



Anthropomorphic Tendencies

amongst some from the Hanābila

Imām Ibn al-Jawzī

translated by Merlin Swartz

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I have observed that some members of the [Hanbalī] school have taken positions on matters of usul that are not acceptable. Among them there are three persons, namely, Abu ‘Abdullāh bin Hāmid, his disciple the Qādī [Abu Ya’la], and Ibn Zaghūnī, who have detailed [their views] in writing and whose books have brought shame on the school. In my view they have descended to the level of the vulgar masses (*awāmm*) by interpreting [texts from the Qur’ān and the Hadith bearing on] the divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) in accordance with the requirements of sense perception (*‘alā muqtad al-biṣ*). Thus when they learn that Allāh created Adam in his own ‘form’ (*sūra*), they conclude that Allāh has a form consisting of a face (*wajh*), which [they say is an attribute] added to His Essence (*ḡā’id ‘alāl dhāt*), two eyes, a mouth, an uvula, molars, a forehead bearing the marks of prostration (*subuhāt*), two hands, fingers, even a little finger and a thumb, a chest and a thigh, two legs and two feet, but they add: “*We know of no reference to a head.*”

They also assert that Allāh can touch and be touched, and that a person may actually draw near to the Divine Essence. Some of them even say that [Allāh] breathes. They delight the uneducated public by advancing their views that contravene the canons of reason. Having adopted a literal interpretation of the divine names (*asmā’*) and the attributes (*ṣifāt*) they go on to apply the term ‘attribute’ [to both of them] indiscriminately, [which is] an innovative method of designation for which there is no evidence (*dalīl*) in scripture or reason. They ignore the scriptural texts (*nusūs*) that discourage a literalistic interpretation (*ḡawābir*) in favour of modes of representation (*ma`ānī*) that are necessary to Allāh’s [oneness and transcendence] and [require] the negation of those references (*ṣimāt*) which, when taken literally, imply origination in time (*budūth*). They are not satisfied to call such ‘an attribute of action’ (*ṣifāt fi`l*) but insist on designating it ‘an attribute of essence’ (*ṣifāt dhāt*). Then having declared them to be such, they refuse to interpret along the lines required by literary usage, in which case the expression ‘hand [of Allāh]’ should be taken to mean His power (*qudra*) or blessing (*ni`ma*); [references to His] ‘arriving’ (*māji*) or ‘coming’ (*ityān*) as his kindness (*birr*) or His benevolence (*lutf*), and [references to His] ‘thigh’ (*saq*) as His might (*shidda*). Rather they say: “*We interpret such expressions literally (‘alā ḡābir).*”

However, since the literal meaning takes human qualities (*nu'ūt al-adamiyīn*) as its point of reference, the expression may be construed in its concrete, literal sense (*`alā haqīqatibī*) only when that is possible; if that is not possible then it ought to be construed metaphorically (*`alā majāz*). [In reality,] they are steeped in [the methods] of anthropomorphism (*tashbīb*), their following having come from the uneducated classes (*`awāmm*).

I have thus [thought it necessary to] expose the errors of both those who follow and those who are followed [in these matters]. I say to my fellow Hanbalis: You are proponents of scripture and tradition (*naql wa-ittibā`*), and your distinguished imam, Ahmad bin Hanbal, used to say when he was being scourged [on account of his beliefs]: “How can I say what has not been said [before]?” Be on your guard, therefore, lest you introduce heretical doctrines into his teaching! Did [Ahmad] ever discourse on such matters as the recitation (*tilāwa*) and what is recited (*matlum*), the reading (*qirā`a*) and what is read (*maqrū`*)? Has anyone ever reported to you that [Ahmad] taught that Allāh’s *istiwā`* on the Throne is one of the attributes of essence (*sifāt al-dhāt*) or an attribute of action (*sifāt al-fi`l*)? On what grounds do you justify venturing into [a discussion of] such matters? Some of you have stated that a ‘hand’ is to be ascribed to Allāh as an attribute added to His Essence (*zā`ida `alāl dhāt*). All such statements are in conflict with established norms and are repugnant to those who oppose innovation (*bid`a*). You insist that the traditions of the Prophet are to be interpreted literally (*`alā zāhir*), but the literal meaning of ‘foot’ (*qadam*), [alleged to be one of the divine attributes] is ‘limb’ (*jariba*). The only acceptable method is to allow [the words of scripture] to stand as they appear in the text [without comment]. They are to be recited, but nothing is to be added.

If you had understood the difference between the two positions, you would not have fallen into error. When it is said that Jesus is a spirit of Allāh (*rūbullāh*), Christians maintain that ‘spirit’ (*rūh*) is an attribute (*sifā*) of Allāh which entered into Mary. [Likewise] those who affirm that Allāh sits on the Throne in His essence (*bi-dhātibi*) have relegated Him to the realm of the physical senses (*hissiyāt*). It is essential that due consideration be given to the established by the principle of reason, for it is through this latter that we can know [that] the Creator [exists] and can ascertain Him to be eternal. Use reason, then, to shield Allāh from those finite, corporeal qualities (*tashbīb aw-tajsīm*) that are alien to His being, and permit the traditions of the Prophet to stand exactly as you find them, without adding to or subtracting from them! If you had said: “*We recite them [without comment]*,” no one would have censured you. It is your interpretation of them in a literalistic fashion (*`alāl zāhir*) alone that is objectionable. Refrain from insinuating into the doctrine of [Ahmad] our pious ancestor, what he never taught! Instead you have brought shame and dishonour to the school, so much so that the only thing that is now said of a Hanbali is that he is an anthropomorphist (*mujassim*). Not only that, but you have embellished your doctrine with a narrowly partisan devotion (*`asabiyya*) to Yazīd [bin Mu`awiyya] even though you know quite well that the founder of the school actually permitted the cursing [of Yazīd]. Abū Muhammad al-Tamīmī used to say of one of your leaders that he had brought such shame on this school that it would not be washed away until the day of resurrection.

The errors of the authors to whom I have referred above fall into seven categories:

(1) They take scriptural texts which refer only to the qualifications (*awsāf*) and construe them as though they were *akhbar as-sifat*. Not everything ascribed to Allāh [in scripture], however, should be assigned the status of an attribute (*sifa*). Thus, when the Qur'an relates Allāh as having said: "I breathed into [Adam] My spirit (*rūh*)," the reference to "spirit" (*rūh*) here should not be taken to mean that Allāh possesses an attribute by that name. Indeed, those who term a simple qualification (*mudaf*) an attribute have departed from normative practice.

(2) They say that the meaning of those sayings of the Prophet that fall into the category of the ambiguous sayings (*mutashabbihāt*) is known only to Allāh. But then they add: "We take [these obscure texts] in their literal sense (*alā ṣāhibihā*)." How strange is it that the literal meaning (*ṣāhib*) is one that only Allāh knows? Can the term *istiwā*, when taken in its literal sense, mean anything other than 'sitting' (*qu'ūd*), or the term *nuḥūl* anything other than 'movement' (*intiḳāl*)?

(3) They ascribe attributes to Allāh [carelessly, not understanding] that attributes (*sifāt*) ought to be predicated of Allāh on the same basis as essence (*dhāt*) is predicated, [that is] only on the authority of peremptory evidence (*adilla qāt'iyya*). Ibn Hāmid said:

Anyone who rejects what is ascribed to Allāh in reliable traditions (*akhbār thabita*), has he [not] blasphemed in a double sense? The majority of Hanbalīs hold that those who reject traditions in which a leg, foot, fingers, palm and so forth are predicated to Allāh are to be declared unbelievers even if the traditions in question have come down from a single source (*abād*) for, in our view, their contents belong to the category of authoritative knowledge (*ilm*).

Statements of this sort can come only from one who does not understand the principles of jurisprudence or those of reason.

(4) They fail to distinguish between those prophetic traditions that rest on multiple authorities (*ḵhabar mashbūr*) such as "He (Allāh) descends to the lowest heaven," and traditions that are not at all reliable such as, for example, the saying "I saw my Lord in the best form (*fī aḥsani sūratin*)." In fact, they establish divine attributes on the basis of both categories indiscriminately.

(5) They make no distinction between traditions whose line of transmission goes back to the Prophet (*marfū'*) and those that go back only to a Companion or a Follower. Indeed they predicate attributes of Allāh on the basis of both types of traditions without distinction.

(6) They interpret certain expressions metaphorically (*ta`annwalu*) in one place but refuse to do so in [another] place. Thus, for example, they take the divine saying "He who comes to Me walking I will come to him running" as a figure of speech referring to Allāh's bestowal of blessings on His creatures. However, in connection with the saying of `Umar bin `Abdul `Azīz: "On the day of resurrection, Allāh will come walking," they insist on a literal interpretation. How strange it is that they interpret a saying going back to the Prophet metaphorically but refuse to do so when considering [a similar saying] from `Umar bin `Abdul `Azīz!

(7) Finally, they make sense experience the basis of their interpretation of the hadith. Thus, they say that Allāh Himself (*bi-dhātibi*) descends (*yanzīlu*) and moves from place to place (*yantaqilu wa-yatabarraku*). they maintain that such statements are not to be understood rationally. By such sophistry they deceive those who listen to them and they contradict both sense experience and reason (*al-hiss wal `aql*).¹



¹ Translated by Merlin Swartz, *A Medieval Critique of Anthropomorphism: Ibn al-Jawzī's Kitāb Akhbār as-Sifāt*; Brill (2002) p. 122-129