

**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, Aḥmad's importance lies in his teaching as a jurist 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 'Abbāsīd 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 Aḥmad'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 'alā al-Zanādiqah wa-al-Jahmīyah* which is a polemical epistle. In jurisprudence there were response collections from Aḥmad's students called *al-Masā'il*, eight of which are still extant, either partly or completely. These works are examined in this thesis.

Aḥmad'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 *Jamā'ah* (Community), *Ṭā'ah* (Obedience) and *al-Amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (commanding right and forbidding wrong). Aḥmad 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, Aḥmad 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 *ابن* 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'ālā), 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 *تَنْوِين* 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.

’إني رأيتُ أنه لا يكتبُ أحدٌ كتاباً في يومه إلا قال في غَدِهِ :
لو غُيِّرَ هذا لكان أحسن ولو زيدَ هذا لكان يُستَحَسَن ولو
قُدِّمَ هذا لكان أفضل ولو تُرِكَ هذا لكان أجمل. وهذا أعظم
العِبر وهو دليلٌ على استيلاء النقصِ على جملةِ البشر.’
القاضي الفاضل عبد الرحيم البيساني

“I am not a theologian (*ṣāhib 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 (*maḥmūd*)”.

Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal

’لا يزال المرءُ في فُسْحَةٍ من عقله حتى يؤلَّفَ
كتاباً يعرضُ على الناس مكنونَ جهله، ويُتَصَفَّحُ
به إن أخطأ مبلغ عقله.’
عمرو بن بحر الجاحظ

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