

# IBN TAYMIYYAH ON THE ḤADĪTH OF THE 73 SECTS

By:  
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## Abstrak

Hadith berkenaan 73 firqah telah difahami dengan pelbagai pemahaman. Sejarah awal Islam menyaksikan bagaimana golongan Mutakallimun menjadikannya sebagai asas kajian mereka tentang firqah-firqah yang lahir dalam sejarah. Mereka menyusun karya-karya yang memperkatakan tentang firqah-firqah yang ada, tokoh-tokoh serta pemikiran mereka. Perkembangan seterusnya menyaksikan bagaimana sesetengah kelompok mengeksploitasi hadith ini dan mendakwa hanya kelompok mereka sahaja yang benar. Kebiasaannya hadith ini diperkatakan tanpa sebarang cubaan untuk menjelaskan makna dan implikasi teologinya. Artikel ini mengemukakan terjemahan Inggeris bagi huraian Ibn Taymiyyah ke atas hadith tersebut beserta pengantar ringkas. Ibn Taymiyyah menyarankan sikap 'bersederhana' (*al-wasat*) dan memberi amaran agar umat Islam tidak mudah mengeluarkan mana-mana kelompok umat Islam selagi mereka mendokong ajaran Islam.

**Katakunci:** Ibn Taymiyyah, hadith firqah, ilmu Firaq, *Kutub wa rasā'il wa fatāwā Ibn Taymiyyah fī al-'aqīdah*

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### Abstract

The hadīth of seventy-three sects has been understood in various ways by different Muslim scholars. From the early days of Islam, theologians used it as a basis for composing works in which they enumerated the various sects, their leaders, and beliefs. Later, this practice was taken to extremes by some Muslim groups which considered themselves to be the only true Muslims and others to be deviant sectarians and outright infidels. They then would subject them to atrocities and acts of aggression as they wished. Most of the time the hadith in question is used without any attempt to explain its meaning and theological implications. In this paper, a translation of Ibn Taymiyyah's commentary on the hadīth of seventy-three sects is presented, preceded by a brief introduction to put it into proper context. The main idea submitted by Ibn Taymiyyah is the necessity of moderation (*al-wasat*). He warns against summary excommunication of any Muslim groups, as long as they still profess the teachings of Islam.

**Keywords:** Ibn Taymiyyah, hadith on the 73 sects, heresiography, *Kutub wa rasā'il wa fatāwā Ibn Taymiyyah fī al-'aqidah*

### Introduction

One of the greatest achievements of the mission of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was the unification of Muslims and forging a strong bond of brotherhood between them. The Qur'an is replete with verses reminding the believers of the importance of this bond of brotherhood and the necessity of preserving it. They are reminded, for instance, to take care of each other, respect each other, refrain from back-biting, name-calling and excessive suspicion, and to make peace between fellow Muslims in case a disagreement arises.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, 3: 102-107, and *Sūrat al-Hujurat*, 49: 1-13.

Have Muslims lived up to that exalted standard? Given what is happening in various parts of the Muslim world, the answer is obviously a no.

Considering the situation of Muslims all over the world, it is clear how disunited, fragmented, and emasculated they are. Historically, many factors have contributed to this disunity. Of all the factors, however, theological disagreements tend to be the deepest, and most enduring. There is currently a wave of extremism among certain Muslim groups whose membership is rapidly increasing. These groups are working hard to radicalize Islam to the extent of committing acts of aggression not only against non-Muslims but also against other Muslims who happen to differ with them on the interpretation of certain aspects of the cardinal principles of Islam. Whoever disagrees with their interpretation is summarily rejected and even excommunicated as a deviant innovator (*mubtadi'*), wicked transgressor (*fāsiq*), or outright heretic (*zindīq*).<sup>2</sup> They claim to be the only people who are on the right path; the saved group (*al-firqat al-nājiya*).

### Muslim 'Heresiography' and the Ḥadīth of Seventy-Three Sects

The problem of extremism and excommunication of others from the faith on flimsy accusations of heresy is as old as it is ubiquitous. It is neither solely confined to Islam nor is it a new phenomenon in Islam. All religions have had a good share of radicals and 'fundamentalists', only that nowadays the dominant Western civilization tends to use that appellation as a weapon against Islam, ignoring what is

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of the nature and political implications of the accusation of being a *zindīq*, see Bernard Lewis, "Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in the History of Islam," *Studia Islamica*, 1 (1953): 43-63. For Ibn Taymiyya's explanation of the concept of *zandaqa* see his *Bughyat al-Murtād fi'l-Radd 'alā'l-Mutafalsifa wa'l-Qarāmīta wa'l-Bāṭiniyya Ahl al-Iḥād mina'l-Qā'ilīna bi'l-Hulūl wa'l-Ittihād*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Riyadh: Maktabat al-'Ulūm wa'l-Ḥikam, 1995: 336-340. Henceforth cited as *Bughyat al-Murtād*.

happening in its own cultural backyard. In Islam, it is to be noted that schisms in the community began barely three decades from the demise of the Holy Prophet (saw). Initially, the community split along political lines. These were soon given theological justifications, leading to the emergence politico-theological movement. Gradually, these metamorphosed into full-fledged theological schools.<sup>3</sup>

Of particular importance in this process is the fact that for each group to justify its split from the main body of believers, it had to refer to canonical texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah. The argument of the mainstream scholars was always that unity is a religious imperative and sectarianism is disapproved in the Qur'an and Sunnah and can even lead to disbelief.<sup>4</sup> Later, scholars dedicated entire works in the genre usually referred to as *firaq* and *maqālāt* (approx. heresiography).<sup>5</sup> This usually involved a survey of the development of the sectarian movements, their major leaders as well as their ideas. Among the most famous works along these lines are al-Ash'arī's *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, al-Shahrastānī's *al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal*, and Ibn Ḥazm's *al-Fiṣal fī'l-Milal wa'l-Ahwā' wa'l-Niḥal*. With very few exceptions, most of these works took the Hadīth in which

<sup>3</sup> On the History of sects in Islam, see 'Alī b. Ismā'il al-Ash'arī (1980). *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāfāt al-Muṣallīn*. ed. Hellmut Ritter. 2 vols., Istanbul: Government Press; 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (1985). *Al-Farq bayna'l-Firaq*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah; and Ibn Ḥazm (1985). *Al-Fiṣal fī'l-Milal wa'l-Ahwā' wa'l-Niḥal*. Ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣr and 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Umairah. Beirut: Dār al-Jīl. See also Israel Friedlaender. "The Heterodoxies of the Shiacites by Ibn Ḥazm." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 28 (1907): 1-80, and 29 (1908): 1-183 and Fazlur Rahman (2000), *Revival and Reform in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld. esp. chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>4</sup> On this refer to the sermon of Caliph 'Alī b. Abī Tālib at Ar-Rabdhah in Ibn Jarīr at-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rīkh at-Ṭabarī*, 3: 23, and al-Bayhaqī, *Sunan al-Bayhaqī al-Kubrā*, 10:208.

<sup>5</sup> For more details on the development and significance of the *maqālāt* tradition, see Friedlaender, "Heterodoxies", *op. cit.* 28 (1907): 15-23; Henri Laoust. "La classification des sects dans le Farq d'al-Baghdādī", *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 29 (1961): 19-59; and R. Strothman (1938), "On the History of Islamic Heresiography." *Islamic Studies*, 12, p. 5 ff.

the Holy Prophet (saw) predicted the split of his Ummah into seventy-three sects as their starting point.<sup>6</sup>

'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī is one of the most influential historians of the development of theological sects in Islam. His *al-Farq bayna al-Firaq* has been used as the primary source for most works in this genre, be they by Sunni or Shi'i authors. Interestingly, al-Baghdādī justifies his approach in classifying and enumerating the sects by referring to the hadīth of seventy-three sects. He indeed devotes the whole of the first chapter of the book to a discussion of this hadīth. After citing three versions of this hadīth, he made the conclusion that it must be rigorously authenticated (*ṣaḥīḥ*). Apparently anticipating a possible objection, he confines the hadīth which considers differences among believers to be a sign of mercy from Allah to the realm of the practical applications of the Shari'ah. Implied here is that theological disagreements are within the purview of the hadīth of seventy-three sects.<sup>7</sup>

Later writers, such as al-Kirmānī (d. circa 525 H), in his commentary on the hadīth of seventy-three sects,<sup>8</sup> and al-Shahrastānī (d. 548 H), in his *al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal*, follow closely in al-Baghdādī's footsteps. In a business-like fashion, the latter scholar used the hadīth of sects to enumerate not only the Muslim sects but also the non-Muslim ones (eg. Magian, Jewish, and Christian). The version he chooses to base his work on is clearly theologically biased. He reports:

<sup>6</sup> Among the major *maqālāt* works, in addition to those mentioned in note 3 above, are: Ṭāhir b. Muḥammad al-Isfarāyīnī. *Al-Tabṣīr fi'l-Dīn wa Tabyīn al-Firqat al-Nājiya 'an al-Firqat al-Hālika*. Ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Hūt. Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1983; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Malaṭī (1936), *Al-Tanbīh wa'l-Radd 'alā Ahl al-Aḥwā' wa'l-Bida'*. Ed. S. Dederling. Istanbul: State Press; and Maḥmūd b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (1961), *Al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal*. Ed. Muḥammad al-Kaylānī. Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, [*Muslim Sects and Divisions: The Section on Muslim Sects in Kitāb Al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal*. Trans. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn. London: Kegan Paul International, 1984]. All references in this paper are to the English translation.

<sup>7</sup> See *al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> Edited by S. Dederling in "Ein Kommentar der tradition über die 73 sekten." *Monde Orientale*, 25 (1931), pp. 35ff.

The Prophet also said: "My Community will be divided into seventy-three sects. Only one will be saved. The others will perish." When asked which was the one that would attain salvation, he replied: "Those who follow *al-Sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*." He was further asked: "What is *al-Sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*?" He replied: "That which I and my companions practice."<sup>9</sup>

The concept of '*ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*' was introduced much later in response to the civil war and the fragmentation of the community. The way it is used in this version of the hadīth indicates a clear theological orientation. The apparent purpose in this case is to define who is on the orthodox path of '*ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*' and who has deviated from it. Al-Shahrastānī clearly argues that there is no room for more than one correct approach to theology:

Salvation belongs to only one sect. The reason is that where there are contradictory propositions wholly opposed to one another, one is necessarily true and the other necessarily false. The truth, therefore, is in one and not in the other. It is impossible to hold, of two disputants who are wholly in conflict on rational principles, that both are right and in possession of the truth. Since the truth in every rational question is one, then the truth in all questions can be found in one sect alone.<sup>10</sup>

The point of view expressed above, apart from being both rigid and pessimistic, creates another problem. What is the cut-off point for the development of sects? Considering that al-Shahrastānī exhausted the enumeration of the seventy-three sects, what do we do when new sects emerge which cannot be subsumed under the previous ones? Later heresiographers apparently considered the number seventy-three to imply the perilous nature of sectarianism and deviation from the truth and not an attempt to limit the number of sects or to state a historical fact. For instance, al-

<sup>9</sup> *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, *op. cit.* p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Maqrīzī, in his *al-Khiṭaṭ*, enumerated 300 Shī'a sects. He divided the Khaṭṭābiyya alone (a small faction of the Shī'a) into fifty groups.<sup>11</sup>

Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456) is one of the very few exceptions to the approach just described above. His *al-Faṣṭ fi'l-Milal wa'l-Ahwā' wal-Niḥal* has been described as "the only one which is not fettered by the tradition on the seventy-three sects."<sup>12</sup> None of the versions of the hadith of sects was recorded in Bukhārī's or Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, which are the only ones recognized by the rigid Zāhirites. As a result, Ibn Ḥazm's classifications of the sects was based more on logic and historical facts than on tradition. The number of sects in his book was, therefore, considerably reduced.

For the scholars who took the ḥadīth of seventy-three sects as their starting point, they apparently took it for granted that all their readers clearly understood it. None of them discussed its implications. Suppose we take the more pessimistic version, which most hereseographers used, does it mean that only one sect will be admitted into paradise and all the rest will be eternally doomed in the hellfire? Or will the sectarians (who continue to profess Islam) have a temporary sojourn in the hellfire and ultimately be admitted into paradise? Does this tradition mean that sectarians do not deserve to be treated as Muslims? What are the theological grounds of excommunication? Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah was one of the first Muslim scholars to address these issues in the context of the ḥadīth of the seventy-three sects.

### Ibn Taymiyyah and the Ḥadīth of Seventy-Three Sects

Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyyah was asked to give his opinion about that hadith.<sup>13</sup> In his

<sup>11</sup> Friedlaender. "Heterodoxies". *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> For more details on the life and works of Ibn Taymiyyah, consult Henri Laoust. *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taqī-d-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiya*. Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archeologie Orientale, 1939. *Idem*, "Quelques opinions sur theodicee d'Ibn Taimiya," in *Melanges Maspéro*. Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français

usual longwinded verbose style, ibn Taymiyyah agrees that, being among the category of the *ṣaḥīḥ* (rigorously authenticated traditions), this hadith has to be taken very seriously. Given his extensive knowledge of hadith, however, one would expect him to mention, at least obliquely, other variants of the same hadith, some of which are more lenient and inclusive than the one he decided to dwell on. For instance, it is mentioned in one version of the same hadith that only one of the sects will go to Hell. In yet another version, all Muslim sects seem to hold onto some aspect of the truth, the most rightly guided being the *jamā'ah* (the majority).<sup>14</sup> With this omission, ibn Taymiyyah somehow follows in the footsteps of the '*maqālāt*' writers whose works he was apparently very conversant with, albeit with a significant difference in emphasis.

True to his usual style, ibn Taymiyyah commences his response by condemning previous '*maqālāt*' writers for writing in a manner that excluded all but their followers from Islam, while they themselves were sectarians and had to some extent deviated from the straight path. What they should have made clear is that the only rightly guided group is those who strictly follow the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (saw). These are none other than *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* (the traditionalists).<sup>15</sup> Like in all his other *fatāwā*, ibn Taymiyyah intends here "to provide decisive guidance to the community". Implicit in this answer though is the premise that his own group of traditionalists (mostly following the Hanbalite school of theology and using literalism as their preferred approach) are the ones on the

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d'Archeologie Orientale, 1940; and M. A. Serajul Haque. "Ibn Taimiyya," in M. M. Sherif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 2 vols. Delhi: Low Price Publications (reprint), 1995, 2: 796-819.

<sup>14</sup> For the different versions of this hadith, see al-'Ijlūnī, *Kaṣḥf al-Khaḥfā' wa Muṣṣil al-Ilbās*, 1:168, entry no. 446.

<sup>15</sup> The term *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* (the traditionalists) was loosely applied by ibn Taymiyyah to refer to the group to which he considered himself to belong. These apparently followed the Hanbalite school of theology (a rather strict literalist strain of that school). See George Makdisi (1981), "Hanbalite Islam". In Merlin Swartz (ed. and trans.), *Studies on Islam*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.



right path. All other groups (this includes the *mutakallimūn*, philosophers, Sufis, and the traditional sectarians like the Khawārij, Shī'a, Murji'a, etc) are at varying stages of deviation from the true path. Each of these groups is on the right path in as far as it agrees with the traditionalists.

Thus in his explanation of the causes of sectarianism, he focuses on why individuals and groups forsake the literal sense of the Qur'an and Sunnah and, instead, innovate conjectural meanings that ultimately subvert the true sense of the revelation.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, he argues, they deviate from the true teachings of Islam and lead others astray. As if that were not enough, they consider themselves to be the only ones on the truth, all other Muslims being considered deviant sectarians, if not outright infidels.

Beneath ibn Taymiyyah's polemical style, however, lies a well reasoned and balanced position on the status of the various Muslim theological sects. Contrary to what one would expect from the 'fanatic firebrand sheikh' that ibn Taymiyyah has been portrayed to be in present day sources, he did not consign all other Muslims, apart from his own group, to the hellfire. With a gentle touch of consideration, moderation and deep understanding – which is often buried beneath the debris of his vociferous polemics – he argues that excommunicating any group from Islam is not a simple matter. Not all sects are the same: different sects have deviated from the authentic teachings of Islam in different degrees. To make things even more complicated, the less-deviant sects have in many instances made commendable contributions in the explication of the basic tenets of Islam, defending them against contrary allegations of detractors, and refuting the falsehoods of the more deviant sects. For all this they deserve some amount of praise and admiration.

<sup>16</sup> To him, the true sense of the revelation is the literal one. Any attempt to allegorically interpret the revealed texts is nothing but illegitimate alteration (*tahrīf*) which is unacceptable. For an excellent scholarly rebuttal of this position from within the Hanbalite school, see 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Jawzī, *Daf' Shubhat al-Tashbīh bi-Akuffi al-Tanzīh*. Ed. Ḥasan al-Saqqāf. Amman: Dār al-Imām al-Nawawī.

This should be a good lesson for contemporary Muslims in their attempts to deal with the thorny issue of theological deviation. Focus should not be on nitpicking and witch-hunting, a process which dissipates their energy and leaves them exposed as easy prey for their detractors. Instead, focus should be on life-giving forces, on the aspects of the tradition on which they all agree. This is not to say that deviant teachings should be condoned. When we focus on the positive, we shall soon discover how much we have in common. Moreover, the rapport established as a result of this process will make it possible to clearly and gracefully discuss about the remaining areas of disagreement. After taking care of problems of mis-communication these will be found to be very few indeed. In this entire process, Ibn Taymiyyah's views presented in the following pages will be of much benefit.

The following is a translation, with occasional notes, of Ibn Taymiyyah's response to a question about the *ḥadīth* of seventy-three sects. The text used is that edited by 'Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad Qāsim al-Najdī in *Kutub wa rasā'il wa fatāwā Ibn Taymiyyah fi'l-'aqīdah*.<sup>17</sup> In my translation, I have endeavored to make the text as meaningful as possible in the English language. This has led me in certain instances to forego the literal meaning, a direct translation of which would make no sense in the English language. I have added sub-headings in parentheses [ ] to make it easier for the reader to navigate through the text.

### Translation of the Ḥadīth of the Seventy-Three Sects

In answering questions about the famous *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said: "My *Ummah* will split into 73 sects": What are these sects, and what is the creed of each one of them? Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah answered as follows:

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.), *Kutub wa Rasā'il wa Fatāwā Ibn Taymiyyah fi'l-'aqīdah*. Ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad Qāsim al-Najdī, 7 vols. Riyadh: Maktabah Ibn Taymiyya, vol. 3, pp. 345-362.

Praise be to Allah.

This is a famous rigorously authenticated (*Ṣaḥīḥ*) hadīth. It has been recorded in various collections, both *Musnad* and *Sunan*, such as those of Abū Dā'ūd, at-Tirmidhī, an-Nasā'ī, and others. The [standard] text is as follows:

“The Jews split into 71 sects all of which are [to go] to Hellfire except one. The Christians split into 72 sects all of which are [to go] to Hellfire except one. This *Ummah* will split into 73 sects all of which are [to go] to Hellfire except one.”

In another version of the same hadīth, he said:

“[My *Ummah*] will split into 73 *milal* (religions).”

In yet another version, the companions asked:

“O Messenger of Allah, which one of those sects will be saved?” He replied: “Those who follow my *Sunnah* (practice) and the *sunnah* of my companions.”

In another version, he is reported to have answered:

“Those who stick with the *Jamā'ah* (community of believers). Verily Allah's hand is with the *Jamā'ah*.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus the Prophet described the successful group as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jamā'ah* (lit. the people of the *sunnah* and the community, i.e. those who practice the *sunnah* of the Messenger (PBUH) and uphold Muslim unity).<sup>19</sup> They

<sup>18</sup> For more details on the different versions of this hadīth, see al-'Ijlūnī, *Kashf al-Khafā'*, op. cit., 1:165-169, entry no. 446, and 1:369, entry no. 1001. Among the sources cited by al-'Ijlūnī are: *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl*, 14: 179, entry no. 3105; *Ṣaḥīḥ ibn Hibbān*, 14:140, no. 6247; *Mustadrak al-Ḥākim*, 1:47, no. 10 and 1:217-219 nos. 441-445; *Sunan at-Tirmidhī*, 5:25-27 nos. 2640-2644; *Majma' az-Zawā'id*, 1:188-189; *Sunan al-Bayhaqī al-Kubrā*, 10-206-209 (al-Bayhaqī tries to explain the meaning of the different versions of the hadīth); *Sunan Abī Dā'ūd*, 4:197-198, nos. 4596-4598; *Sunan ibn Mājah*, 2:1321-1322, nos. 3992-3994; *Musnad ar-Rabī'*, 1:36, nos. 39-42; *Musnad Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, 2:332, no. 8377; and *Tā'riḫ at-Ṭabarī*, 3:23.

<sup>19</sup> On the nature and doctrines of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jamā'ah*, see ibn Taymiyyah's *al-'Aqīdat al-Wāsiṭiyyah*, ed. and trans. Henri Laoust. *La*

comprise the overwhelming majority [of Muslims]. All other sects are promoters of dissenting opinions (*shudhūdh*), sectarianism (*tafarruq*), innovations (*bid'a*), and [merely follow their] desires (*ahwā'*). None of them approximates the size of the saved group (*al-firqat al-nājiya*).<sup>20</sup> As a matter of fact, many of them have a very small number of adherents. The distinguishing mark of all sects is their deviation from the Qur'ān, the Sunnah of the Prophet, and the consensus (*ijmā'*) of the community.

Although a number of works have been written about the identities of the deviant sects in a genre called *al-maqālāt* (the views of the various sects), determining with certainty that any specific sect is one of the seventy-two [destined to the Hellfire] requires a supporting proof (*dalīl*). For Allah forbids all discourse not backed by sound knowledge, and, in particular, forbids discourse about Him that is not based on sound Knowledge. He says:

Say: The things that my Lord has indeed forbidden are: Shameful deeds, whether open or secret; sins and trespasses against truth or reason; assigning of partners to Allah, for which He has given no authority; and saying things about Allah of which you have no knowledge. (*al-A'rāf*, 7:33)

He also says:

O ye people! Eat what is on earth, lawful and good; and do not follow the footsteps of Satan, for he is to you an avowed enemy. He commands you what is evil and shameful, and that you should say of Allah that of which you have no knowledge. (*al-Baqarah*, 2:168-169)

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*Profession de Foi d'Ibn Taymiyya*. Paris: Libraire Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1986. English translation by Merlin Swartz "A Seventh Century (A.H) Sunni Creed: The 'Aqida Wasitiyya of Ibn Taymiyya." *Humaniora Islamica*, 1 (1973): 91-131. Henceforth cited as "Sunni Creed". See especially page 104. See also Laoust, *Essai, op. cit.*, 220-225.

<sup>20</sup> The concept of *al-firqat al-nājiya* is central in Ibn Taymiyya's theological thought. See his "Sunni Creed", pages 104, 115, and 121.

He also says:

And pursue not that of which you have no knowledge of; for every act of hearing, or of seeing, or of (feeling in) the heart will be inquired into (on the Day of Reckoning). (*al-Isrā'*, 17:36)

But many a writer has discussed these sects on the basis of conjectures and prejudice, depicting his clique and loyal fans of his master as the true *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah* and all his opponents as *ahl al-bid'ah* (deviant innovators). This is clearly an aberration. The true followers of the Qur'an and Sunnah have none other than the Messenger of Allah (saw) for their leader. He is the only one who "says nothing of his own desire" (*al-Najm*, 53:3-4). It is only he that has to be believed in whatever he says and obeyed in whatever he commands. No other leader deserves this status. With the exception of the Messenger of Allah, the statements of all other human beings can be accepted or rejected [after evaluation]. Thus whoever takes [as a master] any person other than the Messenger of Allah, such that whoever he agrees with and loves is considered orthodox (*ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*) and whoever he disagrees with is dismissed as a sectarian and deviant innovator – as is the case with the followers of the various theologians – is himself a deviant, sectarian innovator.

### [Identity of the 'saved group' (*al-Firqat al-Nājiya*)]

It follows from the foregoing that the most deserving of all people to be the saved group (*al-firqat al-nājiya*) are *Ahl al-Hadīth wal-Sunnah* (the traditionalists),<sup>21</sup> who have no other leader apart from the Messenger of Allah (saw). They are the most knowledgeable about his sayings and actions. They

<sup>21</sup> This is used interchangeably with *Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah* (lit. the people of the *sunnah* and the community, i.e. those who practice the *sunnah* of the Messenger (PBUH) and uphold Muslim unity). See note 11 above. In this context, however, ibn Taymiyyah apparently wants to single out for mention the group of strict, literalist, Hanbalite traditionists he considered himself to belong to. See note 8 above.

are the greatest in the science of classifying the sayings attributed to him in order to distinguish what is authentic and what is spurious. Their leaders are masters in the field of understanding hadīth: they are the foremost in knowing its meanings and following it – both in terms of assent to its contents, acting on its basis, loving and befriending whoever follows it, and disowning whoever forsakes it.

In trying to understand ambiguous statements in the *hadīth*, they refer to *al-Kitāb wa'l-Hikmah* (lit. the Book and Wisdom, meaning the *sunnah* of the Prophet, peace be upon him).<sup>22</sup> They can not create a doctrine and make it the principle of their religion and the core of their discourse if it is not confirmed to be included in the message delivered by the Messenger (saw). Instead, they take “the Book and the Wisdom” delivered by the Messenger (saw) as the basics in which they believe and upon which they depend.

Thus they refer all doctrines upon which various groups have disputed, such as the Attributes of Allah, Freewill and Predestination (*al-qadar*), reward and punishment (*al-wa'd wa'l-wa'id*), the status of being a believer or otherwise (*al-asmā' wa'l-ahkām*), enjoining the good and forbidding evil (*al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'l-nahy 'an al-munkar*), and so on. [Their approach to these matters is that] they examine the statements upon which there is disagreement among the various groups; whatever meaning they find compatible with the Book and the Sunnah they affirm and whatever they find contrary to the [Qur'an and Sunnah] they reject. They do not follow conjectures and desires because following conjectures is ignorance whereas following the desires of the soul without guidance from Allah is injustice.

### [Causes of Schisms]

The greatest of all evils are ignorance and injustice. Allah refers to that in the verse:

We did indeed offer the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to

<sup>22</sup> This is an allusion to *al-Baqarah*, 2:129, 151, and other verses with similar meanings.

undertake it, being afraid thereof. But man undertook it; he was indeed unjust and foolish.... (*al-Aḥzāb*, 33:72-73)

[In that context], Allah mentions repentance (*tawbah*) because He knows that in every human being there is an element of ignorance and injustice from which Allah will forgive – if He so wishes. Thus many aspects of the truth that the believer was ignorant of are gradually uncovered for him as he leaves those acts in which he used to practice injustice. The smallest of all evils is man's injustice to himself. Referring to that Allah says:

Allah is the protector of the believers; taking them from the depths of darkness, He will lead them forth into light. (*al-Baqarah*, 2:257)

He also says:

He is the one who sends to His servant signs that He may lead you from the depths of darkness into the light.. (*al-Ḥadīd*, 57:9)

He also says:

A Book which We have revealed unto you, in order that you might lead mankind out of the depths of darkness into light – by the leave of their Lord. (*Ibrāhīm*, 14:1)

It also has to be known that the sects which follow certain leaders in theological matters are at varying stages of deviation: some have deviated from the Sunnah on major issues whereas others have deviated from it in matters of details.

Whichever sect makes a good refutation of other sects which are further than it from the Sunnah has to be commended for refuting falsehood and proclaiming the truth. In the process of refutation, however, it may have gone beyond the limits of justice by negating some aspects of the truth and affirming some aspects of falsehood. It may have refuted a deviant innovation (*bid'ah*) with a lesser one, or falsehood with lesser falsehood. This is the situation

of most speculative theologians (*ahl al-kalām*) who claim to be among the orthodox *ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jamā'ah*. As long as they do not turn their innovations into principles on the basis of which they divide the community or declare friendship and enmity, it should be considered a simple mistake. Almighty Allah always forgives believers for such small mistakes.

Many of our pious predecessors (*salaf*) and leading scholars (*a'imma*) committed a similar mistake. They made some assertions on the basis of their independent scholarly judgment (*ijtihād*) which contradict authentic provisions of the Qur'an and Sunnah. This is different from the practice of the sectarians who [sow seeds of discord among Muslims], befriending whoever agrees with their doctrines and declaring enmity on whoever disagrees with them. They declare infidel (*kāfir*) or rebellious transgressor (*fāsiq*) whoever disagrees with them on matters based on conjecture, personal opinion and independent judgment. They consider it lawful to fight [and kill] whoever disagrees with them. That is the true nature of the sectarians.

The first sect to break away from the community of Muslims were the Khawārij. There is a *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Rigorously Authenticated) hadith about this group of which Muslim has recorded several versions in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Bukhārī too has recorded more than one version of the same hadith. When the Companions of the Prophet fought against the [Khawārij] under the command of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib there was no disagreement about the legality of fighting them as had occurred during the battles (*fitnah*) of the Camel and Siffin. In these two battles, three groups had emerged: a group on one side, another group on the opposite side, and a third group which abstained (*qa'adū*) from the fighting. It was later found that several texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah are in favor of the third position. When the Khawārij seceded from the community of Muslims, all of whom they considered infidels and made a ruling that it is permissible to fight against them, texts of the Sunnah were adduced [to clarify their status]. Among them is the hadīth in which the Prophet (saw) says:



One of you will doubt his salāt, compared to theirs, his fasting, compared to theirs, and his recitation of the Qur'ān, compared to theirs. They recited the Qur'ān but it does not go beyond their throats. They will swerve away from Islam, just as the [hunter's] arrow swerves away from the animal target. Wherever you find them, kill them. Whoever kill them will be rewarded on the Day of Judgment.

The first defection (*khurūj*) from Islam was during the lifetime of the Prophet (saw). [This incident is reported in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim as follows]:

Abū Sa'īd Al-Khudrī, may Allah be pleased with him, reported: When 'Alī (may Allah be pleased with him) was in Yemen he sent some gold alloyed with dust to the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him), and the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) distributed that gold among four men: Al-Aqrā' bin Hābis Al-Hanzhalī and 'Uyainah bin Badr Al-Fazarī and 'Alqamah bin 'Ulathah Al-'Āmirī, then to one person of the tribe of the Kilāb and to Zaid Al-Khair Al-Tā'ī, and then to one person of the tribe of Nabhān. Upon this the people of the Quraish felt angry and said: He (the Holy Prophet) gave to the chiefs of Najd and ignored us. Upon this the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: I have done it with a view to conciliating them. Then there came a man with a thick beard, prominent cheeks, deep sunken eyes and protruding forehead and shaven head. He said: Muḥammad, fear Allah. Upon this the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) asked: If I disobey Allah, who would then obey Him? Have I not been (sent as the) most trustworthy among the people of the world? But you do not repose trust in me. That person then went back. A man among the people then sought permission (from the Holy Prophet) to kill him. According to some, it was Khālid bin Al-Walīd who sought the permission. Upon this the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said:

From this very person's posterity there will arise people who will recite the Qur'an, but it will not go beyond their throat; they will kill the followers of Islam and will spare the idol-worshippers. They will glance through the teachings of Islam so hurriedly just as the arrow passes through the prey. If I were to ever find them I would kill them like 'Ād.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the basic principle and starting point of *bid'a* (deviant innovations) was casting aspersions against the practice (*sunnah*) of the Prophet (saw) on the basis of conjectures as Elijah had made allegations about the Lord's Commandments on the basis of mere conjecture.

### [Are the Sectarious Unbelievers?]

When it comes to the identity of the doomed sects, the earliest to mention this, to the best of my knowledge, is Yūsuf ibn al-Asbāt, followed by 'Abdullah ibn al-Mubāarak. Both of them are among the greatest Muslim scholars (imam). They said: "The principal deviant sects ('*uṣūl al-bida'*) are four: the Rawāfiq, the Khawārij, the Qadariyyah, and the Murji'a." When ibn al-Mubāarak was asked: "What about the Jahmiyya?" He answered that they were not counted among the followers of Muḥammad (saw). He even used to say: "We can quote stories from the Jews and the Christians but not from the Jahmiyyah."

A number of scholars among the followers of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal followed this view, arguing that since the Jahmiyyah are non-Muslims, they cannot be included in counting the 72 sects, just like the hypocrites who conceal their unbelief and outwardly pretend to be Muslims. The Jahmiyyah are the Zanādiqa (heretics). Other Hanbalite and non-Hanbalite scholars are of the view that the Jahmiyyah are among the 72 sects, which brings the number of the principal deviant sects to five. According to this view, each of the principal deviant sects is composed of twelve sub-

<sup>23</sup> Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim. Hadith no. 1761 and 1762. <http://hadith.al-islam.com/Display/Hierarchy.asp?Src=1&AlmiaNum=1761>. Retrieved on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2005.

sects. According to the previous view, however, each of the four principal deviant sects is composed of eighteen sub-sects.<sup>24</sup>

This [system of classification] is based on a different principle; that is, attributing unbelief to all sectarian innovators as infidels (*takfir ahl al-bid'a*). Those who excluded the Jahmiyya did not consider them as infidels. As a matter of fact, they do not consider other innovators to be unbelievers. To them, innovators are among those who deserve punishment in the hereafter, just like the *fussāq* (rebellious transgressors) and *'uṣāt* (the disobedient). Thus they interpret the Prophet's words: "They will be in Hellfire," to mean that [their offence is as serious] as any other grievous sin, such as consuming the property of orphans of which Allah says: "Lo! Those who devour the wealth of orphans wrongfully, they do but swallow fire into their bellies, and they will be exposed to the burning flame". (*al-Nisā'*, 4:10)

Those who include the Jahmiyyah among the principal deviant sects are two categories. The first considers all the Jahmiyya to be unbelievers (*kuffār*). This is the position of a number of later followers of the imams and the speculative theologians (*mutakalimūn*). All the *salaf* (ancestors) and great *a'imma* (scholars) agreed that the Murji'a and the Shi'a [who prefer Alī to other Caliphs] are not infidels. All the authentic statements attributed to Imam Aḥmad [ibn Ḥanbal] are to the effect that he did not consider any of those sects as unbelievers. However, some of his followers reported to the contrary that he considered all innovators – including members of the sects mentioned above – to be infidels. They even went to the extent of consigning all [deviant sects] to the hellfire for eternity. This is a grave mistake not only in the right of the school of Aḥmad but also in the

<sup>24</sup> See Friedlaender, "Heterodoxies", op. cit., 15-23; In his commentary on the ḥadīth of the 73 sects. 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Aḥmad al-Kirmānī mentioned that the principal sects are seven, corresponding to the main areas of disagreement. These are: al-Mushabbiha, al-Qadariyya, Nufāt al-Ṣifāt, al-Makhlūqīyya, al-Khawārij, al-Murji'a, and al-Shi'a. See Sven Dederig (ed.) Ein Kommentar der Tradition über die 73 Secten. *Le Monde Orientale*, 25 (1931): 35ff.

right of the Shari'ah. Scholars who hold that sectarians are not infidels do so by means of equating them with people who commit major sins (*aṣḥāb al-ma'āṣi*). Since, as a matter of principle, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jamā'ah* do not judge anyone to be an infidel because of a sin he committed, they should likewise not judge anyone to be an infidel because of a *bid'ah* (deviant innovation).<sup>25</sup>

There are some reports to the effect that the *salaf* (ancestors) as well as the great scholars (*a'imma*) uttered statements accusing the 'pure Jahmiyya' (*al-Jahmiyyat al-Mahda*) who denied the divine attributes. They believed that Allah neither speaks nor sees. That He is not [separate from the creatures]! They also believed that He has no Knowledge, Power, Hearing, Vision, or Life. They held that the Qur'an is a created entity and that, like the dwellers of the Hellfire, the inhabitants of Paradise will not behold Allah, and so on. The status of the Khawārij and the Rawāfiḍ has been a point of much disagreement [among scholars]. Aḥmad and other scholars were very reluctant to accuse them of *kufr*. They, nevertheless, considered the Qadariyyah who deny *kitābah* (predestination) and Divine Knowledge to be *kuffār*, but spared those who affirm Divine knowledge while denying that human actions are created [by God].

Thus the [my position on] this topic can be summarized into two principles:

(First Principle): A *kāfir* who at the same time [claims to be] one of *Ahl al-Ṣalāt* (those who perform the five daily prayers – i.e. Muslims) is nothing but a hypocrite. For when Allah sent Muḥammad (saw) with the revelation, after he migrated to al-Madīna, people became classified into three categories: the believers, the clear and open disbelievers, and the hypocrites who concealed their disbelief. Allah mentions these three categories at the beginning of *Sūrat al-Baqarah*. Four verses were revealed about the merits of the believers, two about the infidels, and more than ten about the hypocrites.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For more details on this see "Sunni Creed", *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>26</sup> *Al-Baqarah*, 2:2-20

The infidels and hypocrites are mentioned in several places in the Holy Qur'ān. For instance, Allah says, for instance:

And obey not the unbelievers and the hypocrites.  
(*al-Aḥzāb*, 33:1)

He also says:

Verily, Allah will collect the hypocrites and the unbelievers – all in hell. (*al-Nisā'*, 4:140)

He also says:

This day shall no ransom be accepted of you, nor of those who rejected Allah (*al-Ḥadīd*, 57:15).

In all those verses, the hypocrites are conjoined with the infidels in order to distinguish between the two groups. The former outwardly pretend to be Muslims, but, in reality, they are worse than outright infidels. Hence Allah says:

The hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of the fire (*al-Nisā'*, 4:145).

He also says:

Do not ever pray for any of them that dies, nor stand at his grave, for they rejected Allah and His messenger and died in a state of perverse rebellion. (*al-Tawbah*, 9:84)

He also says:

Say: "Spend (for the cause of Allah) willingly or unwillingly; it will not be accepted from you: for you are indeed a people rebellious and wicked". The only reasons why their contributions are not accepted are: that they reject Allah and His messenger; that they come to prayer without earnestness; and that they offer contributions unwillingly. (*al-Tawbah*, 9: 53-54).

Thus some of the deviant innovators are hypocrite heretics (*zanādiqa*). These are infidels without any doubt. There are many such people among the Rāfidā and the Jahmiyyah. As a matter of fact, all their leaders were

hypocrite heretics. The founder of *Rafd* (i.e. Shi'ism) was himself a hypocrite. The same applies to Jahmiyya which has its roots in heresy and hypocrisy. That is why the heretical hypocrites of the esoteric movement of the Qarāmiṭa and their likes are all inclined to the Rāfiḍa and the Jahmiyya because of their affinity with them.

Among sectarian innovators (*Ahl al-Bid'a*), however, there are some who have a strong *īmān*, both internal and external, only that because of ignorance and wrongdoing, they commit some errors in the sunnah. Such people are neither hypocrites nor infidels. The fact that they sometimes display some enmity and wrongdoing only qualifies them to be rebellious transgressors (*fāsiq*) and disobedient (*'āṣī*). At times one of them make misinterpret something – [a sin] for which he will be forgiven. Nevertheless, they may have a profound *īmān* and God-fearingness (*taqwā*) both of which qualify them to attain the *wilāyah* (friendship) of Allah commensurate with the degree of their *īmān* and God-fearingness (*taqwā*). End of first principle.

(Second Principle): A [deviant] doctrine, such as denying the obligation of *ṣalāt* (prayers), *zakāt* (almsgiving), fasting Ramaḍān, and Hajj, or considering as lawful [forbidden acts] such as adultery and fornication, drinking intoxicants, gambling, and getting married to *mahārim* (close relatives), can be an outright expression of *kufr* (unbelief). But if it is professed by a person who is yet to receive the message [of Islam], that person cannot be accused of *kufr*. For instance, if someone is a new convert to Islam or if he was raised in a small remote village whereby the message of Islam did not reach him, he cannot be judged as a *kāfir* for denouncing any aspect of the message delivered by the Messenger (saw). Many of the doctrines of the Jahmiyya are of this kind. They actually denounce Allah and what He revealed to His Messenger (saw). Their doctrines should be taken seriously for three reasons:

1. There are many passages in the Qur'an and Sunnah as well as many instances of *Ijmā'* (consensus of the community) which are contrary to their doctrines.

But they reject all of them by means of *tahrīf* (altering their original meanings).<sup>27</sup>

2. Their doctrine is tantamount to *ta'tīl* (stripping the Creator of His Attributes), although some of them do not know that their view actually implies that. Just like the essence of *īmān* is the affirmation of Allah, the essence of *kufr* is the denial of Allah.
3. They differ from what has been agreed upon by adherents of all religions and all normal human beings (*ahl al-ḥiṭar al-Salīmah*). Most of their doctrines are so subtle that most believers may end up believing them to be true as a result of the *shubhāt* (false proofs) they adduce. Such people are true believers both implicitly and explicitly, only that they got confused like all other *mubtadi'ah* (innovators) get confused. Such people are definitely not kuffar. Some of them may be *fāsiq* (heedless) and disobedient (*'āṣi*), and others may commit mistakes from which they deserve to be forgiven. In spite of all these [shortcomings] they may all have such a profound degree of *īmān* and *taqwā* that qualifies them for a degree of *wilāyah* (friendship) of Allah commensurate with their *īmān* and *Taqwā*.

### [The Doctrines of the Main Sects]

The essence of the doctrines of Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jamā'ah which distinguishes them from the Khawārij, Jahmiyya, Mu'tazilah, and Murji'ah, is their belief that *īmān* has degrees and is divisible. The Prophet (saw) said: "Whoever has the equivalent of the weight of an indivisible particle (*dharrat*) of *īmān* in his heart will be delivered from

<sup>27</sup> The concept of *tahrīf*, together with *ta'tīl* and others, are central in Ibn Taymiyyah's polemics against his theological opponents. For a discussion of their significance in Ibn Taymiyyah's thought, see "Sunni Creed", p. 105. See also Laoust, *Essai, op. cit.*, 160.

Hellfire". Hence, the *wilāyah* (friendship) of men with God is accordingly graded and divisible.<sup>28</sup>

Now that the root cause of *bid'ah* (deviant innovation) is clear, [let me explain the main doctrines of each of the major sects]:

The core of the doctrine of the Khawārij is that they accuse anybody of unbelief for committing any of the sins. Moreover, they consider as a sin acts that are in reality not sins. They also prefer to follow the Qur'an and not the Sunnah if the latter differs from the explicit meaning (*ẓāhir*) of the former – even if the Sunnah in question is *Mutawātir* (unanimously agreed upon). They consider as *kāfir* whoever disagrees with them and they consider it lawful do to him what they would not permit to be done to an original *kāfir*. This confirms the Prophet's saying: "They will kill Muslims and spare idolaters." That is how they accused 'Uthmān, 'Alī, and all their followers of *kufr*. They did the same to both warring factions at the battle of Šiffin.<sup>29</sup>

The main doctrines of the Rāfiḍa are that the Prophet (saw) explicitly designated 'Alī (as) as his successor in a manner that leaves no doubt; that [Alī] is an infallible Imam and whoever disbelieves in him is a *kāfir*. They also hold that the *Muhājirūn* and the *Anṣār* withheld the *naṣṣ* (designation of 'Alī) and disbelieved (*kafarū*) in the infallible Imām. They followed their desires, altered the religion, changed the *Sharī'a*, and committed injustice and violence. Indeed, they [i.e. the companions] all committed *kufr*, with the exception of a small group of less than twenty. Then they claim that Abū Bakr, 'Umar and others are still considered hypocrites. Sometimes they say: 'They initially professed

<sup>28</sup> For more details on ibn Taymiyyah's concept of *īmān*, see his "Kitāb al-īmān al-Kabīr" in *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Qāsim. 37 vols. Riyadh: Dār 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1991, 7:4-460.

<sup>29</sup> On the doctrines of the Khawārij, see al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, *op. cit.*, 75-131.



*īmān* but later rejected it' [i.e. became apostates]. Most of them consider whoever does not follow their views to be a *kāfir* and consider themselves the believers. They declare al Muslim lands where their views are not prevalent to be 'the abode of apostasy' (*dār al-ridda*), worse than the lands of polytheists and Christians. It is apparently because of this that they form alliances with the Jews, Christians and pagans in fighting against the majority [Sunni] Muslims. Their alliance with the Franks [Europeans] and the Jews is quite well-known.<sup>30</sup>

It is from the [Shī'a] that most of the major heretical sects, such as the esoteric Bāṭiniyya, the Qarāmiṭa, and the like emerged. The latter sects are, without doubt, the farthest of all sects from [the teachings of] the Qur'ān and Sunnah. To ordinary Muslims, the opposite of Sunism is Shi'ism. Thus when a person says, 'I am Sunni', he means 'I am not a Rāfiḍī (Shi'i)'. There is no doubt too that they are worse than the Khawārij, only that, at the beginning, the latter fought against the Ummah (Muslim Community). Nevertheless, the damage caused by the alliance of [the Shi'a] with the infidels is more devastating than the swords of the Khawārij. Moreover, the Qarāmiṭa and Ismā'īlis [both of which are of Shi'a origin] are among the sects that declare war against Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jamā'ah. Besides, the Khawārij are famous for truthfulness whereas the Rawāfiḍ are notorious for mendacity. Thus whereas the Kawārij only departed (*marāqū*) from Islam, the Rawāfiḍ fought against it.

The pure Qadariyya are much better than the previous two sects in the sense that [their views] are closer to the Qur'ān and Sunnah. The only exception to this are the Mu'tazila and other sects which [on top of being Qadariyya] are Jahmiyya as well. [The latter groups] at times accuse their opponents of being infidels and allow shedding the blood of Muslims – which makes them similar to the [Shī'a and Khawārij].<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-85. See also Friedlaender, "Heterodoxies", *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> For the doctrines of the Jahmiyya, Qadariyya, and Mu'tazila, see al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt. op. cit.*, 155-285.

Murji'a are not like the complex heresies [explained above]. The only problem is that some great jurists and pious men who are usually considered among Ahl al-Sunnah adopted their views. Gradually they also became a major evil because of the heresies that were later added to their [initially simple doctrine]. When some famous men with a large following were suspected of adopting the doctrine of *irjā'*, famous leaders of *Ahl al-Sunnah* made statements in which they censured the Murji'a to scare people away from their doctrines. [Such statements] include Sufyān al-Thawrī's: "whoever gives 'Alī priority over Abū Bakr and the 'two old-men' belittles all *Muhajirūn* and *Anṣār*. I do not think any of his works can ascend to Allah after that." This was said when some scholars in Kūfa were said to give precedence to 'Alī. Similar to this is the saying attributed to Ayyūb al-Shakhtiyānī: "Whoever gives priority to 'Alī over 'Uthmān belittles all the *Muhajirūn* and *Anṣār*." He said this after hearing that some Muslims in Kūfa do that – but he is said to have retracted it later on. The same applies to the sayings of al-Thawrī, Mālik, al-Shāfi'ī, and others, in which they censured the Murji'a after some prominent scholars were reported to have adopted their views.<sup>32</sup>

The statements attributed to Imam Aḥmad [b. Ḥanbal] are in line with those of the previous scholars. Indeed he did not innovate anything by himself. All he did was to make the Sunnah explicit and explain it, defend it, and expose those who deviated from it. He fought in its cause and endured suffering for its sake when human desires and heresy had almost overshadowed it. Of his Allah says:

And We appointed, from among them, leaders, giving guidance under Our Command, so long as they persevered with patience and continued to have faith in Our signs. (*al-Sajda*, 32:24).

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-154.

It is through steadfastness and certitude that leadership (*imāma*) in religious matters is attained. When [Aḥmad] did that he [deservedly] attained the title of Imam Ahl al-Sunnah, in which he was followed by later generations, just as he had followed previous ones.

Otherwise, Sunnah is that which the *Sahāba* directly received (*talaqqā*) from the Messenger (saw). Then the *Tābi'ūn* directly received it from the *Sahāba*, and their followers from them and so on up to the Day of Resurrection. Of course some masters (*a'imma*) are more knowledgeable than others about it and are more steadfast [in facing its detractors].