Imām Āhmad’s ‘Aqīda and Pseudo-Ḥanbalī ‘Aqīda
by GF Haddad – Qasyoun@ziplip.com – Sha'bān 1423

The Shāfi‘ī faqīh, Shaykh al-Islām al-Haytamī was asked: “Was the belief of Imām Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal the same as [certain] present-day Ḥanbalīs claim?” He replied:

Concerning the doctrine of the Imām of Ahl al-Sunnah, Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal may Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam grant him the loftiest of gardens as his resting-place and destination, bestow upon us and him His bounties, and grant him a dwelling in the loftiest firdaws: his doctrine was in absolute conformity with the belief of Ahl al-Sunnah, and completely concordant. It included the belief that Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam is exalted beyond those matters that the oppressors and dissenters attribute to Him. That is, Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam is exalted from possessing direction, parts, corporeality, and so forth among the various Attributes of imperfection.

The truth of the matter is that Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam is free from all the Attributes that are not characterized by absolute perfection; and all those things that are being circulated and publicized among the ignoramuses as being said by this great mujtahid Imām are a slander. It is an outright lie that this Imām ever claimed direction or the like in describing the Attributes of Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam. May Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam lead to perdition those who attribute such positions to the Imām who is entirely exonerated of having said such things.

All these matters have been explained by the hadith Master, Imām Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, who belongs to his [Imām Ahmad’s] school. He has cleared the Imām’s name of such foul slanders and has provided explicit proofs exposing the lies of the slanderers.

And beware of what Ibn Taymiyya, his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and others wrote; he Ibn Taymiyya is a man who took his lusts for his Lord, for which Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam provided explicit proofs exposing the lies of the slanderers.

A contemporary example of this difference

A contemporary example of the disparity between Ḥanbalī ‘aṣba’ī and puristic Taymiyyan views is the recent edition of the Ḥanbalī Shaykh al-Islām, the Imām and Musnid Shams al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Badr al-Dīn ibn Balkān al-Dimashqī al-Sālihī’s (1006-1083) compendium of fiqh, adab and ‘aṣba’ī titled Mukhtasar al-Iṣfādāt fī Ruh al-Iṣfādāt wal-Ādāb wal-Ziyādāt by a “Salafī” student and his teacher Muhammad Sulaymān al-Asghqar who injected into the work the following aberrations:1

Ibn Balkān’s text

Conclusion: On knowledge of Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam and what pertains thereto and what the legally qualified person must believe [p. 485]

It is obligatory to categorically affirm (al-jazm) that He ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam is one, indivisible and not made of parts, single not in the sense of number... [p. 487]

The author was not blessed with success – Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam forgive him! – in reporting the ‘Aṣba’ī of the Salaf that Imām Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal and the expert authorities of the Madhhab held.

Shaykh al-Islām [Ahmad] Ibn Taymiyya warned against such newfangled terms and cites the very same terms used by the author as examples of what not to say.

Ibn Balkān – Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam reward him! – shows mastery of the ‘Aṣba’ī of the Sunni Salaf including Abū Ḥanīfah, Ahmad, and al-Ash’arī with a view to confront innovations current in his time in and outside his own School, including tajwīd and ‘īzzāt.

Ibn Balkān echoes Ash’arī (ibn Khafīf) and Māturīdī (Fiqh al-ṣkhār) ‘aṣba’ī while Ibn Taymiyya innovated triple-tawhīd terminology never used by Imām Ahmad and claims that Ahmad believed Allāh ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam has a limit whereas it is established he held the opposite.

1 Al-Haytamī, Fatāwā Ḥadīthiyya (p. 203).
It is obligatory to categorically affirm that He ﷺ is neither a substance (jawhar) nor a body (jism) nor an atom ('arad).

Shaykh al-Islām IT said:... “the terms jism, jawhar and the like are neither in the Book of Allāh nor the Sunna of His Prophet, nor the words of any of the Companions and their pious Successors to the Day of Judgment [sic] and the rest of the Imāms of the Muslims, whether to affirm or deny.”

Al-Asghar uses the very same terms in his Risāla ʻlā Ahl al-Thughār. Further, the term “uncreated” (ghayr makhliq) is not found in the Qurʾān, the Sunna or the language of the Companions and Successors yet Ahmad used it against those who affirmed the createdness of the Qurʾān.

Contingencies never indwell Him ʿāl tahalūlu al-hawwādith nor does He indwell any of them, nor can any of them encompass Him.

Our shaykh Muhammad [Sulaymān] al-Asghar said: “This is innovated speech that misses the mark, which no legal proof affirms nor denies therefore it can neither be confirmed nor denied. And even if it were confirmed it could suggest what is untrue, as it would if it were denied.”

This pedantic naysaying aims to justify the heresy of “pre-existent contingencies indwelling the Deity” (hawwādith lā awwala lāhā hāllā fi dhāt Allāh) for which al-Ikhānayn (d.764) suspected Ibn Taymiyya of Arjel al-‘azhārīyya as does al-Bihār in al-Salāfiyya (p. 164-175).

So whoever believes or says that Allāh is, in His essence (bi-dhātihī), in every place or in a place, is a kāfir. It is obligatory to categorically affirm that He ﷺ is separate (bāʿīn) from His creation. Allāh ﷺ was when there was no place then He created place and He is now as He was before He created place. [p. 489]

The denial of place is an imprecise term (lafz mujmal) [1] and innovated speech while Allāh ﷺ has said that He is established (mustawīn) over His Throne above His heavens in absolute height (fī- Đàw al-mutlaq). So the words of the author – Allāh forgive him! – are novel in meaning as they are novel in wording.

Whoever likens Him to anything in His creation has definitely committed kufr, for example, he who says “He is a body” or says “He is a body unlike bodies” (jismun lā kal-ajṣām). [p. 490]

In any case, whatever occurs in the mind and dawns upon the imagination, such is other than the Owner of Generosity and Majesty. [p. 490]

The authentically transmitted Divine Names and Attributes must be accepted, believed, and conveyed just as they came even if the meaning cannot be conceived (waʿān laqayiq maʿ nāh). [p. 491]


No comment is needed.

The statement “whatever occurs in the mind” is established from Dhūl-Ghūṭā. Al-Shāfīʿī said something similar.

In any case, whatever occurs in the mind and dawns upon the imagination, such is other than the Owner of Generosity and Majesty. [p. 490]

Mālik said of istiwā‘ “its ‘how’ is inconceivable” while al-Shāfīʿī said, “I believe in what came from Allāh in the meaning meant (marād) by Allāh and I believe in what came from the Messenger of Allāh in the meaning meant by the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ.” [p. 490]

First, the Jumhūr said one may attribute effects to other than the Causator metaphorically. Second, the denial of causes and effects in the world of causes and effects is the doctrine of the fatalists (Jabriyya).

My ailment left me through the blessing of seeing [Imām Ahmad] in dream, Allāh be well-pleased with him! [p. 493]

It only left him through the Divine decree!

This is part of the forbidden and illicit tawassul as was assessed by IT.

We ask Him ﷺ to make us firm upon Sunni aqīdā with the baraka of our Prophet, the Leader of creation. [p. 493]

The Madkhāl of Aḥl al-Sunnah is the affirmation (iḥbāṭ) of the Names and Attributes together with the negation of likeness (tashbīḥ) and organs (adwādūs). [p. 494]

The statement “whatever occurs in the mind” is established from Dhūl-Ghūṭā. Al-Shāfīʿī said something similar.

Mālik said of istiwā‘ “its ‘how’ is inconceivable” while al-Shāfīʿī said, “I believe in what came from Allāh in the meaning meant (marād) by Allāh and I believe in what came from the Messenger of Allāh in the meaning meant by the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ.”

First, the Jumhūr said one may attribute effects to other than the Causator metaphorically. Second, the denial of causes and effects in the world of causes and effects is the doctrine of the fatalists (Jabriyya).

Imām Ahmad assessed that Tawassul through the Prophet ﷺ be part of every Muslim’s dīdā as admitted by IT himself.

The Madkhāl of Aḥl al-Sunnah is the affirmation (iḥbāṭ) of the Names and Attributes together with the negation of likeness (tashbīḥ) and organs (adwādūs). [p. 494]

Know that everything other than Allāh and His Attributes is contingent and that He has created it, brought it into being, and originated it from nothing, by no prior cause (ILLA) nor driving purpose (gharaḍ).

“If he means by organs, such as Allāh ﷺ has affirmed for Himself of the two hands, the eye, and others of His lofty Attributes, then his words are incorrect because they contradict the text of the Qurʾān.”

Al-Asghar is unaware that Aḥl al-Sunnah never attribute cause to the Divine decrees and acts but wisdom (ḥikmah) while the Mu'tazila cite the Qurʾān claiming that Allāh is driven by cause and that His acts are motivated by good.
nor motive (dā’īn) nor need (hāja) nor necessity (mūjib), nor is consideration of any of the above incumbent upon Him whatsoever in His acts, yet He does nothing in vain. [p. 496]

He is free to torture and punish creatures without prior offense nor subsequent recompense nor fitting regard. He can do what He likes and decree freely over them in any terms He wishes, yet all this is excellent (hasan) on His part because they are His dominion and He owns them and cannot be taken to account. Rather, they are taken to account. [p. 497]

and this talk is incoherent, his because the last of it (‘in vain’) contradicts the statement ‘by no prior cause nor driving purpose.”

“Your Lord wrongs no one (18:49) and injustice is evil and prohibited. How then could He possibly punish them without prior offense, yet this be hasan?”

Al-Māturīdī in al-Tawhīd (p. 215-216) ranks the attribution of ‘illa to the Divine acts among the aberrations of the Mu’azzila who pretexted that, otherwise, Allāh would be acting in vain. Ibn Khafīf: “He brings near Him whomever He will without [need for] cause and removes far from Him whomever He will without [need for] cause.”

Al-Ashqar’s objection is the Mu’tazī doctrine in a nutshell as phrased by al-Jubbā’ī to al-Ash’arī after which the latter left them. Ibn Khafīf said: “Allāh is doer of what He will. [Know you not that unto Allāh belongs the Sovereignty of the heavens and the earth? He punishes whom He will, and forgives whom He will. Allāh is Able to do all things] (5:40):

Injustice is not attributed to Him, He rules over His dominion just as He will, without [anyone’s entitlement to] objection whatsoever [(Say : Who then can do aught against Allāh, if He had willed to destroy the Messiah son of Mary, and his mother and everyone on earth? To Allāh belongs the Sovereignty of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. He creates what He will. And Allāh is Able to do all things) (5:17); (The sentence that comes from Me cannot be changed, and I am in no wise a tyrant unto the slaves) (50:29)].” At the same time it is obligatorily known that Allāh does not take back His promise to reward those who believe and do good and punish evil-doers: (But as for those who believe and do good works We shall bring them into gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide for ever. It is a promise from Allāh in truth; and who can be more truthful than Allāh in utterance?) (4:122). The scholars have described the former evidence as “based on reason” (dalīl ‘aqlī) and the latter as “based on law” (dalīl sharī‘ī), noting that it is the latter which takes precedence over the former. Cf. al-Būṭī, Kuhbā’ al-Yaqīnāt (p. 149).

And Allāh knows best.