Early Muslim Traditionalism: 
A Critical Study of the Works and Political 
Theology of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal

Submitted by

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Abstract

The political theology of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) is analysed through comprehensive examination of the authenticity of theological and juridical books attributed to him. The eponym of the Ḥanbalī school (madhhab) of law and theology, Ahmad’s importance lies in his teaching as a jurisprudent and his practices as a zāhid (renunciant), which attracted many students to his circle. However, he is best known for his reputation as a defender of correct belief, and for firmly resisting the doctrine of three ‘Abbāsid caliphs that the Qur’ān was created, although he was imprisoned and beaten during the Inquisition known as al-Miḥnah (between 218/833 and c. 232/847).

As a result of Ahmad’s importance, a variety of different opinions and epistles were ascribed to him. Theologically, the most important among these are the Six Creeds and al-Radd ʿalā al-Zanādiqah wa-al-Jahmiyah which is a polemical epistle. In jurisprudence there were response collections from Ahmad’s students called al-Masāʾil, eight of which are still extant, either partly or completely. These works are examined in this thesis.

Ahmad’s theo-political ideas are critical to understanding the political thought of Sunnism in general, and the study analyses his doctrines on the importance of the Jamāʿah (Community), Ṭāḥah (Obedience) and al-Amr bi-al-maʿrūf wa-al-nahy ʿan al-munkar (commanding right and forbidding wrong). Ahmad was a quietist thinker, but the main purpose of his quietism was in fact to save the unity of the Muslim community from internal fighting and protect the common people who always lacked security and suffered from threats of looting of their shops and houses. Though a quietist, Ahmad was not in favour of the rulers and avoided all kinds of connections to them, including not accepting their gifts or working with them. He became angry with his family when they accepted the caliph’s money.
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NOTE ON CONVENTIONS

Translations, apart from the Qur’ān, are my own except where a specific one is cited. Some place names are transliterated, but place names familiar in English are given their usual English spelling (for example Mecca and Baghdad). For reasons of clarity and consistency, dating throughout this thesis is according to the Christian Era. When the Islamic lunar Hijrī dates are also given they usually appear in the format 241/855, otherwise, they will be followed by the short reference A.H. I mainly follow the Library of Congress system of transliteration, but with some changes. For example: I use b. for the Arabic ﺑن when the name is followed by the name of the immediate father (for example Mālik b. Anas), but I use Ibn for the Arabic ﺃﺑن when the name is not followed by the name of the immediate father (such as Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal), or is followed by a kunyah (e.g., Ibn Abī Ya’lā), or when the individual is known by the Ibn’s name more than by his own name (e.g., Ibn Ḥāmid). Another difference from the Library of Congress System is that of tanwīn; for َ, ََ, َََ I use an, un and in. However, I use superscript for the tanwīn to distinguish it from the normal letters.

Full names and titles are given at first place of citation, then short referencing is applied. Full bibliographic details are found in the bibliography, preceded by a list of abbreviations.
“I am not a theologian (ṣāḥib kalām) and I do not agree to discuss anything, unless it exists in the Book of God, or in ḥadīth from the Prophet, or from his Companions or from their Successors. Apart from these things, any discussion [of an issue] is not praiseworthy (māhmuḍ)”.  

Alexander Ibn Hanbal
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