

Saviours of Islamic Spirit

SHAYKH ABŪ 'L-ḤASAN 'ALĪ NADWĪ

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White Thread
P R E S S



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Introduction

IN THE NAME OF ALLĀH Most Gracious Most Merciful. All praise is to Allāh Almighty, through whose subtle power acts come to be, through whose benevolence and generosity hopes are achieved, through whose decree events occur, by whose will states change; and to Him is our return and with Him is the final abode. Glorified is He, the enduring without end, transcendent of place and movement, knower of the unseen and the seen. We praise Him for the bounties and gifts He has poured on us, praise that is not outweighed by mountains, to the amount of the heavens and the earth, and perpetually for all time. We invoke blessings and peace on His Messenger, the Prophet of Mercy, our Ultimate Benefactor, Muḥammad son of ʿAbdullāh, possessor of elegance, beauty, knowledge, and perfection. May Allāh bless him, the angels, the prophets, their pure descendants, and the family of Muḥammad, his companions, and those who have followed him in excellence. May He forgive us our trespasses and gather us in the company of the righteous, and grant us adherence to the prophetic path so long as we live.

Throughout history, the Umma has faced many challenges, with periods of immense greatness, as well as stagnation and upheaval. It has faced countless attacks, in which enemy forces conspired to bring about its destruction and corrupt it from within. Its cities have been razed to the ground, its Deity accused of violence, its scripture misunderstood, its prophet scorned, its history deplored, its heritage maligned, its community condemned, its scholars slain, its activists persecuted, its well-wishers silenced, its teachings distorted. It has suffered from internal assault. Many of its own followers have brought it into disrepute, misinterpreted its teachings, misapplied its force, and committed injustices in its name, thereby contributing to the environment of Islamophobia and further invigorating those who seek to annihilate it.

History has recorded this oscillation in detail, and any avid reader of history would not be surprised to see the cycle in motion yet again.

Despite being taken many times to the brink of destruction, Islam has always re-emerged as a force to be reckoned with. Islam has a staying power above that of all other religious faiths. Its scripture remains intact and uncorrupted in the original language of its revelation over fourteen centuries ago. Its Prophet is loved and revered as much as he ever was. Its way of life is faithfully adhered to by many. It is the religion of at least a fifth of the world's population. It is an active mechanism that binds a diverse multi-ethnic community across the world as one Umma. Saying the *salām*, the universal Islamic greeting of peace, to another Muslim anywhere in the world breaks down barriers, elicits a friendly smile, and emanates a feeling of comfort and security. Muslims are able to break bread together in the name of Allāh (*bismillāh*) and eat from the same platter, regardless of their ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic background. During a recent visit to Senegal, a group of Britons of South Asian descent, myself among them, sat alongside several guests of various African tribes, eating couscous comfortably with our hands from the same platter as our African host, whom we had met for the first time only an hour earlier. A scholar of eighty-two years in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, told us that the only reason he had decided to meet us was our faith, and that was our motivation in meeting him as well. Muslims the world over still unite on the formula of *tawḥīd*, "There is no god but Allāh, and Muḥammad is His Messenger."

Eternally binding the Umma is faith in Allāh and His Prophet ﷺ. Allāh says in the Qur'ān, "The believers are brothers" (Q 49:10). The stronger the faith, the greater the bond of brotherhood. The Prophet of Allāh ﷺ said, "The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion and sympathy are just like one body. When one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds to it with sleeplessness and fever" (*Bukhārī, Muslim*). Thus, with faith comes compassion, kindness, and sympathy. People of other faiths often find it difficult to comprehend the love that Muslims have for their Prophet and why they care so deeply for anything perceived as an attack against him. Anyone who so much as glances through a biography and the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ with true objectivity should at least recognize that his character, compassion, empathy for humanity, and complete moral rectitude make him an exceptional human being. For the believer, these qualities create a love of awe and esteem, and the continual discovery of his excellent qualities deepens this love still further.



of the Muʿtazilī school. It was enforced by invoking the power and influence of the state, and was made a criterion for determining one's heresy or one's adherence to the true faith. This brought forth vehement opposition from the ḥadīth scholars, with Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal at the helm of the movement.

Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal

Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal was born in Baghdad in Rabīʿ al-Awwal 164/780. He hailed from the Arab tribe of Shaybān, which was renowned for its courage, endurance, grit, and vigor.¹ His grandfather, Ḥanbal ibn Hilāl, had migrated from Basra to Khurasan and was appointed governor of Sarakhsh under the Umayyads, but he was sympathetic to the Abbasid scheme to install Banū Hāshim, the descendants of the Prophet ﷺ, in place of the Umayyads. After his father's death, his mother migrated to Baghdad, where Aḥmad was born. Although placed in dire circumstances, his mother took pains to provide him with the best possible education. Aḥmad, despite his lack of means, also learned to be industrious, patient, resolute, and self-restrained. He committed the Qur'ān to memory while still young, studied literature for some time, and then enlisted in an office to gain proficiency in writing.

Aḥmad possessed a virtue and a purity of conscience from his early childhood. His uncle held the post of an official reporter in Baghdad and used to send dispatches to his superiors about the affairs of the city. Once he handed over a bundle of his dispatches to Aḥmad for delivery to a courier, but Aḥmad threw them away in the river because he thought they contained secret reports about certain persons. While he was working as an apprentice in the correspondence office, many housewives whose husbands were away on military duty came to have their letters read out to them and replies written on their behalf. Aḥmad would oblige them, but he refused to write anything he considered undignified or against the Shariʿa. It was on the basis of these distinctive qualities that a discerning man (Haytham ibn Jamīl) predicted that "if the young man remains alive, he will be a model for the people of his time."²

regarded as rationalist and progressive, but they proved to be the most turbulent sectarians, since they endeavored to stifle all opposition to their creed. They filled the entire Islamic world with rancor and fanned the flame of hatred between different segments of the populace. The manner in which they dealt with their opponents is reminiscent of the courts of Inquisition set up by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages for the repression of liberal thinkers. This behavior is what ultimately gave a death blow to Muʿtazilism.

¹ The famous commander under Caliph Abū Bakr, Muthannā ibn Ḥāritha, hailed from the same tribe.

² Dhahabī, *Tarjamat al-Imām*, 16.

In religious sciences, Aḥmad paid special attention to the ḥadīths. In the beginning he took notes of the ḥadīths from Abū Yūsuf and then studied for four years under a famous ḥadīth scholar of Baghdad, Haytham ibn Bashīr (d. 182/798).¹ During this period he also received education from ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Mahdī, Abū Bakr ibn ʿAyyāsh, and a few other reputed teachers of ḥadīth. Aḥmad was an avid and industrious student. He often wanted to leave home for his studies so early in the morning that his mother had to beg him to wait until the call for the morning prayer was heard and the darkness had at least begun to fade away.

After completing his education in Baghdad, he set out for Basra, Hijaz, Yemen, Syria, and Upper Mesopotamia (Jazīra)² to attend the lectures of the reputed scholars of ḥadīth in these places. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal met Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī in 187/803 while on his first visit to Hijaz.³ He met Shāfiʿī again in Baghdad after he had expanded the science of jurisprudence into a comprehensive system and developed the doctrine of *ijmāʿ* (consensus). Aḥmad had acquired such proficiency by then that Shāfiʿī used to depend on his knowledge, and often asked Aḥmad to enlighten him about the authenticity of certain ḥadīths.

Aḥmad wanted to set off for Rayy, in Iran, to attend the lectures of a reputed ḥadīth scholar, Jarīr ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥamid, but could not go because of a lack of funds. He often remarked that if he had even ninety dirhams, he would have left for Rayy. Another incident indicative of his zeal for acquiring knowledge of ḥadīth has been related by the historians. In 198/813 he decided to depart to Hijaz and then, after performing the ḥajj, to Sanaʿa, Yemen, to listen to ḥadīth from ʿAbd al-Razzāq ibn al-Humām. One of his colleagues, Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn, also promised to accompany him. However, when they were circumambulating the Kaʿba, they happened to meet ʿAbd al-Razzāq ibn al-Humām. Ibn Maʿīn was acquainted with him so he greeted him and introduced Aḥmad to him. He also made a request to give them some time for learning the ḥadīths from him. After ʿAbd al-Razzāq left, Aḥmad told Ibn Maʿīn that it was not befitting for them to take advantage of the shaykh's presence in Makka to listen the ḥadīths from him. Although Ibn Maʿīn pleaded

1 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib al-Imām Aḥmad*, 23.

2 Jazīra is the name used for the uplands of northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria and southeastern Turkey. It refers to the northern section of Mesopotamia, which together with Sawād, made up Iraq. The name means "island," and at one time referred to the land between the river Euphrates and Tigris.

3 Abū Zahra, *Ibn Ḥanbal*, 33.

Nūr al-Dīn Zangī & *Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī*

The Crusaders

The Umma of Islam devoted its attention to educational and intellectual pursuits on the one hand, while Christendom consolidated its might to wipe out the entire Islamic world on the other. Europe had nourished an intense hatred for Islam ever since the Arabs had taken arms against the eastern possessions of the Byzantine Empire. All the holy places of Christendom, including the birthplace of ʿĪsā ﷺ, were under Muslim rule. This alone was sufficient cause for Europe to yearn for vengeance against Islam, but the existence of powerful Islamic states and their continued inroads into the Christian countries prevented them from developing the heart to hope for Muslim territories. However, the decline of the Seljuq Empire and the insecure conditions in Asia Minor and Syria toward the end of the fifth/eleventh century were in many respects to Europe's advantage. At the same time, Christian lands received a wandering preacher, Peter the Hermit, who could move thousands of poor Christians from one corner of Europe to another through his eloquence and fiery zeal. In addition, numerous other social and economic factors combined to cover the religious venture of the Crusaders with a veneer of romance, albeit tainted with avarice, ambition, and lust.¹

The first eastward march of the Crusaders toward Syria commenced in 490/1197. Within two years the great cities of Edessa (Ruhā),² and Antioch and several fortresses were captured, and by 492/1099 the Christians had taken possession of Jerusalem itself. Within a few years the greater part of Palestine

1 For detailed account of these reasons, see "Crusades," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

2 Present-day Urfa in southeastern Turkey.

and the coast of Syria, Tortosa, Acre, Tripoli¹ and Sidon fell into the hands of the Crusaders. “The Crusaders penetrated like a wedge between the old wood and the new,” wrote Stanley Lane-Poole, “and for a while seemed to cleave the trunk of the Mohammedan empire into splinters.”² The capture of Jerusalem threw the fanatical horde of Crusaders into a frenzy, and gave rise to their wildest passions; such savagery even their own writers were ashamed to confess, yet unable to deny. Here is a graphic account of the massacre of Muslims after the fall of Jerusalem:

So terrible, it is said, was the carnage which followed that the horses of the Crusaders who rode up to the mosque of Omar were knee-deep in the stream of blood. Infants were seized by their feet and dashed against the walls or whirled over the battlements, while the Jews were all burnt alive in the synagogue.

On the next day the horrors of that which had preceded it were deliberately repeated on a larger scale. Tancred had given a guarantee of safety to 300 captives. In spite of his indignant protest these were all brought out and killed; and a massacre followed in which the bodies of men, women and children were hacked and hewn until their fragments lay tossed together in heaps. The work of slaughter ended, the streets of the city were washed by Saracen prisoners.³

The fall of Jerusalem marks the beginning of the decline of Muslim power and the increasing strength of the Christian West, which succeeded in establishing four Latin kingdoms in Jerusalem, Edessa, Antioch, and Tripoli in the territory bordering the eastern end of the Mediterranean from the Euphrates to Egypt, placing the entire Muslim world in danger of annihilation. The ambition of the Warriors of the Cross ran so high that Reginald (Raynald) of Châtillon once expressed the desire to cross over to Arabia with the clear design of sacking Makka and Madīna, taking the body of the blessed Prophet ﷺ out of his grave.⁴ Never since the rise of the Apostates following the death of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ had such a grave danger threatened Islam. With the existence of Islam at stake for the second time in history, its adherents had to take the field for a decisive battle with the Latin West.

1 Tripoli (or Tarābulus), a city in the northwest of present-day Lebanon. This was known as the Tripoli of the East while its namesake in Libya was known as the Tripoli of the West.

2 Stanley Lane-Poole, *Saladin*, 25.

3 “Crusades,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 6:627.

4 *Saladin*, 177.