipulated to present an idealised version of events which promoted preconceived ideological perspectives and standpoints (pp. 65-66). With this in mind, it is concluded that the trials share common features in that they provide precedents for the actions of the caliphs, confirming their role as prosecutors of heresy and defenders of faith. In Turner's view this also signals that the acts of intervention by the caliphs were not extraordinary. On this basis it is explained that the events of the *miḥna* should not be viewed as being anomalous in terms of their illustrating the caliph's failure to assert his right to define dogma, nor do they presage a departure in the practices of the ruling elite. Turner reasons that such a state of affairs suggests that notions of orthodoxy were still in a state of flux during these formative periods (p. 116). The arguments and discussions set fourth in the preceding two chapters serve as a prelude to the subjects explored in the final chapter: namely, the *miḥna* and its context, which is predominantly concerned with probing how traditionalist orthodoxy came to be defined through the figure of Ibn Ḥanbal and the role that later Ḥanbalites played in portraying the accounts of the *miḥna*. In the chapter the struggle for authority and legitimacy between the Ḥanbalites and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) is used to highlight the way in which the events of the *miḥna* were recast to weave a narrative which presented its unfolding in a whole new light (p. 119). The crux of Turner's explanation is that the *miḥna* owes its saliency not to the significance of the events which led to its imposition nor indeed the specifics of the dispute, but rather to the reality that its narrative was used with devastating skill by later Ḥanbalite chroniclers and luminaries to create an inflated role for Ibn Ḥanbal as a hero of the episode in order to buttress the emerging school's claim to legitimacy and recognition (pp. 142-145). *Ex hypothesi*, this was pursued in the face of palpable tensions between the Ḥanbalites and al-Ṭabarī's Jarīrī school of *fiqh*. By exaggerating accounts of the episode and the role of Ibn Ḥanbal, the genuine historical import of the *miḥna* was distorted, adversely impinging upon the way secondary scholarship has interpreted the events and even understood the role of caliphs during these formative periods.

The elaborate linkage between key elements of the discussions presented by Turner remains impressive. Still, there are aspects to his arguments and premises with which one could take issue. For example, it is possible to question whether it is appropriate to posit a

correlation between the trials prosecuted by ʿAbd al-Malik (d. 86/705) and Hishām ibn ʿAbd Malik (d. 125/743) and those imposed during the *miḥna*. This equivalence appears to underestimate the scale of the issues at stake during the *miḥna* and their overwhelming impact upon theological discourses in later years; it was this reality that perpetuated its significance as a historical event, generating a profusion of discussions within theological thought. It is certainly apposite for Turner to point out that the doctrine of a created Qurʾān was not exclusive to Muʿtazilite theologians, but it was viewed with suspicion by those who deemed themselves advocates of a traditionalist brand of theology. Wilferd Madelung made the telling point that in the reactionary environment of dialectical debate, scholars were often obliged into adopting counter positions. This is true of the developed notion of the eternity of the Qurʾān, which was a corollary of the desire to deny that it was created.¹ For example, during the *miḥna*, Ibn Kullāb (d. 258/854), who was renowned as the progenitor of Sunnī dialectical discourses, was immensely influential in promulgating the thesis of an eternal Qurʾān, although, he is not mentioned in Turner’s discussion, while equally elaborate theories in this regard were refined by al-Qalānisi (flor. 3rd/9th centuries).² Ibn Kullāb professed that God’s speech does not consist of letters or sounds, nor can it be fragmented, divided, segmented, or parted. It exists as an entity within him, although he does qualify this by stating that the physical trace and impression (script) of the Qurʾān are constituted both in its various letters and consonants and in its very recitation.³ The reverberation of such ideas was felt in theological literature for centuries, confirming the impact the *miḥna* had on the course of such discussions; its theological cachet was substantial. It

¹ Wilferd Madelung, “The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Qurʾān,” in Félix M. Pareja Casañas (ed.), *Orientalia Hispanica: sive studia FM, Pareja octogenaria dicata* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 524-525.

² Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991-1995), IV, 200-202; and his article “Ibn Kullāb und die *Miḥna*,” *Oriens* 18-19 (1967), 92-142. Daniel Gimaret, “Cet autre théologien Sunnite: Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Qalānisi,” *Journal Asiatique* 277 (1989), 227-261.

³ Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyin wa-ikhtilāf al-muḥallim* (ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd; Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1987), II, 257 f.

was also more than just a coincidence that the construct of a created Qurʾān was aligned with the Muʿtazilite concept of *tawḥīd*, the theological implications of which were colossal. Notably, this is flagged as a concern in the correspondence of al-Maʾmūn who rails against those who draw an equivalence between God and his revealed scripture.

On the subject of the doxographies selected by Turner to illustrate the ‘definition of norms’ proposition, his choice of texts is open to question. One wonders whether the *Maqālāt* of al-Ashʿarī really serves as a suitable analogue for his schema or indeed whether the genre to which it belongs lends itself to his thesis (p. 42). For example, the issue of the approach adopted in al-Ashʿarī’s *Maqālāt* is the subject of much debate.⁴ In the exordium to the text al-Ashʿarī insists that he wanted to provide an objective account of sects and movements, expressly avoiding their denigration purely on the basis of their beliefs. He states that such approaches were reprehensibly evident in the works of his peers, and he distances himself from the raptorial disparagement of adversaries. Turner appears to allude to this but goes on to question whether it is applied by al-Ashʿarī; one notes that there are only select junctures in the text where al-Ashʿarī declares his allegiances (p. 44). A rich repertoire of works was produced within the *maqālāt* and *ṭabaqāt* genres of writing, including texts written by figures such as al-Kaʿbī (d. 319/931), al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025), al-Malaṭī (d. 379/987), Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015), al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), Abū l-Muẓaffar al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 471/1078), al-Nawbakhtī (d. c. 300/912), al-Sheikh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), and numerous other luminaries, yet each work has its discrete goals, designs and is intended for different audiences. It was in the area of the more focused theological *summae* that scholars could engage their opponents and defend their doctrinal positions. Additionally, Turner’s observations about the underlying strategy of al-Shahrastānī’s *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal* are open to question: not only

⁴ Josef van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere: Beobachtungen an islamischen häresiographischen Texten* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), I, 454 ff.; and Richard Frank, “Elements in the Development of the Teaching of al-Ashʿarī,” *Le Muséon: Revue d’Études Orientales* 104 (1991), 141-190. Frank’s discussions do explain the significance of the work.

are the author's affiliations the subject of contention, but in certain respects al-Shahraṣṭānī is derivatively revisiting existing discussions; besides, there is nothing calculating about al-Shahraṣṭānī devoting 'approximately half of the discussion of the orthodox' to the Ash'arites given the prominence of their contribution to rational and dialectical discourses.⁵

Ultimately, Turner does lay great store by the view that the struggle for authority and legitimacy between the Ḥanbalites and al-Ṭabarī provided the backdrop for the realignment of the *miḥna* narratives in order to magnify the role of Ibn Ḥanbal as the emblematic defender of orthodoxy. In this specific context he mentions that al-Ṭabarī was 'vying for adherents, permanency, and orthodox status' with the Ḥanbalites (pp. 145-147). However, such a view runs the serious risk of taking the actual disputes between al-Ṭabarī and his opponents among the Ḥanbalites out of their historical setting. Tensions between al-Ṭabarī and his critics were the result of his unswerving intellectual independence and the integrity of his scholarship which he expressed in the context of legal, exegetical, and, especially, theological discussions. This is evidenced by his disputes with the eponym of the Zāhirī school, Dāwūd Ibn Khalaf (d. 270/884), and his son Abū Bakr: against the former he composed the *al-Radd 'alā dhī'l-asfār*. And in his hostile encounters with Ibn Abī Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 316/929), who was probably behind the accusations of *rafḍ* and *ilhād* levelled against al-Ṭabarī; the antagonism between the two, which was protracted, provides a critical context for understanding the disputes of the period.⁶ With

⁵ See the discussions in Abū l-Faḥḥ Tāj al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahraṣṭānī, *Struggling with the Philosopher: A Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics* -A new Arabic edition and English translation of al-Shahraṣṭānī's *Kitāb al-Muṣāra'a* (edited and translated by Wilferd Madelung and Toby Mayer; New York & London: I. B. Tauris, 2001). See the discussion in the introduction.

⁶ Mustafa Shah, "Al-Ṭabarī and the Dynamics of *tafsīr*: Theological Dimensions of a Legacy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15/2 (2013), p. 84 and p. 115. On Ibn Abī Dāwūd, see 'Abd Allāh Ibn 'Adī al-Jurjānī, *al-Kāmil fī ḍu'afā' al-rijāl* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1997), IV, 1577-1578), Cf. with Abū l-Faraj Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntazam fī tā'rikh al-umam wa-l-mulūk* (ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā' and Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā'; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1992), XIII, 215-217.

regards to the emergence of the Ḥanbalī *madbhab*, Abū Bakr al-Khallāl (d. 311/923) was undeniably instrumental in codifying and promoting Ibn Ḥanbal's legal legacy, but ultimately it was the quality of the constellation of legal materials as preserved in the various collections known as the *masāʾil* which was prerequisite to the success of this enterprise. Finally, it is an overstatement to describe al-Ashʿarī as being engaged in “a struggle against the Ḥanābila for inclusion” and that he was a claimant to Ibn Ḥanbal's legacy (p. 142).⁷ Al-Ashʿarī was not a legal or indeed a *ḥadīth* specialist; and simply used his *al-Ībāna ʿan uṣūl al-diyāna* to express his theological allegiance to Ibn Ḥanbal, although such pronouncements appear to have been nominal as the text itself, together with his oeuvre, shows that his inclinations in theology remained indomitably rationalist and were vehemently disavowed by those of a traditionalist bent.

There is certainly much to be admired from Turner's analysis of the *miḥna* and the events surrounding it, especially the originality of his arguments and the clarity with which they are presented. The sheer range of materials and themes covered in the book is highly impressive. His appraisal of the historical narratives connected with the episode is particularly insightful, and shows not only key nuances in their development, but also the integral nature of the relationship between the religious and social roles of the caliphs. With reference to the outcome of the *miḥna*, Turner also convincingly demonstrates that the impression that religion was divorced from politics is shown to be based on a fallacy, as is the idea that an inevitable opposition of sorts developed between the class of religious scholars and the ruling élite. Although one could dispute whether the book fully succeeds in accounting for the prominence of the *miḥna* as an historical event, it does nevertheless form a formidable contribution to its study and one which readers will find engaging.

⁷ Richard Frank also questioned the historicity of the encounter between al-Barbahārī (d. 329/941) and al-Ashʿarī as recounted in Ibn Abī Yaʿlā's *Ṭabaqāt*. See “Elements in the Development of the Teaching of al-Ashʿarī,” 171-172. Cf. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: General Introduction and Translation from the Creation to the Flood* (translated and annotated by Franz Rosenthal; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 72.

REFERENCES

- al-Ash‘arī, Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Ismā‘īl, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa-ikhtilāf al-muṣallīn*, 2 vols., (ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd; Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1987).
- Frank, Richard, “Elements in the Development of the Teaching of al-Ash‘arī,” *Le Muséon: Revue D’Études Orientales* 104 (1991), 141-190, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2143/MUS.104.1.2006086>.
- Gimaret, Daniel, “Cet autre théologien Sunnite: Abū l-‘Abbās al-Qalānisī,” *Journal Asiatique* 277 (1989), 227-261, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2143/JA.277.3.2011502>.
- Ibn al-Jawzī, Abū l-Faraj Jamāl al-Dīn, *al-Muntaẓam fī tā’rikh al-umam wa-l-mulūk*, 18 vols., (ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā’ and Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā’; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992).
- al-Jurjānī, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil fī ḍu‘afā’ al-rijāl*, 7 vols., (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1997).
- Madelung, Wilferd, “The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Qur’ān,” in Félix M. Pareja Casañas (ed.), *Orientalia Hispanica: sive studia FM, Pareja octogenaria dicata* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 504-525.
- Shah, Mustafa, “Al-Ṭabarī and the Dynamics of *tafsīr*: Theological Dimensions of a Legacy,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 15/2 (2013), 83-139, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2013.0097>.
- al-Shahrastānī, Abū l-Faṭḥ Tāj al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Struggling with the Philosopher: A Refutation of Avicenna’s Metaphysics - A new Arabic edition and English translation of al-Shahrastānī’s Kitāb al-Muṣāra‘a* (edited and translated by Wilferd Madelung and Toby Mayer; New York & London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).
- al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: General Introduction and Translation From the Creation to the Flood* (translated and annotated by Franz Rosenthal; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).
- van Ess, Josef, *Der Eine und das Andere: Beobachtungen an islamischen häresiographischen Texten*, 2 vols., (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).
- van Ess, Josef, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. 3. jahrhundert Hidschra*, 6 vols., (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991-1995).
- van Ess, Josef, “Ibn Kullāb und die *Miḥna*,” *Oriens* 18-19 (1967), 92-142.

Mustafa Shah

School of Oriental and African Studies, London-UK

E-mail: ms99@soas.ac.uk