

## Article Review

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**Reviewed Article:** *Peringkat Pemikiran Imam Al-Ash'ari dalam Akidah by Muhammad Rashidi Wahab dan Syed Hadzrullathfi Syed Omar. IJIT, Vol. 3 (June), 2013.*

This article by Wahab and Hadzrullathfi (2013) is part of a long-standing debate in the discourse of 'ulama of ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah, especially between the Ash'ariyyah and Athariyyah. While the debate is very old, but the discourse is always fresh and this particular topic (i.e. the stages of Imam Al-Ash'ari's creed of *aqidah*) is among the underappreciated topics. The authors explained that this article is intended to refute the Salafis/Wahhabis who claim that Imam Abu Hasan Al-Ash'ari has had three stages of *aqidah* creed: (a) *Mu'tazilah*, (b) *Kullabiyah*, then (c) *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (hereinafter: Three Stage), an opinion which they attribute to Ibn Taymiyyah. Hence, this article is a very welcomed addition to this discourse. This review is intended to provide some critical insight towards Wahab and Hadzrullathfi's article.

The sentiment is clear as the authors open their article emphasize the significance of the *ash'ariyyah* as the creed of *aqidah* followed by 90% Muslims. This, as the author claims, is based on a research published by the Royal Islamic Strategies Center (RISC) by Usra Ghazi (Ghazi 2010). This opening feat, however, reflects what seems to be the recurring theme of this article's methodology: misrepresentation of literature and misattribution.

A careful examination of the aforementioned RISC's publication never mentions that 90% Muslims are *ash'aris* and *maturidis*. Rather, it mentions that 90% traditionalist Muslims follow the *Sunni* school. By 'Sunni school', the study means the four *madhhabs* (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali), as opposed to the Shi'a and Ibadi (Ghazi 2010: 17–18). Wahab and Hadzrullathfi, on the other hand, somehow interpreted 'Sunni' in that research as Ash'ariyyah and Maturidiyyah only and excluding the Salafi/Wahabi. Meanwhile, RICS actually classifies Wahhabism/Salafism as "Sunni" (Ghazi 2010: 21).

Another mistake of attribution is a quoted passage illustrating *tafwid* in pages 64–65 of this article, which was attributed to Imam Al-Ash'ari. However, this is a misattribution, because the edition of Al-Ibanah referred to by the author was written from the Alexandria manuscript known to be corrupted. Fawqiyah Husein, the *muhaqqiq* of the Al-Ibanah version cited by Wahab and Hadzrullathfi, admits this corruption in her *muqaddimah* to the book (Al-Ash'ari 1977: 188). Al-'Usaymi, in his *tahqiq* of Al-Ibanah (Al-Ash'ari 2011: 204–213), explains that the cited passage was actually written by Imam Al-Ghazali but misattributed to Imam Al-Ash'ari. Additionally, the attribution of that passage to Imam Al-Ghazali has been done by Imam Ibn 'Asakir, a 12<sup>th</sup> century AD ash'ari scholar (Ibn 'Asakir 1404: 300).

In their main arguments, the authors explain that they focus on Ibn Taymiyyah's who, according to them, is the main source of the Salafi/Wahabi claim of Abu Hasan Al-Ash'ari's Three-*Stages*. This is conspicuous because the authors claim to refute Ibn Taymiyyah but did not cite any single book or works of Ibn Taymiyyah, despite it being abundantly available. Rather, they cite another author who cites Ibn Taymiyyah, which is Al-Mahmud (1995). They indicate that Al-

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Mahmud's book in pages 337-339 explains that Ibn Taymiyyah says that Imam Ash'ari had Three Stages.

However, a further look into Al-Mahmud's book shows something very far from what Wahab and Hadzrullathfi claims it to say. Pages 337-339, as cited by Wahab and Hadzrullathfi (we use the same edition of Al-Mahmud's book to verify this), mentions nothing about Ibn Taymiyyah, but an overview of the nasab and life of Imam Al-Ash'ari, and some praises for him by the 'ulama. Then, Al-Mahmud (Al-Mahmud 1995: 361-409) explains that there are different opinions on how many stages di Imam Asy'ari went through, and what these stages are. Most importantly, Al-Mahmud indicates (1995: 394-397) that Ibn Taymiyyah seems to classify Imam Al-Ash'aris development into two stages of *aqidah* creed, i.e. Mu'tazillah then Kullabiyyah. Not three. This concurs with Ibn Taymiyyah's own works, such as *Kitab Al-Tis'iniyyah* (1999: 1031), *Bayan Talbis* (Ibn Taymiyyah 1426: 204) and *Majmu' Fatawi* (1995: 228). So, one may wonder: from where did the authors attribute the Three Stages opinion to Ibn Taymiyyah?

The authors then submits that no classical scholars after Imam Al-Ash'ari has ever mentioned the Three Stages, attempting to indicate than Ibn Taymiyyah is the only classical scholar who makes that proposition. While it has been shown above that Ibn Taymiyyah did not even make this proposition, there are more things to say about this. The authors classified Al-Dhahabi and Ibn Kathir as 'classical Ash'ari scholars', which is strange because Al-Dhahabi is not an Ash'ari according to the Ash'ari scholars themselves (Al-Subki n.d.: 56). Nonetheless, it can be agreed that Al-Dhahabi, like Ibn Kathir, is a classical scholar.

The most important point about Al-Dhahabi and Ibn Kathir, however, is that they actually agree with the Three Stages. In fact, it is them who started this position. Imam Al-Dhahabi (2003: 387) mentions that Imam Al-Ash'ari went through three stages: *mu'tazillah* at first, then *sunni* in some fundamentals, then finally *sunni* in a majority of (but not all) fundamentals. Imam Ibn Kathir (2004: 199) mentions that the 'ulama have noted that Imam Al-Ash'ari went to three stages: *mu'tazillah* at first, then *ithbat* to the seven *aqliyah sifats* and *ta'wil* to the *khaboriyyah*, and finally *ithbat* to all *sifats* without *takyif* and *tashbih*. It is also important to note that Imam Ibn Kathir uses the term *dhakaru*, indicating that there are many 'ulama who hold this view. This indicates that there are multiple classical scholars who agree with the Three Stages of Imam Al-Ash'ari opinion (Ibn Taymiyyah is not among them), all against the claims of the authors.

Some of these differences between the Three Stages and Two Stages arguments seem to be simply a matter of perspective. For example, Imam Al-Ash'ari's post-Mu'tazillah journey to follow Ibn Kullab, then Al-Saji in Basrah, then the Hanabilah in Baghdad, was counted as two stages by Al-Dhahabi (2003: 387), but seems to be considered as two shades within one stage by Ibn Taymiyyah (1999: 1031). Hence, despite the different numberings, in essence the opinion is shared by many classical 'ulama that Al-Ash'ari eventually departed from Ibn Kullab's teachings and inclined towards (albeit not adopting entirely) the *ahl al-hadith*.

Be that as it may, the most important aspect is the actual works of Imam Abu Hasan Al-Ash'ari himself. There is no disagreement that Imam Al-Ash'ari has left the Mu'tazillah and followed the creed of Kullabiyyah. But then, an examination towards his final works such as *Maqaalat al-Islamiyyin* indicates that the Kullabiyyah is a separate sect from the *ahl al-hadith wa sunnah* with some differences and similarities between the two, and ascribes himself to the latter (Al-Ash'ari 1980: 5, 298). Meaning, Imam Al-Ash'ari himself seems to classify his journey into three stages: *mu'tazillah*, *kullabiyyah*, then *ahl al-hadith wa sunnah*. This seems to be missed by the author.

Having all that said, it seems that the points of the authors do not stand. The Three Stage opinion, which was incorrectly attributed to Ibn Taymiyyah, is actually the position of a numerous classical scholars and perhaps even Imam Al-Ash'ari himself. The misattribution and misrepresentation of literature does not help either. Nonetheless, the *aqidah* of Imam Abu Hasan Al-Ash'ari is a topic that is worth investing on, also the Ash'ari-Athari debate, as it is always relevant.

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