

THE ISLAMIC DOCTRINE OF *TAKFĪR*  
(EXCOMMUNICATION): TRACING ITS  
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE  
THOUGHT OF IBN ḤANBAL, IBN TAYMIYYA,  
AND MUḤAMMAD IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB

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**Abstract**

*This article traces the long-term historical development of Islamic doctrine on takfīr (excommunication, declaring a self-professed Muslim to be a disbeliever). I focus on a line of influential scholars associated with the ahl al-ḥadīth and the Ḥanbalī school—Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), and Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792)—and examine how these scholars view takfīr in relation to three key topics: non-application of the sharī‘a, denial of Allah’s attributes (ṣifāt), and shirk (taking a being other than Allah as a god). In addition, I document the scholars’ varying approach to the “excuse for ignorance” (al-‘udhr bi’l jah) that prevents takfīr for individuals who lack knowledge of relevant Islamic teachings and examine the role of historical events and politics in shaping the development of the takfīr doctrine, with the focus of scholars’ attention shifting according to the circumstances confronting them.*

**Keywords:** criminal law, disbelief (*shirk*), excommunication (*takfīr*), “excuse for ignorance,” *jihād*, mitigation, punishment, Salafis, *sharī‘a*

INTRODUCTION\*

*Takfīr* is one of the most important concepts in the Islamic tradition. It means “excommunication,” or declaring a self-professed Muslim to be a *kāfir* (non-Muslim).<sup>1</sup> Those declared *kāfirs* are to be punished with death and fought through religious warfare (*jihād*).<sup>2</sup> The earliest Muslim sects were intensely concerned with the topic of *takfīr* and frequently excommunicated one another (e.g., the Khārijīs, Murjī’īs, Shī’īs, Mu’tazilīs).<sup>3</sup> Around the eleventh century CE, Muslims (arguably) adopted a more restrained attitude towards *takfīr*.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, movements that favored less restraint arose periodically.<sup>5</sup>

The present article examines the long-term development of *takfīr* doctrine among the *ahl al-ḥadīth*/Hanbalīs. The *ahl al-ḥadīth* emerged between the late eighth and early ninth centuries CE and were the dominant theological school in the early Sunnī sect.<sup>6</sup> All early Muslim sects acknowledged the Qur’ān’s authority. They also granted some authority to *ḥadīth* reports while

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\* Acknowledgments: I would like to express my thanks to Indonesian International Islamic University for supporting the research that made this article possible. In particular, I wish to thank Dr. Jamhari Makruf (the Rector), and Dr. Yanwar Pribadi (Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies). Additionally, I wish to thank Maggie Sager and the two anonymous reviewers for their assistance and valuable feedback on the manuscript.

1 Given its Christian origins and connotations, the term “excommunication” is not ideal. However, it is the most suitable English translation for *takfīr*.

2 See SHERMAN JACKSON, ON THE BOUNDARIES OF THEOLOGICAL TOLERANCE IN ISLAM (2002); YOHANAN FRIEDMANN, TOLERANCE AND COERCION IN ISLAM 121–59 (2003); CAMILLA ADANG, HASSAN ANSARI & MARIBEL FIERRO (EDS.), ACCUSATIONS OF UNBELIEF IN ISLAM (2016); HUSSAM TIMANI, TAKFĪR IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT (2018).

3 See MICHAEL COOK, COMMANDING RIGHT AND FORBIDDING WRONG IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT 393–429 (2004); JEFFREY KENNEY, MUSLIM REBELS 19–54 (2006); 1–5 JOSEF VAN ESS, THEOLOGY AND SOCIETY IN THE SECOND AND THIRD CENTURIES OF THE HIJRA (2020); ADAM GAISER, SECTARIANISM IN ISLAM (2023).

4 Evidence for this will be presented below.

5 E.g., Almohads, Qadizadelis, Wahhābīs. See ADANG ET AL., *supra* note 2; TIMANI, *supra* note 2.

6 See CHRISTOPHER MELCHERT, THE FORMATION OF THE SUNNI SCHOOLS OF LAW, 9TH–10TH CENTURIES C.E. (1997); Wesley Williams, *Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse*, 34 INT’L J. MIDDLE E. STUD. 441–63 (2002); NIMROD HURVITZ, THE FORMATION OF HANBALISM (2002); GAISER, *supra* note 3 at 147–65; AHMAD KHAN, HERESY AND THE FORMATION OF MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC ORTHODOXY (2023).

recognizing that many reports were untrustworthy or fabricated. The *ahl al-ḥadīth* differed from other sects in three basic ways. First, they granted maximal authority to *ḥadīth* reports. Second, they systematically compiled these reports in large collections (e.g., Mālik’s *Muwattaʿa*, Ibn Ḥanbal’s *Musnad*, al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*). Third, they favored a strongly literalistic approach to the interpretation of scriptural texts (*nuṣūṣ*), that is, the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* reports. Other sects were less trusting of *ḥadīth* reports and more open to non-literal forms of scriptural interpretation. Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) was the most important authority among the *ahl al-ḥadīth*. Over the ninth and tenth centuries, the majority of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* evolved into the Ḥanbalī theological and legal school. Nevertheless, around the eleventh century, the *ahl al-ḥadīth*/Ḥanbalīs would lose their position as the dominant Sunnī theological school to the Ashʿarī and Māturīdī schools. (These two theological schools were adopted by the Shāfiʿī, Ḥanafī, and Mālikī legal schools). Three figures played a leading role in shaping *ahl al-ḥadīth*/Ḥanbalī doctrine on *takfīr*: Ibn Ḥanbal and the later Ḥanbalī scholars Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792).

Existing studies of *takfīr* focus heavily on individuals, sects, and movements that many Muslims and non-Muslims perceive as endorsing sweeping forms of excommunication.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, such studies generally do not examine the long-term development of *takfīr* doctrine over time. Thus, many regard Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb as two of Islam’s most influential advocates for wide-ranging excommunication. Consequently, studies have given significant attention to these figures, as have the Wahhābī and Salafī movements that their ideas inspired.<sup>8</sup> However, such studies do not provide a broader history of Ḥanbalī *takfīr* doctrine. The present article takes up

7 JACKSON, *supra* note 2; ADANG ET AL., *supra* note 2; TIMANI, *supra* note 2.

8 Ahmad Dallal, *The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750–1850*, 113 J. AM. ORIENTAL SOC’Y 341–59 (1993); DAVID COMMS, *THE WAHHABI MISSION AND SAUDI ARABIA* (2006); Denise Aigle, *The Mongol Invasions of Bilād al-Shām by Ghāzān Khān and Ibn Taymīyah’s Three “Anti-Mongol” Fatwas*, 11 MAMLŪK STUD. REV. 89–120 (2007); Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya between Moderation and Radicalism*, in *RECLAIMING ISLAMIC TRADITION 177–203* (Elisabeth Kendall & Ahmad Khan eds., 2016); COLE BUNZEL, *WAHHABISM* (2023); Mehdi Berriah, *Ibn Taymiyya as a Hermeneutical Paradigm: Reception and Reactivation of Medi-*

this task by addressing several interrelated topics which have not been covered in earlier research. It examines the *takfīr* doctrine of Ibn Ḥanbal and the “early” *ahl al-ḥadīth* (i.e., those who lived between the eighth and tenth centuries). It also explains how their ideas relate to the *takfīr* doctrine of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. To do this, the article examines three key topics related to *takfīr*. Though linked to one another, these topics have not been analyzed together in previous studies.

The first topic concerns non-application of the *sharī‘a* (i.e., failing to implement *sharī‘a* rulings in judgement and governance). I argue that Ibn Ḥanbal and the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* strongly opposed excommunicating governments or rebelling against them for non-application of the *sharī‘a*. They associate such behavior with heretical Khārijī beliefs. Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb take a more complicated stance. Although they caution against illicit rebellion, they also argue for excommunicating governments that severely fail in applying the *sharī‘a*. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb put their ideas into practice. Ibn Taymiyya excommunicated the Mongol government and mobilized a *jihād* campaign against them. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb did likewise with the Ottoman government and their allies.

The second topic concerns denial of Allah’s attributes (*ṣifāt*) (i.e., denying that scriptural descriptions of Allah are true in any literal or semi-literal sense). I argue that Ibn Ḥanbal strongly promotes excommunicating individuals for denying Allah’s attributes. On the other hand, Ibn Ḥanbal also endorses an “excuse for ignorance” (*al-‘udhr bi’l-jahl*). This means that a person can be pardoned for egregious beliefs and actions if he or she lacks knowledge of relevant Islamic teachings. An ignorant person of this type is not to be excommunicated. Like Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyya holds that denial of Allah’s attributes merits *takfīr*. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya also tightly restrains such *takfīr* by maximally expanding the notion of an excuse for ignorance. He asserts that even highly educated religious scholars deserve to be excused. Furthermore, he holds that, in later

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*eval Islamic Thought in the Jihadist Discourse of Ayman al-Zawahiri*, 4 *ITIHAD J. FOR ISLAMIC & ARABIC STUD.* 21 (2025); DANIEL LAV, *SALAFI POLITICAL THEOLOGY* (2025).

Islamic times, ignorance has spread so widely that entire societies deserve to be excused. While Allah's attributes are a central concern of Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb shows little interest in this matter.

The third topic pertains to *shirk* (i.e., taking a being other than Allah as a god). I argue that Ibn Ḥanbal and the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* do not believe that there is a great risk of Muslims falling into *shirk*. They exhibit a comparatively tolerant attitude towards practices like seeking blessings from graves and relics, as well as making requests from dead persons, *jinn*, and angels. On the other hand, for Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, such practices raise deep concerns over *shirk*, and in many cases can justify *takfīr*. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya tightly restrains *takfīr* by granting an expansive excuse for ignorance to Muslims guilty of *shirk*. By contrast, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb minimizes the excuse for ignorance. Furthermore, he advocates for excommunicating those guilty of *shirk*, and for waging *jihād* campaigns against them.

Besides providing a general history of Ḥanbalī *takfīr* doctrine, the article makes three additional contributions. First, unlike previous studies, it explains the origins and development of the "excuse for ignorance" as a crucial component of *takfīr* doctrine. Second, by taking a long-term view, the article is able to explain the role of historical contingency in shaping *takfīr* doctrine. I argue that *takfīr* doctrine moved along an unpredictable trajectory and was reoriented multiple times by particular events. During the seventh and eighth centuries, Muslim thinking on *takfīr* focused on non-application of the *sharī'a* and whether this justified political rebellion. However, debates on these matters subsided as the emerging *ahl al-ḥadīth* took strong stances against Khārijism and rebellion. During the ninth century, Muslim thinking on *takfīr* came to focus on the denial of Allah's attributes. This was largely due to 'Abbāsīd state policies that sought to impose a particular Mu'tazilī understanding of Allah's attributes. Following the ninth century, Muslim societies gradually ascribed increasing power to dead prophets and saints while introducing elaborate rituals for interacting with them. By the twelfth century some Muslims

began strongly criticizing these developments as *shirk*, while reorienting *takfīr* doctrine towards a greater focus on *shirk*. Third, the article explains the role of politics in shaping *takfīr* doctrine. Existing studies recognize that particular political commitments underlie the views of Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyya, and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.<sup>9</sup> However, the present article goes a step further by highlighting shared features of their thinking on *takfīr*. Hence, all three figures strongly advocate loyalty to the governments under which they lived. They put forth an understanding of *takfīr* that rejects excommunicating these governments or rebelling against them. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb advocate excommunicating and fighting enemy foreign governments. While the *takfīr* doctrine of such figures cannot be reduced to politics, it is partly influenced by political loyalties.

Although texts written by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb are readily available, matters are more problematic when it comes to Ibn Ḥanbal. Numerous texts and opinions are attributed to him, but such attributions are often contentious.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, material attributed to Ibn Ḥanbal was generated (at least in part) by early Ḥanbalī scholars living within a century or two of his life. For the sake of simplicity, the present article will concentrate on early and widely accepted reports about Ibn Ḥanbal’s opinions, with the understanding that some of these opinions may in fact originate with early Ḥanbalī scholars.

I structure the article as follows. I begin by introducing classic Sunnī *takfīr* doctrine. Next, I discuss the *takfīr* doctrine of Ibn Ḥanbal and the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* with respect to non-application of *sharī‘a*, denial of Allah’s attributes, and *shirk*. I treat these topics in order of their historical emergence, which I argue must be kept in mind to understand the development of early *ahl al-ḥadīth takfīr* doctrine. In the next sections, I discuss Ibn Taymiyya’s *takfīr* doctrine with respect to denial of Allah’s

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<sup>9</sup> Hoover, *supra* note 8; KHAN, *supra* note 6, at 184–205; BUNZEL, *supra* note 8, at 27.

<sup>10</sup> ABDUL HAKIM AL-MATROUDI, THE ḤANBALI SCHOOL OF LAW AND IBN TAYMIYYA 10–13 (2006);

Andrew McLaren, *Ibn Ḥanbal’s Refutation of the Jahmiyya*, 140 J. AM. ORIENTAL SOC’Y 901 (2022).

attributes, then *shirk*, and then non-application of *sharī‘a*. Here, I address non-application of *sharī‘a* last because it occupies a less important place in Ibn Taymiyya’s thought. Finally, I discuss Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s *takfīr* doctrine with respect to *shirk* and non-application of *sharī‘a*. This reflects the fact that *shirk* dominates Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s thought, and he does not engage with the subject of Allah’s attributes.

## SECTION I: CLASSIC SUNNĪ *TAKFĪR* DOCTRINE

Classic Sunnī *takfīr* doctrine crystallized around the eleventh century and received its most systematic and authoritative expression in the work of the Ash‘arī theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111).<sup>11</sup> Classic doctrine is a useful point of departure in thinking about the long-term development of Sunnī thinking on *takfīr*. Although classic doctrine is complex and multifaceted, it is shaped by four key ideas. First, generally speaking, people can be excommunicated for incorrect beliefs but not incorrect actions. However, as we will see, many early Muslims, including the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, were more open to excommunicating people for incorrect actions. Second, people merit *takfīr* when they reject the teachings of Prophet Muḥammad (i.e., they disbelieve in them).<sup>12</sup> Third, *takfīr* should be avoided to the greatest extent possible.<sup>13</sup> One oft-cited *ḥadīth* report quotes the Prophet as warning: “If a man says to his brother ‘O *kāfir*,’ then it is true of one of them.”<sup>14</sup> To restrain *takfīr*, classic doctrine stipulates that individuals can only be excommunicated for rejecting Prophetic teachings that have been proven with certainty (such that they

11 See ABŪ ḤĀMID AL-GHAZĀLĪ, *FAYṢAL AL-TAFRIQA BAYNA AL-ISLĀM WA’L-ZANDAQA* (Dār al-Minhāj 2017); ABŪ ḤĀMID AL-GHAZĀLĪ, *AL-IQTISĀD FĪ AL-‘IṬIQĀD* 133–38 (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya 2004); JACKSON, *supra* note 2; Also see ADANG ET EL., *supra* note 2, at 8; TIMANI, *supra* note 2, at 75–94; FRANK GRIFFEL, *AL-GHAZĀLĪ’S PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY* 111–22 (2009). Other examples of classic *takfīr* doctrine include I YAḤYĀ B. SHARAF AL-NĀWAWĪ, *AL-MINHĀJ SHARḤ ṢAḤĪḤ MUSLIM B. AL-ḤAJJĀJ* 150 (Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī 1392 AH); 9 MUWAFFAQ AL-DIN IBN QUDĀMA, *AL-MUGHNĪ* 11–13 (Maktabat al-Qāhira 1969).

12 See AL-GHAZĀLĪ, *FAYṢAL*, *supra* note 11, at 84–85.

13 *Id.* at 82.

14 8 MUḤAMMAD B. ISMĀ‘ĪL AL-BUKHĀRĪ, *ṢAḤĪḤ AL-BUKHĀRĪ* 73 (Dār al-Ta’šīl 2012).

are “necessarily known” or *ma‘lūm min al-dīn bi’l-darūra*).<sup>15</sup> Notably, the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* do not posit any limitation of this kind, which is one reason why their *takfīr* is less restrained. The fourth key idea is the excuse for ignorance (*al-‘udhr bi’l-jahl*). The Qur’ān indicates that people are not held responsible for unintentional sins due to lack of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Based on this, classic doctrine asserts that a person cannot be excommunicated for rejecting one of the Prophet’s teachings out of ignorance.<sup>17</sup> However, to better understand the four preceding ideas, some further clarifications are needed.

Classic doctrine holds that the Prophet’s teachings are proven through valid evidence (*dalīl*, pl. *dalā’il*). The three most important sources of evidence are the Qur’ānic text, Prophetic *ḥadīth* reports, and consensus opinions (*ijmā’*). The *ahl al-ḥadīth* hold a broadly similar view. In discussing evidence, classic doctrine gives significant attention to the question of how the Prophet’s teachings may be proven with certainty. Here the theory of *tawātur* is central.<sup>18</sup> This theory originated in Greek philosophy and was then gradually adapted by Mu‘tazilī and Ash‘arī scholars.<sup>19</sup> The theory posits that one may obtain certain (i.e., *darūrī*) knowledge about historical facts if they are corroborated by a sufficiently large number of separate contemporaneous reports. For example, we know with certainty that Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798 because various Egyptian, French, and British officials from the time reported this fact. Similarly, a sufficiently large number of separate contemporaneous reports can prove with certainty that the Prophet made particular statements or performed particular actions.

Classic doctrine asserts that the Qur’ānic text is proven with certainty through *tawātur*.<sup>20</sup> Put differently, there is a suf-

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15 AL-GHAZĀLĪ, FAYSAL, *supra* note 11, at 84; AL-NAWAWĪ, *supra* note 11, at 150; 12 SHIHĀB AL-DĪN AL-QARĀFĪ, AL-DHAKHĪRA 28–29 (Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī 1994).

16 See, e.g., Qur’ān 2:286, 33:5.

17 AL-GHAZĀLĪ, FAYSAL, *supra* note 11, at 84; AL-NAWAWĪ, *supra* note 11, at 150; IBN QUDĀMA, *supra* note 11, at 11–13; 28 IBN TAYMIYYA, MAJMŪ‘ AL-FATĀWĀ 500–01 (Majma‘ al-Malik Fahd 2004).

18 See generally SUHEIL LAHER, TAWĀTUR IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT (2025).

19 LAHER, *supra* note 18, at 20–30.

20 *Id.* at 105–152, 199–200.

ficiently large number of contemporaneous reports to establish, beyond doubt, that the Prophet proclaimed a Qur'ānic text that matches the text used by later generations.

Matters are more complicated with respect to *ḥadīth* reports. Classic doctrine recognizes that many *ḥadīth* reports are untrustworthy (*da'īf*) or outright fabrications (*mawḍū'*). Moreover, even a report with a sound chain of transmitters (*ṣaḥīḥ*) cannot prove the Prophet's actions and statements with certainty. On the other hand, classic doctrine asserts that, in some cases, there exists a sufficiently large number of separate contemporaneous *ḥadīth* reports to prove things about the Prophet beyond doubt. These are known as *tawātur* reports (*al-ḥadīth al-mutawātir*). In rare instances, separate reports prove the exact wording of a statement made by the Prophet (*al-tawātur al-lafẓī*). However, far more often, these reports simply prove some more general fact about him (*al-tawātur al-ma'nawī*).<sup>21</sup> For example, it is known that the Prophet taught that sinners will be punished in their graves (*'adhāb al-qabr*), and that Muslims must recite *al-Fātiḥa* in their daily prayers.<sup>22</sup> One may doubt individual reports about the precise words or actions he used to communicate these teachings. However, the large and varied body of reports definitively establishes the basic fact that he taught these things.

Classic doctrine holds that the Prophet's teachings can only be proven with certainty through the Qur'ān, *tawātur ḥadīth* reports, and (in the view of some) consensus opinions. Consequently, a person may only be excommunicated for rejecting a Prophetic teaching established by such evidence. By contrast, teachings based on non-*tawātur ḥadīth* reports cannot justify *takfīr*.<sup>23</sup> Notably, although the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* are familiar with the theory of *tawātur*, it plays little role in their thinking about *takfīr*.<sup>24</sup>

One important additional issue pertains to interpretation. Classic *takfīr* doctrine holds that, when interpreting scriptural texts, literal and apparent meaning (*al-ḥaqīqa*, *al-zāhir*) takes

21 *Id.* at 134,169–71.

22 *Id.* at 43–45.

23 AL-GHAZĀLI, FAYṢAL, *supra* note 11, at 84–85.

24 LAHER, *supra* note 18, at 37–45.

precedence.<sup>25</sup> Departure from such meaning (*ta'wīl*) is not necessarily unacceptable, but it requires justification. There is a special hostility towards forms of interpretation that understand scripture in ways that are highly metaphorical (*al-majāz*) or esoteric (*al-bāṭin*). Significant departures from literal and apparent meaning can justify *takfīr*, especially where they function to negate central Islamic theological beliefs and *sharī'a* rules. For instance, Muslim philosophers (*falāsifa*) and Ismā'īlī Shī'īs challenged the belief in a literal hell, the belief that Allah created matter, the obligation to pray five times daily, and the obligation to fast during *Ramaḍān*. Both groups were excommunicated despite justifying their views through metaphorical and esoteric interpretations of scripture.<sup>26</sup> We will see that classic doctrine is somewhat more tolerant of non-literal interpretation than the early *ahl al-ḥadīth*.

Finally, we come to the excuse for ignorance. According to classic doctrine, some Muslims lack knowledge of Prophetic teachings that have been proven with certainty. When these ignorant Muslims reject such teachings, they are not to be immediately excommunicated. Rather they must be provided with knowledge to remove the ignorance. Such usually involves presenting scriptural texts along with explanations of these texts. This is sometimes referred to as “establishing the proof” (*iqāmat al-ḥujja*).<sup>27</sup> After receiving knowledge, the erring Muslim no longer has an excuse. Hence, if he or she persists in rejection, then *takfīr* is necessary.<sup>28</sup>

The excuse for ignorance is not granted to everyone. Hence, it is assumed that virtually all Muslims are aware of basic Islamic teachings, including many which have been established with certainty (e.g., that hell exists, that alcohol is forbidden).

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25 AL-GHAZĀLĪ, FAYSAL, *supra* note 11, at 56–81, 87–88; GRIFFEL, *supra* note 11, at 111–22.

26 ABŪ ḤĀMĪD AL-GHAZĀLĪ, FADĀ'IH AL-BĀTINIYYA 46–47 (Mu'assasat Dār al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya 1964); *id.*, AL-MUNQIDH MIN AL-ḌALĀL 193 (Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha 1979); GRIFFEL, *supra* note 11, at 111–22.

27 12 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 500–1. Also see 3 AL-JĀHĪZ, RASĀ'IL AL-JĀHĪZ 292 (Maktabat al-Khānjī 1964); 3 IBN TAYMIYYA, KITĀB JĀMĪ' AL-MASĀ'IL 145–46, 151 (Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2019).

28 1 AL-NAWĀWĪ, *supra* note 11, at 150; 9 IBN QUDĀMA, *supra* note 11, at 11–13.

Generally speaking, Muslims cannot claim ignorance in these matters. There are only limited exceptions. Islamic legal texts commonly mention two situations. One is the case of the new convert. The other is the person who lives in an isolated area with no access to Islamic learning.<sup>29</sup> We will see that the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* also endorse a type of excuse for ignorance—albeit one that is somewhat more vaguely defined.

**SECTION II: IBN ḤANBAL AND THE EARLY *AHL AL-ḤADĪTH* ON NON-APPLICATION OF THE *SHARĪʿA***

Contrary to classic doctrine, earlier forms of Muslim thought are more open to excommunicating people for incorrect actions (as well as beliefs). Indeed, (arguably) the first theological controversy in Islam concerns whether Muslims become *kāfirs* due to incorrect actions. The controversy is tied to particular Qurʾānic verses, many of which pertain to “hypocrites” (*munāfiqūn*). In the Qurʾān, the term “hypocrite” refers to individuals who claim to be Muslims but are actually *kāfirs*. The hypocrites are associated with a faction of Muslims in Medina who politically opposed the Prophet and cultivated alliances with his non-Muslim enemies (especially the Jews of Medina).

The Qurʾān describes hypocrites as doubting or disbelieving in the Prophet but pretending otherwise.<sup>30</sup> They also lack commitment to the Islamic message at the level of personal behavior. When it comes to pious acts like prayer and charity, hypocrites avoid them, lack sincere motivation, and often only do them to impress others.<sup>31</sup> Hypocrites are also described as lacking in commitment to the Islamic message at a social and political level. Hence, they mock the Islamic message and the believers.<sup>32</sup> They avoid offering military and financial support to the Muslim community<sup>33</sup> and encourage others to do the same.<sup>34</sup>

29 AL-GHAZĀLĪ, FAYSAL, *supra* note 11, at 84; AL-NAWAWĪ, *supra* note 11, at 150; IBN QUDĀMA, *supra* note 11, at 11–13; IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 500–01

30 Qurʾān 63:1–4, 33:12.

31 Qurʾān 4:142, 9:67.

32 Qurʾān 4:140, 9:64.

33 Qurʾān 33:12–14, 63:7.

34 Qurʾān 33:12–14, 63:7.

They ally with non-Muslim enemies of the Muslims.<sup>35</sup> They are ready to rebel against the Prophet if they see this as being in their interests.<sup>36</sup> The Qur'ān also criticizes the hypocrites for refusing to submit to the legal and political judgements of the Prophet.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Qur'ān 5:44 states: “And those who do not judge (*yahkum*) according to what Allah has revealed, then they are *kāfirs*.” Such verses appear in debates over non-application of the *sharī'a*. In classic Islamic writings, *sharī'a* refers to the full corpus of Allah's rulings (*aḥkām*) for regulating different aspects of human life, including worship, family relations, commercial transactions, criminal punishment, warfare, and the like. Social groups and states are obliged to “apply” the *sharī'a* by obeying its rulings and implementing them in governance and judgement. The preceding verses can be interpreted as suggesting that social groups and government officials who do not apply the *sharī'a* are hypocrites and/or *kāfirs*.

Significantly, existing sources indicate that the Prophet never excommunicated or fought the hypocrites. He seems to have avoided excommunicating specific individuals so long as they claimed to be Muslims.<sup>38</sup>

Ultimately, the Qur'ān itself does not lay down clear principles for differentiating Muslims from *kāfirs*, or for regulating *takfīr*. Controversy about these issues broke out immediately after the Prophet's death. At this time, Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) established a caliphal government and demanded the submission of all Muslims. A number of recently converted Arab tribes refused to submit and pay *zakāt* taxes to this government. Some also pledged allegiance to new prophets who had arisen among them.<sup>39</sup> The government excommunicated the insubordinate tribes and successfully subdued them through *jihād* between 11/632 and 12/633. These events are known as “Wars of Apostasy” (*ḥurūb al-ridda*). Insofar as the caliphal government was understood as representing Islam, the tribes' actions might be seen as opposition to the Islamic message on

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35 Qur'ān 59:11–12, 5:51–55.

36 Qur'ān 33:14, 63:8.

37 Qur'ān 4:59–61.

38 6 AL-BUKHĀRĪ, *supra* note 14, at 441–42.

39 E.g., Musaylima, Ṭalayḥa, al-Aswad al-'Ansī.

a social and political level. Moreover, according to some Sunnī scholars (including Ibn Taymiyya), tribes that merely refused to pay *zakāt* taxes thereby rejected the *sharīʿa*. Consequently, they became apostates.<sup>40</sup>

The issue of *takfīr* for non-application of the *sharīʿa* gained even more importance with the emergence of the Khārijīs in the mid-seventh century. Khārijīs deny that mere belief suffices to make one Muslim. Actions in keeping with the *sharīʿa* are also necessary. Khārijīs excommunicated individuals who violated the *sharīʿa* by committing major sins (*kabāʿir*) such as wine drinking, fornication, and failure to apply the *sharīʿa* (i.e., failure to apply the Qurʾān and the *ḥukm Allāh*).<sup>41</sup> Khārijīs also excommunicated governments that failed to apply the *sharīʿa* and rebelled against them with *jihād* campaigns. Based on these teachings, Khārijīs justified *takfīr* and *jihād* against the caliphs ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān (d. 35/656), ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), and Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān (d. 60/680).

Opposing the Khārijīs, other early sects developed alternative positions on *takfīr*. The Murjiʿīs, who emerged in the late seventh century, hold that mere belief makes one Muslim. Thus, major sins (including failure to apply the *sharīʿa*) do not make one a *kāfir*.<sup>42</sup> The Muʿtazilīs, who emerged in the mid-eighth century, hold that individuals who commit major sins are neither Muslims nor *kāfirs*. Rather, they have an intermediate status (*al-manzila bayna al-manzilatayn*). They are not excommunicated and killed in this life but will spend eternity in hell.<sup>43</sup>

The *ahl al-ḥadīth* developed a position between that of the Khārijīs and the Murjiʿīs. Like the Khārijīs, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* hold that the criterion for being a Muslim includes both beliefs and actions.<sup>44</sup> Ibn Abī Yaʿlā (d. 526/1131) attributes a creed to

40 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 545.

41 KENNEY, *supra* note 3, at 46; VAN ESS, *supra* note 3, at 21–44; GAISER, *supra* note 3, at 57–85.

42 VAN ESS, *supra* note 3, at 173–262; GAISER, *supra* note 3, at 126–36.

43 Racha El Omari, *The Muʿtazilite Movement (I): The Origins of the Muʿtazila*, in THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF ISLAMIC THEOLOGY 130–41 (Sabine Schmidtke ed., 2016); TIMANI, *supra* note 2, at 49–74; GAISER, *supra* note 3, at 140.

44 See ʿABD ALLĀH AL-ḤUMAYDĪ, UṢŪL AL-SUNNA 35–44 (Dār Ibn al-Athīr 1997); 1 ABŪ AL-QĀSIM AL-LĀLAKĀʿĪ, SHARḤ UṢŪL IʿTIQĀD AHL AL-SUNNA WAʿL-JAMĀʿA 198 (Dār Ṭayba, 2003).

Ibn Ḥanbal which reads: “Faith is speech and action (*al-īmān qawl wa-‘amal*).”<sup>45</sup> Because actions are essential to being Muslim, a person with bad enough actions becomes a *kāfir*. However, whereas the Khārijīs assert that any grave sin renders one a *kāfir*, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* believe that only the worst grave sins have such an effect. The *ahl al-ḥadīth* commonly put abandoning prayer into this category. Ibn Ḥanbal’s *Musnad* includes a *ḥadīth* report that quotes the Prophet, saying, “The covenant (*al-‘ahd*) between us and them is the prayer. Whoever abandons it becomes a *kāfir* (*kafara*).”<sup>46</sup> Abū Bakr al-Khallāl (d. 311/923) reports that Ibn Ḥanbal seems to have adopted this view.<sup>47</sup> Ibn Abī Ya‘lā’s creed of Ibn Ḥanbal reads: “There is no act whose abandonment is *kufīr* (unbelief) except the prayer. Whoever abandons it is a *kāfir*, and Allah has made his killing lawful.”<sup>48</sup> Other *ahl al-ḥadīth* scholars go somewhat further. Al-Ḥumaydī (d. 219/834) suggests that abandoning any of the five pillars (declaration of faith, prayer, fasting, *zakāt*, pilgrimage) can make one a *kāfir*.<sup>49</sup> Ḥarb al-Kirmānī (d. 280/893) indicates that even wine-drinking can make one a *kāfir*.<sup>50</sup>

Significantly, the general view of later Sunnī scholars (outside the Ḥanbalī school) is that even the person who abandons prayer does not become a *kāfir*.<sup>51</sup> This is partly because Ash‘arīs and Māturīdīs emphasize that being a Muslim is primarily, if not exclusively, a matter of belief (*taṣḍīq*) rather than action.<sup>52</sup> Compared to classic *takfīr* doctrine, the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* are more open to the notion that bad actions justify *takfīr*.

Studies on early Sunnism note that some (proto-)Sunnī figures like Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) were open to rebellion against

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45 I IBN ABĪ YA‘LĀ, ṬABAQĀT AL-ḤANĀBILA 243 (Maṭba‘at al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya 1952).

46 38 AḤMAD IBN ḤANBAL, MUSNAD AL-IMĀM AḤMAD IBN ḤANBAL 20 (Mu‘assasat al-Risāla 2001).

47 ABŪ BAKR AL-KHALLĀL, AḤKĀM AHL AL-MILAL WA’L-RIDDA MIN AL-JĀMI‘ LI-MASĀ’IL AL-IMĀM AḤMAD IBN ḤANBAL 471 (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya 1994).

48 IBN ABĪ YA‘LĀ, *supra* note 45, at 243.

49 AL-ḤUMAYDĪ, *supra* note 44, at 35–44.

50 ḤARB AL-KIRMĀNĪ, IJMĀ‘ AL-SALAF FĪ AL-‘IṬIQĀD KAMĀ HAKĀH AL-IMĀM ḤARB B. ISMĀ‘ĪL AL-KIRMĀNĪ 48–49 (Dār al-Imām Aḥmad 2011).

51 I ABŪ AL-WALĪD MUḤAMMAD B. AḤMAD IBN RUSHD, AL-MUQADDIMĀT AL-MUMAHHADĀT 141–44 (Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī 1988).

52 See TIMANI, *supra* note 2, at 49–74.

evil rulers. However, over the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, Sunnī scholars became increasingly averse to rebellion, even when it was not accompanied by excommunication of rulers.<sup>53</sup> They associated rebellion with heretical Khārijī teachings.

The early *ahl al-ḥadīth* hold that Muslims have an obligation to obey the ruler. Muslims should not excommunicate him or rebel against him, even if he blatantly violates the *sharīʿa*. While absent from the Qurʾān, this idea is found in many *ḥadīth* reports. Muslim (d. 261/875) records a famous report in which the Prophet says, “There will be leaders after me who do not follow my guidance and do not adhere to my Sunna. Among them will be men with the hearts of devils in human bodies ... listen and obey the ruler, even if your back is beaten and your wealth is taken—listen and obey (*fa-smaʿ wa-aṭiʿ*).”<sup>54</sup> Ibn Abī Yaʿlā’s creed of Ibn Ḥanbal reads, “[We affirm] listening to and obeying the leaders and the Commander of the Believers—righteous and wicked .... It is not lawful for anyone among the people to kill the sultan or rebel against him ; whoever does so is an innovator upon other than the Sunna and the path.”<sup>55</sup> Similar ideas are echoed in the “Creed of the Two Rāzīs,” which records the ideas of major *ahl al-ḥadīth* scholars Abū Zurʿa al-Rāzī (d. 264/878) and Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 277/890). The creed rejects Khārijī views about major sins justifying *takfīr*. Furthermore, it links this with rejection of political rebellion. The creed first states, “We do not excommunicate the people of the *qibla* on account of their sins.” Immediately thereafter, the Creed explains the need to submit to rulers and says, “We do not hold that one should rebel (*al-khurūj*) against the rulers or fight during times of turmoil. We listen to and obey whoever Allah the Mighty and Majestic has placed in authority over us.”<sup>56</sup>

Government officials welcomed *ahl al-ḥadīth* views of this kind and permitted them to spread. By the ninth century,

53 MUHAMMAD QASIM ZAMAN, *RELIGION AND POLITICS UNDER THE EARLY ʿABBĀSIDS 76–78, 97–98* (1997); KHAN, *supra* note 6, at 184–205. *See also* KHALED ABU EL FADEL, *REBELLION AND VIOLENCE IN ISLAMIC LAW 100–233* (2001).

54 3 MUSLIM B. AL-ḤAJJĀJ, *ṢAḤĪH MUSLIM 1476* (Maṭbaʿat ʿĪsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Shurakāʾuh 1955).

55 IBN ABĪ YAʿLĀ, *supra* note 45, at 241–46.

56 AL-LĀLAKĀʾI, *supra* note 44, at 199.

such views came to dominate Sunnī discourse and undermined the notion that non-application of *sharī‘a* could justify *takfīr* or political rebellion.

### SECTION III: IBN ḤANBAL AND THE EARLY *AHL AL-ḤADĪTH* ON THE DENIAL OF ALLAH’S ATTRIBUTES

During the ninth century, Muslim thinking on *takfīr* came to focus increasingly on the issue of Allah’s *ṣifāt*. *Ṣifāt* may be translated as “attributes” or “descriptions.”

Dating back to the eighth century, some Muslims have championed a highly transcendent concept of God, partially influenced by late antique Neoplatonic philosophy. The concept posits that Allah is (something like) an invisible spirit who is radically unlike humans, lacks a material body, and is not limited to a specific spatial location. Advocates of the transcendent concept cite scriptural texts that seem to describe Allah in this way. Thus, speaking of Allah, the Qur’ān says “there is nothing like Him,”<sup>57</sup> and that “vision does not reach Him.”<sup>58</sup> The Qur’ān also says, “The East and the West belong to Allah. So, wherever you turn, there is the Face (*wajh*) of Allah.”<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, some scriptural texts seem to conflict with the transcendent concept. These texts suggest that there is a type of resemblance (*tashbīh*) between Allah and humans. Hence, the Qur’ān describes Allah as having “hands,”<sup>60</sup> a “face,”<sup>61</sup> and a “shin.”<sup>62</sup> He is also described as “speaking,”<sup>63</sup> “hearing,”<sup>64</sup> “loving,”<sup>65</sup> and being “angry.”<sup>66</sup> Additionally, He is described as being located in the sky and above a throne.<sup>67</sup>

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57 Qur’ān 42:11.  
58 Qur’ān 6:103.  
59 Qur’ān 2:115.  
60 Qur’ān 38:75, 48:10.  
61 Qur’ān 2:115, 55:27.  
62 Qur’ān 68:42.  
63 Qur’ān 4:164, 2:253.  
64 Qur’ān 2:127.  
65 Qur’ān 2:195, 9:7.  
66 Qur’ān 1:7, 2:61.  
67 Qur’ān 7:54, 10:3, 67:16-17.

Advocates of the transcendent concept include Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/746) and (more importantly) the Mu‘tazilīs.<sup>68</sup> Such thinkers promoted non-literal interpretations of scriptural texts that describe Allah as resembling human beings (especially those texts which suggest that Allah has a body). In their view, when scripture says Allah created things with His “hands,”<sup>69</sup> this is a metaphor for His power.<sup>70</sup> When scripture says that Allah is above a throne,<sup>71</sup> this is a metaphor for Him ruling the universe like a king.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, Allah does not literally “speak,” for “speaking” is a human action, and arguably implies that Allah has a tongue and mouth. Rather, Allah simply creates words and sounds that prophets perceive. The Qur’ān is “created” (*makhlūq*) in this manner.<sup>73</sup> The *ahl al-ḥadīth* refer to proponents of such views (e.g., Jahm, the Mu‘tazilīs) as “Jahmīs” (*al-Jahmiyya*).

The *ahl al-ḥadīth* deny that Allah genuinely resembles humans (*tashbīh*) or has a human-like material body. However, they tacitly accept some degree of resemblance between Allah and humans based on scriptural texts. Moreover, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* (including Ibn Ḥanbal) transmit and endorse many *ḥadīth* reports which go beyond the Qur’ān in suggesting that Allah has a highly human-like bodily form. The most controversial reports indicate that Allah has the form of a curly-haired youth, and that He created angels from the light of His chest.<sup>74</sup> (The Mu‘tazilīs consider many of these to be fabrications.) The *ahl al-ḥadīth* also adopt a literalistic approach to these scriptural texts and insist on

68 See 3 VAN ESS, *supra* note 3, at 138–46; GAISER, *supra* note 3, at 138–46; David Bennett, *The Mu‘tazilite Movement (II): The Early Phase*, in THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF ISLAMIC THEOLOGY 142–58 (Sabine Schmidtke ed., 2016); Jon Hoover, *God Spatially Above and Spatially Extended: The Rationality of Ibn Taymiyya’s Refutation of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Ash’arī Incorporalism*, 69 ARABICA 626, 627–31 (2022).

69 Qur’ān 36:71, 38:75.

70 Binyamin Abrahamov, *The “Bi-lā Kayfa” Doctrine and Its Foundations in Islamic Theology*, 42 ARABICA 365 (1995).

71 Qur’ān 7:54, 10:3.

72 ABRAHAMOV, *supra* note 70, at 365; Hoover, *supra* note 68, at 631.

73 See VAN ESS, *supra* note 3, at 305–8, 443–51; FARID SULEIMAN, *IBN TAYMIYYA AND THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD* 294–95 (2024).

74 See LIVNAT HOLTZMAN, *ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN ISLAM* 152–53, 201–2, 246 (2018).

avoiding non-literal interpretation. Their ideal (i.e., *bi-lā kayf*) is simply affirming the truth of texts, without speculating further on their exact meaning (e.g., it is necessary to affirm a text which states Allah has a hand, without asking about the exact nature of this hand).<sup>75</sup> Ibn Abī Ya‘lā’s creed of Ibn Ḥanbal reads: “One does not say: ‘Why?’ or ‘How?’ [in interpreting scriptural texts]—rather, it is affirmation and belief in them [which is necessary]. Whoever does not know the interpretation of the *ḥadīth* report and his intellect (*‘aql*) does not reach it ... his duty is to believe in it and submit to it (*al-taslīm lahu*).”<sup>76</sup>

The early *ahl al-ḥadīth* consider many Jahmī views to be deviant (*bid‘a*). However, in most cases, they do not believe that such views justify *takfīr*. Nevertheless, there are two major exceptions, which concern Allah’s attributes of “speech” (*kalām*) and “aboveness” (*‘uluww*, *fawqiyya*). According to the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, the Qur’ān clearly affirms that Allah literally speaks and that this speech is not merely created. The Qur’ān also clearly affirms that Allah is spatially located in an upwards direction, above other things like the earth and the throne. This is His “aboveness.” Denying either of these two things justifies *takfīr*. Hence Jahmīs are *kāfīrs*.

Notably, classic *takfīr* doctrine is more tolerant of interpretive differences in these matters. Thus, Ash‘arīs and Māturīdīs affirm that Allah speaks. However, like Mu‘tazilīs, they deny His aboveness using non-literal interpretation. The Ash‘arī Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) permits limited non-literal interpretation of this type. For him, it does not justify *takfīr*.<sup>77</sup>

Between 218/833 and 237/852, the ‘Abbāsīd caliphal government instituted policies known as the *Miḥna* (trial/ordeal). These policies sought to impose the Mu‘tazilī view that Allah does not literally speak and that the Qur’ān is created. The government tested religious scholars about their beliefs and punished those who rejected the Mu‘tazilī view with beatings, loss of official positions, and death threats. The *Miḥna* deeply impacted *ahl al-ḥadīth* theology.

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75 Abrahamov, *supra* note 70, at 365–79; HOLTZMAN, *supra* note 74, at 185–266.

76 IBN ABĪ YA‘LĀ, *supra* note 45, at 241–46.

77 AL-GHAZĀLĪ, FAYSAL, *supra* note 11, at 56–81.

Mu‘tazilī ideas on *takfīr* guided the *Miḥna*. Mu‘tazilīs asserted that *ahl al-ḥadīth* views on Allah’s speech were contrary to the Qur’ān. On these grounds, some Mu‘tazilīs favored excommunicating and killing the *ahl al-ḥadīth*.<sup>78</sup> However, Mu‘tazilīs endorsed a type of excuse for ignorance. They held that offenders should only be excommunicated after having their errors explained to them.<sup>79</sup> Partly for this reason, the *Miḥna* only resulted in perhaps two deaths.<sup>80</sup>

Ibn Ḥanbal led *ahl al-ḥadīth* opposition to the *Miḥna* and was initially arrested and tortured. But a new caliph (al-Mutawakkil) ended the *Miḥna* and took a favorable stance towards Ibn Ḥanbal. This facilitated the eventual acceptance of his views as Sunnī orthodoxy. Ibn Ḥanbal made heavy use of *takfīr* to counter Jahmīs. Ibn Ḥanbal’s son ‘Abd Allāh (d. 290/903) quotes him as saying, “Whoever claims that anything from Allah, the Almighty and Majestic, is created—whether His knowledge or His speech—is a heretical *kāfir* (*zindīq kāfir*). Such a person should not be prayed over [in funeral prayer], nor should prayers be performed behind him. His wealth should be treated as the wealth of an apostate [i.e., it should be taken by the state treasury].”<sup>81</sup> According to some reports, Ibn Ḥanbal not only mandated *takfīr* of Jahmīs but declared that “whoever does not excommunicate [Jahmīs] becomes a *kāfir* [himself].”<sup>82</sup>

Although Ibn Ḥanbal asserts that Jahmīs in general should be excommunicated, he avoided excommunicating the caliph and other government officials who embraced Jahmī beliefs.<sup>83</sup> Reports indicate two reasons for this. First, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* endorsed an excuse for ignorance.<sup>84</sup> Al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) approvingly quotes Ibn Ḥanbal as saying, “Anyone who does not know that Allah with His speech is not created—must be taught,

78 AL-JĀHIZ, *supra* note 27, at 292, 294; IBN ABĪ YA‘LĀ, *supra* note 45, at 81; IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 507.

79 AL-JĀHIZ, *supra* note 27, at 292.

80 I.e., Aḥmad b. Naṣr and Muḥammad b. Nuḥ.

81 I ‘ABD ALLĀH B. AḤMAD IBN ḤANBAL, AL-SUNNA 164 (Dār Ibn al-Qayyim 1986).

82 IBN ABĪ YA‘LĀ, *supra* note 45, at 342.

83 See I ABŪ BAKR AL-KHALLĀL, AL-SUNNA 131 (Dār ar-Rāyah 1989); 23 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 349.

84 AL-LĀLAKĀ‘I, *supra* note 46, at 200.

and his ignorance returned to the Book and the Sunna [i.e., the person should be taught scripture]. If, after the truth is made clear to him, he still refuses, then he is one who resists stubbornly (*mu'ānid*). Allah Most High says, 'Allah would not lead a people astray after He has guided them until He makes clear to them what they should avoid' [Qur'ān 9:115]."<sup>85</sup> Similar ideas appear in the Creed of the Two Razīs.<sup>86</sup> A second possible reason why Ibn Ḥanbal did not excommunicate the caliph was his opposition to the Khārijī practice of excommunicating rulers (for behavior contrary to the *sharī'a*) and then revolting against them.

Multiple reports indicate that, during the *Miḥna*, *ahl al-ḥadīth* religious scholars approached Ibn Ḥanbal. They wished to rebel against the caliph, but Ibn Ḥanbal forcefully rejected this idea, insisting that it conflicted with *ḥadīth* reports requiring obedience.<sup>87</sup> Al-Khallāl records how the jurists of Baghdad came to Ibn Ḥanbal and complained about the caliph promoting belief in the Qur'ān's createdness. The report continues: "[The jurists said:] We do not approve of his [i.e., the caliph's] leadership nor his authority.' So Abū 'Abd Allāh [Ibn Ḥanbal] debated with them for a while and said: 'You must reject what is in your hearts. Do not remove yourselves from obedience, do not break the unity of the Muslims, do not shed your own blood or the blood of the Muslims with you .... This [rebellion] is contrary to the reports (*al-āthār*) [from the Prophet and *salaf*] that command us to be patient [and not rebel].'"<sup>88</sup> Al-Khallāl records a report where Ibn Ḥanbal asserts that he believes in praying behind the (Jahmī) caliphs, considers their leadership valid, and rejects rebelling against them.<sup>89</sup> That being said, al-Khallāl also records a report which indicates that Ibn Ḥanbal excommunicated the (Jahmī) caliph al-Ma'mūn after his death in 281/833, while passing by his grave in Ṭarsūs.<sup>90</sup>

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85 MUHAMMAD B. ISMĀ'ĪL AL-BUKHĀRĪ, *KHALQ AF'ĀL AL-'IBĀD* 62 (Dār al-Ma'ārif al-Sa'ūdiyya n.d.). See also 'ABD ALLĀH B. AḤMAD IBN ḤANBAL, *supra* note 81, at 164.

86 AL-LĀLAKĀ'Ī, *supra* note 44, at 200.

87 AL-KHALLĀL, *supra* note 83, at 131–33.

88 *Id.* at 133.

89 *Id.* at 131.

90 *Id.* at 95.

SECTION IV: IBN HANBAL AND THE EARLY  
 AHL AL-ḤADĪTH ON SHIRK

The Qurʾān refers to people “taking” (*ittakhadha*) particular beings as “gods” (*āliha*).<sup>91</sup> *Tawḥīd* means taking Allah alone as a god. Meanwhile, *shirk* means taking beings other than Allah as gods. Such gods are treated as partners (*shurakāʾ*) beside Allah.<sup>92</sup>

Premodern Muslim discourse on *shirk* is shaped by a number of key ideas. One key idea is that *shirk* involves believing that beings other than Allah have great power, including the power to create, to control the universe, and to benefit or harm humans.<sup>93</sup> Another key idea is that *shirk* involves worshipping beings other than Allah. The Qurʾān presents worship (*ibāda*) as having two major components. The first consists in making requests (*duʿāʾ*).<sup>94</sup> Gods are asked to provide benefits (e.g., wealth, children) or eliminate harms (e.g., sickness). The second component consists in striving to please the god, for this makes it more likely that he or she will grant requests. The underlying assumption here is that gods are pleased when people perform acts of submission (*islām*) and/or reverence (*taʿzīm*) which affirm the god’s much greater power and status. The Qurʾān mentions many distinctive submissive/reverential acts used by Arabs at the Prophet’s time. These include chanting praise for gods (*taṣbīḥ*, *ḥamd*),<sup>95</sup> visiting their shrines or idols (*ḥajj*), circumambulating these shrines and idols (*tawāf*),<sup>96</sup> prostrating before them,<sup>97</sup> and slaughtering animals (*naḥr*) in their gods’ honor.<sup>98</sup>

One who commits *shirk* is known as a *mushrik*. *Shirk* is most closely associated with the pre-Islamic Arabs who were

91 Qurʾān 5:115, 19:81, 25:3.

92 Qurʾān 6:22, 10:28.

93 Qurʾān 10:3, 22:11, 25:3, 32:5.

94 Qurʾān 10:106, 46:5, 35:13–14, 7:194. See also IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 10–11.

95 Qurʾān 17:44, 87:1.

96 Qurʾān 2:125.

97 Qurʾān 22:18, 27:24–25.

98 Qurʾān 22:36–37, 108:2; 4 AL-BUKHĀRĪ, *supra* note 14, at 175; 5 *Id.*, *supra* note 14, at 431; 8 AL-NAWAWĪ, *supra* note 11, at 90; 13 *Id.*, *supra* note 11, at 141.

the primary audience of the Prophet's message.<sup>99</sup> These Arab *mushriks* believed in Allah as well as a host of lesser gods that were represented as idols (e.g., al-Lāt, al-‘Uzzā, Manāt, Hub-al).<sup>100</sup> Arab *mushriks* believed that all of these gods had the power to harm and benefit.<sup>101</sup> They worshipped these gods by making requests and performing the distinctive submissive/reverential acts mentioned above. Preaching against this *shirk*, the Prophet condemned believing in gods besides Allah, making requests of them, and performing submissive/reverential acts for them.

Muslims turned away from pre-Islamic gods like al-Lāt and al-‘Uzzā. Nevertheless, with time, Muslims gradually developed an increasingly elaborate set of beliefs concerning prophets (*anbiyā’*) and pious non-prophets or “saints” (*awliyā’*). In the eyes of critics like Ibn Taymiyya, these beliefs tacitly elevated such figures to the status of gods.

The early *ahl al-ḥadīth* hold that Allah has empowered both prophets and saints to perform miraculous supernatural acts (*mu‘jizāt, karāmāt*) (e.g., curing illness, resurrecting the dead). Many *ḥadīth* reports endorse these ideas. Ibn Ḥanbal transmits a report which asserts that Syria is home to forty men known as the *abdāl*. Allah uses them to bring rain and achieve military victories.<sup>102</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal believes in the *abdāl*, and suggests that certain people are from among them.<sup>103</sup> Al-Bukhārī transmits a famous *ḥadīth* report, wherein Allah states that He will grant sufficiently pious persons whatever they request.<sup>104</sup> With these ideas in mind, many scholars came to believe that prophets and saints can exercise some control over the universe (*taṣarruf*). They can do this by using their God-given powers to perform miracles (e.g., causing rainfall) or by making requests to Allah, which He will likely grant (e.g., they can request that Allah causes rainfall).<sup>105</sup> Many scholars also came to believe that prophets

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99 See Qur’ān 2:221, 9:5.

100 Qur’ān 53:19-120; 4 AL-BUKHĀRĪ, *supra* note 14, at 175.

101 See Qur’ān 19:81, 21:43, 36:74.

102 2 IBN ḤANBAL, *supra* note 46, at 231.

103 4 *id.* at 441; 1 IBN ABĪ YA‘LĀ, *supra* note 46, at 263.

104 8 AL-BUKHĀRĪ, *supra* note 14, at 294.

105 See TAQĪ AL-DĪN AL-SUBKĪ, SHIFĀ’ AL-SIQĀM FĪ ZIYĀRAT KHAYR AL-ANĀM 357–58, 372–85 (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya 2008).

and saints retain their powers even after death. They also encouraged Muslims to make requests of the dead.

Scholars who attribute great power to prophets and saints deny that this means taking them as gods. These scholars argue that Allah is the only real power in the universe and hence the only god. Prophets and saints are not gods because they lack independent power. They can only use power that Allah has given them or make requests of Allah. Such a perspective is famously articulated by figures like Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355) and Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1566).<sup>106</sup>

When Muslim scholars discuss the relationship between *shirk* and worship, they give special attention to submissive/reverential acts. Scholars hold that such acts are worship in some contexts but not others. For instance, prostration and animal slaughter are worship when done for idols. However, the Qurʾān speaks of Prophet Yūsuf’s family prostrating before him<sup>107</sup> and Prophet Ibrāhīm slaughtering animals to honor guests.<sup>108</sup> In these contexts, prostration and slaughtering are not understood to be worship.<sup>109</sup>

At the same time, scriptural texts condemn many types of submissive/reverential acts when they are directed towards beings other than Allah, especially the dead. Ibn Ḥanbal transmits a *ḥadīth* report where the Prophet says, “O Allah, do not turn my grave into an idol (*wathan*). Allah has cursed people who take the graves of their prophets as places of worship (*masājid*).”<sup>110</sup> Thus, the report cautions against worshipping near the graves of prophets, as it can lead to *shirk*. There are also *ḥadīth* reports which forbid making images,<sup>111</sup> placing lamps on graves,<sup>112</sup> constructing places of worship upon graves,<sup>113</sup> prostrating to beings

106 AL-SUBKĪ, *supra* note 105, at 378–79, 382–83; IBN ḤAJAR AL-HAYTAMĪ, AL-JAWHAR AL-MUNAZZAM FĪ ZIYĀRAT AL-QABR AL-MUKARRAM 111 (Maktabat Madbūlī 2000).

107 Qurʾān 12:4, 99–100. *See also* 4 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 358, 360.

108 Qurʾān 51:24–26.

109 4 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 358, 360.

110 12 IBN ḤANBAL, *supra* note 46, at 314.

111 14 *id.*, *supra* note 46, at 152.

112 2 IBN QUDĀMA, *supra* note 11, at 378–79.

113 *Id.*

other than Allah,<sup>114</sup> and slaughtering animals for beings other than Allah.<sup>115</sup> Notably, however, these *ḥadīth* reports do not refer to such acts as *shirk*. They also do not state that such acts cause one to become a *kāfir*. Muslim scholars typically condemn the same acts condemned in scripture, arguing that they resemble *shirk* and encourage it.<sup>116</sup> However, scholars typically do not call the acts *shirk* or excommunicate the doer of the acts.

Certain submissive/reverential acts were prohibited by virtually all scholars when done for beings other than Allah. These include prostration (e.g., before living *shaykhs*)<sup>117</sup> and circumambulation (e.g., of graves).<sup>118</sup> Scholars also commonly banned many forms of animal slaughter (e.g., for *jinn*)<sup>119</sup> and vowing (e.g., “O dead saint, I vow to donate to your shrine if my daughter is healed”).<sup>120</sup> However, many scholars permitted other types of reverential acts when used to *honor* (not worship) prophets and saints (e.g., reciting praise poetry for them, annually celebrating their births, kissing and touching their relics, building monumental structures over their graves).

Ibn Ḥanbal accepted some kinds of reverential acts, especially when directed towards the Prophet. Thus, he permitted reverently touching and kissing material objects (i.e., relics) associated with the Prophet, like his pulpit and grave.<sup>121</sup> It is reported that Ibn Ḥanbal himself used to seek blessings by kissing a hair from the Prophet, placing it on his eyes, dipping it in water, and then drinking the water.<sup>122</sup>

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114 3 ABŪ DĀWŪD SULAYMĀN AL-SUJISTĀNĪ, *SUNAN ABĪ DĀWŪD* 475 (Dār al-Risāla al-‘Ālamiyya 2009).

115 13 AL-NAWAWĪ, *supra* note 11, at 141.

116 *See also* 10 ABŪ ‘ABD ALLĀH AL-QURTUBĪ, *AL-JĀMĪ‘ LI-AḤKĀM AL-QUR’ĀN* 380 (Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya 1964); 2 IBN QUDĀMA, *supra* note 11, at 378–79.

117 AL-HAYTAMĪ, *supra* note 106, at 117.

118 *Id.* at 113.

119 13 AL-NAWAWĪ, *supra* note 11, at 141; 1 IBN ḤAJAR AL-HAYTAMĪ, *AL-ZAWĀJIR ‘AN IQTIRĀF AL-KABĀ’IR* 351 (1987).

120 2 IBN ‘ĀBIDĪN, *ḤASHIYAT RADD AL-MUḤTĀR ‘ALĀ AL-DURR AL-MUKHTĀR* 439 (Maktabat wa-Maṭba‘at al-Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlādih 1966).

121 2 IBN ḤANBAL, *AL-‘ĪLAL WA-MĀ‘RIFAT AL-RIJĀL* 492 (Dār al-Khānī 2001).

122 ABŪ AL-FARAJ IBN AL-JAWZĪ, *MANĀQIB AL-IMĀM AḤMAD* 255 (Dār Hajr 1409 AH).

As indicated above, worship also involves making requests. However, just as submissive/reverential acts can be worship, but are not necessarily worship, the same is true of making requests.<sup>123</sup> For instance, Muslim scholars agree that when a living person requests something from a living person, this is not worship or *shirk* (e.g., “O brother bring me medicine”). Moreover, some scriptural texts suggest that certain limited requests may be made of *jinn* and angels. Thus, the Qur’ān speaks approvingly of Prophet Sulaymān making requests from *jinn*.<sup>124</sup> There is also a *ḥadīth* report where the Prophet encourages people who are lost to call out and request help from angels.<sup>125</sup> Based on such texts, Ibn Ḥanbal endorses calling out to angels when lost.<sup>126</sup> He dislikes making requests from *jinn*, but does not prohibit it.<sup>127</sup>

Requests from the dead fall into two basic categories. The first is known as *tawassul* (intercession), which involves requesting that dead persons ask Allah for assistance on one’s behalf (e.g., “O Prophet, ask Allah to heal me”). The second is known as *istighātha*. It involves directly requesting assistance from dead persons (e.g., “O Prophet, heal me”).

Some reports indicate that, as early as the caliphate of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644), Muslims would go to the Prophet’s grave and request that he petition Allah on their behalf for benefits like rain.<sup>128</sup> *Tawassul* was an established practice by the time of Ibn Ḥanbal, and he endorsed it.<sup>129</sup> Eventually, *tawassul* won the approval of almost all Muslim scholars. Many scholars likewise came to endorse *istighātha* and often did not clearly differentiate it from *tawassul*.<sup>130</sup>

123 See Qur’ān 24:63.

124 Qur’ān 27:38–40, 34:12–14.

125 11 ABŪ BAKR AL-BAZZĀR, *MUSNAD AL-BAZZĀR* 181 (Maktabat ‘Ulūm wa-Ḥikam 1988–2009).

126 IBN ḤANBAL, *MASĀ’IL AHMAD IBN ḤANBAL RIWĀYAT IBNIHI ‘ABD ALLĀH* 245 (al-Maktab al-Islāmī 1981).

127 1 IBN MUFLIḤ, *AL-ĀDĀB AL-SHAR‘IYYA WA’L-MINAH AL-MAR‘IYYA* 198 (‘Ālam al-Kutub 2009).

128 AL-SUBKĪ, *supra* note 105, at 381–82; AL-HAYTAMĪ, *supra* note 106, at 112.

129 3 IBN MUFLIḤ, *AL-FURŪ‘ WA-TAṢḤĪḤ AL-FURŪ‘* 229 (Mu’assasat al-Risāla 2004).

130 See AL-SUBKĪ, *supra* note 105, at 383. See also *id.* at 357–58, 372–85; AL-HAYTAMĪ, *supra* note 106, at 109–12.

**SECTION V: IBN TAYMIYYA ON THE  
DENIAL OF ALLAH'S ATTRIBUTES**

Ibn Taymiyya was a highly respected but controversial scholar in Mamluk Syria.<sup>131</sup> He wrote on a myriad of topics but gave special attention to Allah's attributes and *shirk*. The concept of the *salaf* is central to Ibn Taymiyya's thought. The term *salaf* refers to the earliest Muslim generations. It includes the Prophet's Companions as well as Muslims who lived during the first two centuries or so after his death (approximately mid-seventh to mid-ninth centuries CE). The last members of the *salaf* include the founders of the four legal schools and the earliest *ahl al-ḥadīth*. Generally speaking, Sunnīs believe that because the *salaf* learned from the Prophet and were closest to him in time, they had the best understanding of his message. Consequently, Sunnīs in later eras claim that their views are based on those of the *salaf*. However, Ibn Taymiyya routinely argues that later scholars (including later Ḥanbalīs) actually hold views that conflict with the views of the *salaf* and hence should be regarded as heretical "innovations" (*bida'*).

For Ibn Taymiyya, promoting the views of the *salaf* usually meant promoting the views of the early *ahl al-ḥadīth*. Like the early *ahl al-ḥadīth*, Ibn Taymiyya is highly critical of non-literal interpretation, especially as it relates to Allah's attributes. He goes so far as to deny that the Qur'ān contains metaphors that could justify non-literal interpretation.<sup>132</sup> He also attacks contemporary Ash'arīs, Māturīdīs, and Ḥanbalīs for their openness to non-literal interpretation. Like the early *ahl al-ḥadīth*, Ibn Taymiyya insists on excommunicating those who deny Allah's aboveness via non-literal interpretation.<sup>133</sup> He rejects tolerance

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131 For works on Ibn Taymiyya's ideas see AL-MATROUDI, *supra* note 10; JOHN HOOVER, *IBN TAYMIYYA'S THEODICY OF PERPETUAL OPTIMISM* (2007); YOSSEF RAPOPORT & SHAHAB AHMED EDS., *IBN TAYMIYYA AND HIS TIMES* (2010); CARL EL-TOBGUI, *IBN TAYMIYYA ON REASON AND REVELATION* (2019); SULEIMAN, *supra* note 75.

132 7 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 113. See also SULEIMAN, *supra* note 73, at 141–72.

133 7 IBN TAYMIYYA, *DAR' TA'ĀRUḌ AL-'AQL WA'L-NAQL* 26–29 (Jāmi'at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa'ūd 1991); *Id.*, *KITĀB AL-ISTIGHĀTHA FĪ AL-RADD 'ALĀ AL-BAKRĪ* 253 (Maktabat Dār al-Minhāj 1426 AH).

for different opinions in this matter—thereby repudiating the position of al-Ghazālī and classic *takfīr* doctrine.

However, Ibn Taymiyya also diverges from the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* in significant respects. He insists much more strongly on restraining *takfīr*. For instance, Ibn Taymiyya assumes that *takfīr* requires rejecting Prophetic teachings known with certainty through *tawātur*.<sup>134</sup> This reflects classic doctrine rather than the views of the early *ahl al-ḥadīth*. Expanding on a point made by al-Ghazālī,<sup>135</sup> Ibn Taymiyya adds that in order to excommunicate a person, the person must deny a teaching they know with certainty comes from the Prophet. And this requires that the person knows that the teaching is transmitted via *tawātur*. A person may not be excommunicated simply because they deny a teaching that other scholars know with certainty comes from the Prophet, because the scholars know it is transmitted via *tawātur*. For example, *ḥadīth* experts know that the Prophet will be given the right to intercede for his followers on the Day of Judgement. They know that Muslims will see Allah in the afterlife and that Companions like Abū Bakr were of righteous character. All of this is found in *tawātur ḥadīth* reports.<sup>136</sup> *Tawātur* reports also remove any ambiguity found in the Qur’ānic text about Allah’s aboveness, and whether He is literally located in an upwards direction. Nevertheless, certain individuals may falsely believe that the views of *ḥadīth* experts are not based on *tawātur ḥadīth* reports and hence doubt them. Such individuals cannot be excommunicated. Ibn Taymiyya holds that, as a result, Mu‘tazilīs and Ash‘arites generally cannot be excommunicated for denying Allah’s aboveness. Ibn Taymiyya writes:

The assertion that Allah, Most High, is above the universe is known with certainty (*ma‘lūm bi’l-iqṭirār*) from the Book, the Sunna, and the consensus of the *salaf* of the *umma*—after an individual reflects on the matter .... In fact, it might be said that there are hundreds of places in scriptural texts concerning aboveness (*‘uluww*). *Tawātur*

134 See 7 *id.* at 26–29; 2 *id.*, BAYĀN TALBĪS AL-JAHMIYYA 73–74 (Majma‘ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā‘at al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf 1426 AH).

135 AL-GHAZĀLĪ, FAYṢAL, *supra* note 11, at 84.

136 18 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 69–70.

reports from the Prophet—peace be upon him—his Companions, and the Successors agree on this [i.e., affirming literal aboveness]. So, there is no need for us to deny this based on the wording of a specific text, which could be said to be open to non-literal interpretation (*yaḥtamil al-taʿwīl*) . . . . For this reason, the *salaf* unanimously agreed on excommunicating anyone who denied this, because in their view it was among the religious matters [i.e., teachings] which are known with certainty. But the matters known with certainty to the *salaf*, the *imāms*, and the scholars of religion may not be known to some people—either because they turn away from listening to what has been transmitted on the matter [or because they refuse to reflect on what has been transmitted].<sup>137</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya continues on to note that deviant groups like the Muʿtazilīs often lack the type of transmitted religious knowledge possessed by the *ahl al-ḥadīth*. Consequently, such deviants are ignorant on matters like Allah’s aboveness.<sup>138</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya also restricts *takfīr* by reworking the excuse for ignorance. He selects out the most forgiving views in the Islamic tradition and synthesizes them together. He thereby produces a distinctive notion of excuse, which ranks among the most expansive found in premodern Islam.

Some earlier scholars assert that people should not be excommunicated until their various false arguments have been explicitly countered with evidence. Although al-Ghazālī does not affirm this relatively forgiving view, it seems to be endorsed by the eminent Syrian Ḥanbalī Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223).<sup>139</sup> Ibn Taymiyya goes beyond Ibn Qudāma’s position to argue that it is not sufficient to produce a general refutation of a deviant group. Every individual from the group must have his or her arguments carefully addressed with evidence. Ibn Taymiyya says: “No one should excommunicate any Muslim, even if he or she errs and goes astray, until the evidence is established for him or her and

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137 7 *id.*, DAR’ TA’ĀRUD, *supra* note 133, at 26–29.

138 *Id.*

139 9 IBN QUDĀMA, *supra* note 11, at 12.

the right path is made clear to him or her ... [his or her status as a Muslim] can only be negated after establishing the evidence and eliminating specious arguments (*al-shubha*) [that he or she has for his or her mistaken view].”<sup>140</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya also goes beyond Ibn Qudāma by clarifying that even deviant religious scholars, like learned Jahmīs, cannot be excommunicated until their arguments have been countered. Such scholars necessarily have some significant amount of religious knowledge—including knowledge of opposing positions. Hence it is not obvious that they are “ignorant” such that they deserve to be excused. But Ibn Taymiyya nevertheless holds they are entitled to an excuse: “I used to say to the Jahmīs from among ... those who denied that Allah, Exalted is He, is above the Throne ...: ‘Had I agreed with you, I would have been a *kāfir*; because I know that your statement is *kufir*. But you, in my view, are not *kāfirs* because you are ignorant.’ And this was addressed to their scholars, judges, elders, and leaders.”<sup>141</sup>

In fact, Ibn Taymiyya likely believed that deviant religious scholars might still be entitled to the excuse for ignorance even after their opponents had argued with them for many years and presented them with extensive evidence. After all, he spent his own life arguing with highly educated scholars of this type. Moreover, his writings indicate that he refrained from excommunicating them, despite the fact that their views merited *takfir*—were it not for the excuse (e.g., Ash‘arīs who denied Allah’s aboveness, Sufis who endorsed *istighātha*).

Ibn Taymiyya’s position can be contrasted with the early *ahl al-ḥadīth*, as well as classic *takfir* doctrine. The early *ahl al-ḥadīth* do not state that before excommunicating any deviant individual, it is necessary to carefully counter all his or her arguments with evidence. The early *ahl al-ḥadīth* also do not state that deviant scholars are entitled to the excuse for ignorance. Indeed, many of their statements seem to imply that such scholars (e.g., Jahmīs) can be excommunicated with few limits.<sup>142</sup> Moreover, as noted earlier, classic doctrine holds that the excuse for

140 12 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 500–1.

141 IBN TAYMIYYA, *AL-ISTIGHĀTHA*, *supra* note 133, at 253.

142 See e.g., 1 ‘ABD ALLĀH B. AḤMAD IBN ḤANBAL, *supra* note 81, at 164; *AL-LĀLAKĀ’I*, *supra* note 44, at 200.

ignorance is generally only allowed in limited circumstances. Where basic Islamic teachings are concerned, the excuse is typically reserved for people of little knowledge (e.g., recent converts, those who live in isolated areas).

Ibn Taymiyya's analysis raises a particular difficulty. He claims to be following the *salaf* and the early *ahl al-ḥadīth*. However, he seems to favor more restraint in *takfīr* than they do. How can this be justified? Here Ibn Taymiyya has a number of arguments. One is that there must be more restraint in later times (like his era) than earlier times (like the *salaf*'s era). This is because in later times ignorance is more widespread, such that more deserve to be excused.

For example, Ibn Taymiyya explains that the *salaf* excommunicated the Jahmīs with few restraints because, at that time, the general body of Muslims possessed a very high level of knowledge. He says:

The *salaf* and the *imāms* were unanimous in excommunicating the Jahmīs when their opposition to the Messenger appeared. It was famous and known with certainty to the general body of Muslims, even before [succeeding generations] acquired [detailed] knowledge of faith later on. [Then, when knowledge declined,] some of that became unclear to many who were not outright heretics.<sup>143</sup>

Elsewhere Ibn Taymiyya remarks:

When time grew long, what had been apparent to them [i.e., the earliest Muslims] became hidden to many people.... Yet even so, they [i.e., scholars from later generations] were *mujtahids* who were excused (*mujtahidīna ma'dhūrīn*). Allah forgives their errors and rewards them for their *ijtihād*. And it may be that, in terms of good deeds, a doer among them has the reward of fifty men who performed it in that [earlier] time; for they [i.e., the early Muslims] used to find those who would

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143 2 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 134, at 73–74.

help them, whereas these later ones have not found anyone to help them.<sup>144</sup>

More generally, Ibn Taymiyya argues that access to knowledge is “a relative matter” (*amr idāfi*) and depends heavily on circumstances. In some circumstances, individuals lack even the most basic types of Islamic knowledge (e.g., those living in isolated desert areas). Hence, they are not aware of religious obligations concerning prayer, *zakāt*, and *hajj*.<sup>145</sup> Elsewhere, Ibn Taymiyya asserts that religious knowledge often dies away. He states that “many people may be raised in times and places in which much of the knowledge of the prophets becomes effaced.”<sup>146</sup> Where ignorance prevails, many may be excused. Indeed, as we will see, Ibn Taymiyya seems to hold that, in later times, entire societies may be excused.<sup>147</sup>

Thus, Ibn Taymiyya can grant that the *salaf* engaged in relatively unrestrained *takfīr*, while holding that later generations need more restraint. However, he also puts forth a second key idea. According to Ibn Taymiyya, truly unrestrained *takfīr* is a heretical innovation (*bid‘a*) associated with groups like the Khārijīs, Shī‘īs, and Mu‘tazilīs.<sup>148</sup> For Ibn Taymiyya, the *takfīr* practiced by the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* is actually more restrained than it appears. This is because the *ahl al-ḥadīth* tacitly endorse an expansive excuse for ignorance. So, when the *ahl al-ḥadīth* say things like “Jahmīs are *kāfīr*,” they really mean that Jahmīs are *kāfīr*s unless they have an excuse for ignorance.<sup>149</sup> Ibn Taymiyya cites Ibn Ḥanbal’s behavior as evidence for this view and notes that Ibn Ḥanbal prayed behind ‘Abbāsīd caliphs, refused to publicly excommunicate them, and refused to rebel against them. For Ibn Taymiyya, all of this implies that Ibn Ḥanbal considered them Muslims and excused them for their Jahmī views.<sup>150</sup> Ibn

144 13 *id.*, *supra* note 17, at 65.

145 *Id.* at 118.

146 11 *id.*, *supra* note 17, at 407.

147 3 *id.*, *supra* note 27, at 145–46, 151.

148 5 *id.*, MĪNHĀJ AL-SUNNA AL-NABAWIYYA FĪ NAQD KALĀM AL-SHĪ‘A AL-QADĪRIYYA 239–40 (Jāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa‘ūd al-Islāmiyya 1986).

149 5 *id.*, *supra* note 148, at 239–40.

150 23 *id.*, *supra* note 17, at 349.

Taymiyya is correct that Ibn Ḥanbal likely granted the caliphs an excuse for ignorance. Nevertheless, it should be reiterated that Ibn Taymiyya’s concept of the excuse is much broader than that of Ibn Ḥanbal and the early *ahl al-ḥadīth*.

## SECTION VI: IBN TAYMIYYA ON *SHIRK*

Recall that, over time, Muslim scholars gradually ascribed increasing power to the dead while encouraging people to make requests of them. By the twelfth century, a minority of scholars (particularly within the Ḥanbalī school) had begun to criticize these developments as *shirk*.<sup>151</sup> This trend reached its apex with Ibn Taymiyya.

Recall that many scholars came to emphasize that Allah is the only real power in the universe, and hence the only real god. Such scholars assert that Muslims do not commit *shirk* so long as they believe Allah is the only real power.<sup>152</sup> As highlighted in previous studies, Ibn Taymiyya’s single most important idea is that Muslims can commit *shirk* even if they believe Allah is the only real power.<sup>153</sup> To advance his argument, Ibn Taymiyya puts forth a novel claim. He argues that the ancient Arab *mushriks* believed that Allah was the only real power in the universe (i.e., they affirmed *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya*).<sup>154</sup> Given this belief, the *mushriks* actually conceptualized their “gods” as similar to dead persons, *jinn*, and angels. Such beings have apparent power, but not real independent power. They can only do what Allah allows them to do. Ibn Taymiyya argues that when the Qur’ān condemns *shirk*, it is actually referring to those who worship beings like dead persons, *jinn*, and angels. It is possible to worship such beings, and commit *shirk*, even if one believes that they lack real independent power. For Ibn Taymiyya, this type of *shirk* characterizes both the ancient Arabs as well as many Muslims in his

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151 See ONDŘEJ BERÁNEK & PAVEL TUPEK, THE TEMPTATION OF GRAVES IN SALAFI ISLAM 28–29, 42 (2018); BUNZEL, *supra* note 8, at 106–07.

152 AL-SUBKI, *supra* note 105, at 357–58, 372–85; AL-HAYTAMI, *supra* note 106, at 109–12.

153 BUNZEL, *supra* note 8, at 128–45; LAV, *supra* note 8, at 38–94.

154 1 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 22–23; 14 *id.* at 12–14; Hoover, *supra* note 131, at 26–39; BUNZEL, *supra* note 8, at 128–45; LAV, *supra* note 8, at 38–94.

era, who worship prophets and saints. Ibn Taymiyya notes that such *shirk* is a grave sin, and that the Prophet fought *jihād* wars against the ancient Arabs to eliminate it.<sup>155</sup> Ibn Taymiyya refers to worshipping Allah alone as *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya*. For him, what distinguishes true Muslims from *mushriks* is *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya* (rather than *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya*).<sup>156</sup>

Compared to other scholars, Ibn Taymiyya takes stricter positions on matters of *shirk*. For example, Muslim scholars commonly hold that actions like prostration, slaughtering, and vowing can be *shirk*. But this requires that the doer intends to worship a being other than Allah and considers it a god (e.g., a dead person, a *jinn*).<sup>157</sup> Meanwhile, Ibn Taymiyya downplays the importance of intentions. He suggests that slaughtering,<sup>158</sup> vowing,<sup>159</sup> and (may be) prostration are *shirk* regardless of the doer's intentions.<sup>160</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya forbids travelling to graves with the aim of acquiring benefits for oneself from Allah or from the dead. For him, such pilgrimages encourage *shirk*, even if they are not necessarily *shirk* themselves.<sup>161</sup> At Ibn Taymiyya's time, pilgrimage to the Prophet's tomb was a major, widely accepted religious rite. Ibn Taymiyya's opinion prohibiting it was one of his most controversial and resulted in his incarceration.<sup>162</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya takes a harsher stance on touching structures and relics than other scholars like Ibn Ḥanbal. Ibn Taymiyya does not believe that kissing (*taqbīl*) and rubbing (*tamassuḥ*) inanimate objects (*jamādāt*) is *shirk*.<sup>163</sup> However, in his view, it can encourage *shirk*—especially when graves are involved. He

155 1 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 154–55.

156 *Id.* at 22–24; BUNZEL, *supra* note 8, at 128–45; LAV, *supra* note 8, at 38–94.

157 See, 8 AL-NAWAWĪ, AL-MAJMU' SHARḤ AL-MUHADHDHAB 409 (Maṭba'at al-Taḍāmūn al-Ukhawī 1344–47 AH); 4 IBN ḤAJAR AL-HAYTAMĪ, AL-FATĀWĀ AL-KUBRĀ AL-FIQHIYYA 284–87 (Al-Maktaba al-Islamiyya, 1357 AH).

158 2 IBN TAYMIYYA, IQTIDĀ' AL-ŠIRĀT AL-MUSTAQĪM LI-MUKHĀLAFAT AŠHĀB AL-JAḤĪM 65 (Dār 'Ālam al-Kutub 1999).

159 1 *id.*, *supra* note 17, at 81; 11 *id.* at 504.

160 27 *id.* 91–95; 4 *id.* at 360.

161 See 4 *id.* at 520; 24 *id.* at 343; 27 *id.* at 188; 2 *id.*, *supra* note 158, at 157–58.

162 AL-MATROUDI, *supra* note 10, at 18–20.

163 Or at least not *shirk akbar*.

thus generally forbids such behavior, with some limited exceptions (e.g., kissing the black stone in the Ka'ba, because this was done by the Prophet).<sup>164</sup>

For Ibn Taymiyya, mere requests often raise concerns over *shirk*, even when they are not accompanied by submissive/reverential acts. Whereas Ibn Ḥanbal permits certain requests from angels, Ibn Taymiyya strongly suggests that such behavior is *shirk*.<sup>165</sup> However, somewhat surprisingly, Ibn Taymiyya permits requests from *jinn*.<sup>166</sup> This more tolerant position is close to that of Ibn Ḥanbal.

Ibn Taymiyya strongly condemns requests from the dead. Breaking with Ibn Ḥanbal, he prohibits the widely accepted practice of *tawassul*. This is another of his most controversial opinions. According to Ibn Taymiyya, *tawassul* is not *shirk*, but it encourages *shirk*.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, he prohibits *istighātha* as blatant *shirk*.<sup>168</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya's views on *shirk* must be situated in relationship to his expansive excuse for ignorance. According to him, ignorance about *shirk* had become so widespread in his era that people typically deserved the excuse for ignorance. Speaking of the person who engages in *istighātha*, Ibn Taymiyya says:

[It is] obligatory to kill him like other similar *mushriks* [who are fought in war].... But if he was ignorant, knowledge did not reach him, and he was not aware of the true nature of the *shirk* for which the Prophet fought the *mushriks*, then [in that case] it is not ruled that he is a *kāfir*, especially since this *shirk* has proliferated amongst those who profess Islam.<sup>169</sup>

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164 27 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 79–80, 107–08; *id.*, AL-RADD 'ALĀ AL-IKHNĀ'Ī 126 (Dār al-Kharrāz 2000); *id.*, MANĀSIK AL-ḤAJJ 71–72 (Dār Rakā'iz li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī' 2018).

165 1 *id.*, *supra* note 17, at 124.

166 1 *id.* at 307–8; 13 *id.* at 87.

167 1 *id.* at 330; *id.*, MUKHTAṢAR AL-FATĀWĀ AL-MIṢRIYYA 192–93 (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya 1985).

168 3 *id.*, *supra* note 27, at 145–46, 151.

169 *Id.*

**SECTION VII: IBN TAYMIYYA ON NON-APPLICATION OF THE *SHARĪʿA***

Ibn Taymiyya’s views on *takfīr* for non-application of the *sharīʿa* are complex. He states with approval that, as a general matter, the “doctrine of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* is to refrain from armed rebellion against tyrannical rulers and to be patient with their injustice.”<sup>170</sup> Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya also indicates that, in some cases, governments and groups can be excommunicated for not applying the *sharīʿa*. He expresses these views in a series of *fatwās* (legal responsa) against the Mongol government.<sup>171</sup> During the late thirteenth century, the Ilkhanate Mongols launched a series of military campaigns to conquer Mamluk-ruled Syria. In 1295, the Mongol leader Ghāzān Khān (d. 703/1304) converted to Sunnī Islam and demanded that all fellow Muslims submit to him. Most of his soldiers were also Muslims. Nevertheless, compared to the Mamluks, the Mongols were more relaxed in their adherence to the *sharīʿa*. Many did not undertake practices like prayer and *zakāt*. They also followed a Mongol legal code laid down by Genghis Khan known as the *yāsā*,<sup>172</sup> which they often prioritized over the *sharīʿa*. This produced a confusing situation for the Muslims of Mamluk Syria, who did not know whether to treat the Mongols as fellow Muslims or as invading *kāfīrs* to be fought. Ibn Taymiyya addressed this situation by publicly excommunicating the Mongols for not applying the *sharīʿa*. He also played a major role in organizing a successful *jihād* campaign against them.

Explicating his views, Ibn Taymiyya draws attention to the Wars of Apostasy. He states:

The Companions and the *imāms* after them unanimously agreed on fighting those who withheld the *zakāt*, even if they performed the five daily prayers and fasted the month of Ramaḍān. These people did not have any false

<sup>170</sup> 4 *id.*, *supra* note 17, at 444.

<sup>171</sup> 28 *id.* at 501–53; AIGLE, *supra* note 8; Hoover, *supra* note 8; Berriah, *supra* note 8.

<sup>172</sup> 28 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 521–22, 530–31.

argument that would justify [excusing them], and thus they were apostates (*murtaddīn*). They were fought for withholding it [i.e., the *zakāt*]—even if they acknowledged that it was obligatory.<sup>173</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya claims that the Mongols, as a group, are guilty of many offenses: they do not practice or implement a wide range of *sharīʿa* rules beyond *zakāt*; they consider Genghis Khan to be a son of God and a messenger of Allah; they regard his *yāsā* as a sacred law and favor it over the *sharīʿa*; and they commit acts of open blasphemy like fornicating in mosques or simply destroying them.<sup>174</sup> Ibn Taymiyya states:

We personally witnessed the army of these people and saw that the majority of them did not pray. We did not see in their camp a single *muʾadhdhin* (person who performs the call to prayer) or *imām* (prayer leader) ... even with their power, they did not perform *hajj* to the Ancient House. And even if some of them prayed and fasted, the majority did not establish prayer or give *zakāt*.... They did not fight for Islam, nor did they impose *jizya* (poll tax) [on *kāfīrs*] and subjugate them.<sup>175</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya also states that if the Mongols were to win, it “would lead to the disappearance of the religion of Islam and the effacement of its laws (*durūs sharāʿi ih*).”<sup>176</sup> Ibn Taymiyya holds that the Mongols are worse than the tribes excommunicated by Abū Bakr. Hence, he excommunicates them *en masse* and repeatedly refers to them as apostates (*murtaddīn*).<sup>177</sup>

Like the Khārijīs, Ibn Taymiyya is willing to excommunicate governments. However, he also differs from Khārijīs in several notable ways. Khārijīs hold that it is legitimate to excommunicate and wage *jihād* against any government—whether foreign or one’s own. Meanwhile, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* reject

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173 *Id.* at 519.

174 *Id.* at 519–22.

175 *Id.*

176 *Id.* at 530–31.

177 *Id.* at 519, 530–31, 534–35.

excommunicating and rebelling against one's own government. However, they do not address the case of foreign governments. Ibn Taymiyya excommunicates a foreign government (i.e., the Mongols), but not his own. This goes beyond the *ahl al-ḥadīth* position but does not necessarily conflict with it.

Such is not the only difference between Ibn Taymiyya and the Khārijīs. Khārijīs hold that governments and groups can become *kāfirs* by ignoring a single *sharī'a* rule. Ibn Taymiyya holds that this is technically possible in specific circumstances (e.g., the tribes who refused to pay *zakāt* to Abū Bakr).<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya does not promote excommunicating governments that ignore a single rule. (This would lead to excommunicating all extant governments, including the Mamluks.) Rather, he promotes excommunicating governments that abandon a wide range of basic *sharī'a* rules and replace the *sharī'a* with an alternative law code. This position is a novel one. It is less permissive of excommunicating governments than the Khārijī view yet more permissive than the *ahl al-ḥadīth* view.

Ibn Taymiyya's student Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) echoed his ideas. Citing Qur'ān 4:65 and 5:50 as evidence, Ibn Kathīr states, "Whoever abandons the definitive, revealed law sent down to Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh, the Seal of the Prophets, and seeks judgment (*taḥākama*) by another abrogated law, has committed disbelief (*kafara*). So, what then of one who seeks judgment by the *yāsā* and gives it precedence over [the *sharī'a*]? Whoever does so has become a *kāfir* by the consensus of the Muslims."<sup>179</sup>

Notably, in countering the Mongols, Ibn Taymiyya invokes another *takfīr* principle, which is tied to particular Qur'ānic verses (e.g., 3:28, 5:51). Thus, Qur'ān 5:51 reads, "You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies (*awliyā'*); They are allies only to each other. Whoever takes them as allies becomes one of them." Muslim scholars have long interpreted such verses as prohibiting Muslims from forming alliances with *kāfirs* against other Muslims. Those who do this are declared

<sup>178</sup> *Id.* at 518–19, 530–31.

<sup>179</sup> 15 ABŪ AL-FIDĀ' IBN KATHĪR, *AL-BIDĀYA WA'L-NIHĀYA* 161 (Dār Ibn Kathīr 2013); *see also* Berriah, *supra* note 7.

*kāfirs* themselves.<sup>180</sup> Although Ibn Ḥanbal has little to say about this principle, matters are different for Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Taymiyya suggests that this principle applies to the (*kāfir*) Mongols. Consequently, whoever allies with them against the Mamluks becomes a *kāfir*.<sup>181</sup>

#### SECTION VIII: IBN ʿABD AL-WAHHĀB ON *SHIRK*

Unlike Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb had little interest in Allah’s attributes (*ṣifāt*). Rather his central concern was *shirk*. Prior to Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb’s time, Ibn Taymiyya’s influence on mainstream Sunnism was limited due to his controversial opinions.<sup>182</sup> However, Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb enthusiastically embraced Ibn Taymiyya’s uniquely strict views on *shirk*. Breaking with earlier scholars, he held that Ibn Taymiyya should be treated as the foremost authority on Islamic doctrine.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb initiated an enduring partnership between his growing Wahhābī movement and the Saud dynasty (*Āl Suʿūd*), which ruled the town of Dirʿiyya. Together they established a larger Saudi state in the central Arabian region of Najd. The expanding Saudi state soon entered a long-term conflict with the Ottoman empire (698–1341/1299–1922). The Ottomans and their allies exercised varying degrees of authority over southeastern Europe and the Arab world, including the sacred Ḥijāz region. At the time, most of the world’s Muslims equated the Ottomans’ version of Islam with Sunnī orthodoxy. However, Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb condemned Ottoman Islam as *shirk*, and rebuked the Ottomans for not applying the *sharīʿa*. Based on this, Saudi Wahhābī authorities excommunicated the Ottomans and launched *jihād* campaigns against them.<sup>183</sup> The Saudi-Ottoman conflict continued until the Ottoman empire collapsed following its defeat in World War I. The 1920s witnessed several key developments.

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180 On Qurʾān 3:28, see 6 ABŪ JAʿFAR AL-ṬABARĪ, JĀMIʿ AL-BAYĀN ʿAN TAʾWĪL ĀY AL-QURʾĀN 313 (Dar al-Tarbiya waʾl-Turāth 2010).

181 28 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 530–31.

182 RAPOPORT & AHMED, *supra* note 131, at 6–7, 16, 269–70.

183 10 ʿABD AL-RAHMĀN IBN QĀSIM ED., AL-DURAR AL-SANIYYA FĪ AL-AJWI-BĀ AL-NAJDIYYA 7–8 (Maṭbaʿat Umm al-Qurā 1996); BUNZEL, *supra* note 8.

The Saudis annexed the Ḥijāz and established the modern state of Saudi Arabia. However, in the Ḥijāz and elsewhere, many Muslims opposed strict Wahhābī doctrines on *shirk* and *takfīr*. To allay these concerns, the Saudi government began forcibly reforming the Wahhābī religious establishment, demanding that it gradually tone down and qualify its *takfīr* doctrine.<sup>184</sup> In this way, Wahhābism evolved into the influential global movement known as Salafism.

As recognized in previous studies, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb embraces most of Ibn Taymiyya’s ideas on *shirk*.<sup>185</sup> Thus, he accepts Ibn Taymiyya’s central claim that Muslims can commit *shirk* even if they believe that Allah is the only real power in the universe. He likewise accepts Ibn Taymiyya’s claim that the ancient Arab *mushriks* conceptualized their “gods” as similar to dead persons, *jinn*, and angels.<sup>186</sup>

Like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb holds that slaughtering<sup>187</sup> and vowing are *shirk* when directed towards beings other than Allah,<sup>188</sup> and that little if any consideration needs to be given to the doer’s intentions. Like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb forbids pilgrimage to graves<sup>189</sup> and holds that requests from angels are *shirk*.<sup>190</sup> However, whereas Ibn Taymiyya permits requests from *jinn*, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb considers this *shirk*.<sup>191</sup> Following Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb considers *istighātha* to be *shirk*.<sup>192</sup> Like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb opposes *tawassul* without considering it outright *shirk*.<sup>193</sup> How-

184 See STEPHANE LACROIX, AWAKENING ISLAM 12–14 (2011); HENRI LAUZIERE, THE MAKING OF SALAFISM 60–94 (2016).

185 1 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 183, at 137–38; 2 *id.* at 125; BUNZEL, *supra* note 8, at 128–38; LAV, *supra* note 8, at 95–125.

186 See MUḤAMMAD IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB, KASHF AL-SHUBUHĀT 33–35 (Wizārat al-Shu’ūn al-Islāmiyya wa’l-Awqāf wa’l-Da’wā wa’l-Irshād 1418 H).

187 IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB, *supra* note 187, at 40; 10 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 183, at 14.

188 IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB, *supra* note 187, at 40; 10 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 185, at 14.

189 IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB, ĀDĀB AL-MASHĪ ILĀ AL-ṢALĀH 40 (Jāmi’ at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa’ūd n.d.).

190 *Id.*, *supra* note 186, at 6–8.

191 *Id.* at 6–8.

192 *Id.*, *supra* note 187, at 42–44.

193 1 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 183, at 33–34.

ever, whereas Ibn Taymiyya firmly prohibits *tawassul*, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb indicates that it is merely disliked (*makrūh*).<sup>194</sup>

As recognized in earlier scholarship, the primary difference between Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb concerns the excuse for ignorance.<sup>195</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb adopts Ibn Taymiyya’s strict opinions on *shirk* while rejecting his exceptionally expansive excuse for ignorance. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb judges that the general population of self-professed Muslims in his era has fallen into *shirk*. However, rather than pardoning them (like Ibn Taymiyya), he declares *jihād* against them. In some places, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb suggests that there is no excuse for ignorance.<sup>196</sup> More often, he admits that there is an excuse for ignorance but holds that it should be tightly restricted.<sup>197</sup> He argues that a person can no longer be considered ignorant once he or she has simply heard the Qur’ān. Addressing this matter, he says: “As for the fundamentals of the religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*), which Allah has clarified and made firm in His Book, Allah’s proof is the Qur’ān. Whoever the Qur’ān reaches, the proof has reached him (*balagathu al-ḥujja*).”<sup>198</sup>

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s sons (who became the highest Wahhābī religious authorities after his death) argue that anyone who has heard about their father’s general message possesses enough evidence. Such a person cannot claim the excuse for ignorance. They write, “[A]s for those who have received our call to *tawhīd* and the application of Allah’s [*sharī‘a*] obligations (*al-‘amal bi-farā‘id Allāh*) but refuse to accept it, persist in *shirk*, and neglect the [*sharī‘a*] obligations of Islam, we excommunicate them, fight them, and launch raids against them.”<sup>199</sup>

Admittedly, there is a famous letter where Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb asserts that he does not automatically declare those worship at graves to be disbelievers (e.g., for acts like *istighātha*).

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194 IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB, *FATĀWĀ WA-MASĀ’IL* 68 (Jāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa‘ūd al-Islāmiyya n.d.).

195 BUNZEL, *supra* note 8, at 127–190.

196 IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB, *supra* note 186, at 11; *see also id.*, *supra* note 187, at 28.

197 *Id.*, *AL-RASĀ’IL AL-SHAKHSIYYA* 60 (Jāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa‘ūd 1206 AH).

198 10 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 183, at 93.

199 9 *id.* at 252–53.

He asserts that his critics have slandered him by falsely claiming that he does not grant an excuse for ignorance.<sup>200</sup> Nevertheless, this letter conflicts with what Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb says in many other places. As such, it either represents a contradiction in his thinking or an attempt to conceal his actual views.<sup>201</sup>

**SECTION IX: IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB ON NON-APPLICATION OF THE *SHARĪ‘A***

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb holds that, as a general principle, Muslims must submit to governments and not rebel against them, even when they fall short in applying *sharī‘a*. In one text, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb explains that the ancient Arabs had many erroneous views that Islam came to correct. These include seeing disobedience to rulers as a good thing. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb comments:

[For the ancient Arabs,] opposing the ruler and refusing to submit to him is seen as a virtue. Obeying and listening to him is regarded as humiliation and disgrace. But the Messenger of Allah opposed them, and commanded patience with unjust rulers. He commanded obedience [to rulers] and giving them [beneficial] advice. He emphasized that with severity, repeating it often.<sup>202</sup>

However, like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb believes that some circumstances justify excommunicating governments and groups for not applying the *sharī‘a*. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb expresses his views in a short influential text titled *Nawāqid al-Islām (Nullifiers of Islam)*, which lists ten offenses that make one a *kāfir*.<sup>203</sup> The first two offenses concern *shirk*. The fourth offense is not applying the *sharī‘a*. In describing this fourth offense, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb uses the distinctive term *ṭāghūt*. In

200 1 *id.* at 104.

201 BUNZEL, *supra* note 8, at 158–62.

202 IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB, *MASĀ’IL AL-JĀHILIYYA* 7 (al-Maṭba‘a al-Salafiyya 1347 AH).

203 10 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 183, at 90–93.

Ibn Taymiyya's writings, a *tāghūt* is an illegitimate authority who demands obedience to his or her commands and laws over those of Allah.<sup>204</sup> Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb states, "Fourth [nullifier]: Whoever believes that the guidance of someone other than the Prophet is more complete than his guidance, or that the judgment of another is better than his judgment—such as those who prefer the rule of *tāghūt* over his rule—then he is a *kāfir*."<sup>205</sup> He also suggests that simply supporting the rule of a *tāghūt* verbally makes one a *kāfir*, such that the one who "praises the *tāghūts* or argues on their behalf ... exits Islam even if he fasts and stands in prayer."<sup>206</sup>

As mentioned above, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's sons argued that *takfīr* is justified for both *shirk* and non-application of the *sharī'a*.<sup>207</sup> Significantly, the prominent early Wahhābī scholar Ḥusayn Ibn Ghannām (d. 1225/1810) cites Ibn Taymiyya's *fatwās* against the Mongols to legitimate *takfīr* and *jihād* against the Ottomans and their allies. Like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Ghannām emphasizes that Abū Bakr was correct to excommunicate tribes who simply did not pay *zakāt*. This justifies excommunicating groups who do not adhere to *sharī'a*.<sup>208</sup> For Ibn Ghannām, the most serious offence of the Ottomans and their allies is failure to implement *sharī'a* rules banning *shirk*.

To build support against his enemies, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb invokes two further *takfīr* principles. In *Nawāqid*, he identifies allying with *kāfirs* against Muslims as the eighth offense that makes one a *kāfir*.<sup>209</sup> For Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Muslims who have allied with the Ottomans against the Saudi state have become *kāfirs*. A second important *takfīr* principle concerns what we might call "chain *takfīr*." Recall that according to classic *takfīr* doctrine, denying a Prophetic teaching that is known with certainty makes one a *kāfir*. Chain *takfīr* is a specific application of this principle. Thus, it is definitively known that

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204 28 IBN TAYMIYYA, *supra* note 17, at 201.

205 10 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 183, at 91.

206 *Id.* at 55.

207 9 *id.* at 252–53.

208 1 ḤUSAYN IBN GHANNĀM, TĀRIKH NAJD 31 (Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī 1949).

209 10 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 183, at 90–93.

the Prophet taught that particular groups are *kāfirs*. Examples are Christians and worshippers of al-Lāt.<sup>210</sup> A person who denies that such groups are *kāfirs* becomes a *kāfir* himself and merits *takfīr*. This is chain *takfīr*. Many Muslim scholars accept some form of the chain *takfīr* principle, such as Ibn Ḥanbal. He holds that the Prophet taught that Allah literally speaks, and that whoever denies Prophetic teachings is a *kāfir*. On these grounds, Ibn Ḥanbal excommunicates Jahmīs. He further excommunicates whoever denies that Jahmīs are *kāfirs* and refuses to excommunicate them.<sup>211</sup>

Although Ibn Taymiyya presumably accepts the chain *takfīr* principle, it does not play a significant role in his thought. By contrast, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb emphasizes the importance of chain *takfīr*. In *Nawāqid*, the third offense that makes one a *kāfir* is not excommunicating those who are *kāfirs*. The text states: “Whoever does not excommunicate the *mushriks*, doubts that they are *kāfirs*, or considers their doctrine sound, has become a *kāfir* by consensus.”<sup>212</sup> For Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, this means that whoever does not excommunicate the Ottomans and their allies becomes a *kāfir*.

Although Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is critical of surrounding societies for not applying the *sharī‘a*, his primary justification for excommunicating them is *shirk*. Thus, people in these societies partake in or tolerate making requests from dead persons and angels, slaughtering for *jinn*, and so on. Indeed, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb goes so far as to assert that “the *shirk* of the ancients [i.e., pre-Islamic Arabs] is less severe (*akhaff*) than the *shirk* of people in our time.”<sup>213</sup> In other words, given their extreme *shirk*, the Ottomans are lower in status, and further from Islam, than the ancient Arabs. The implied message is that since the Prophet fought the ancient Arabs for their *shirk*, the Ottomans are even more deserving of being fought.

To sum up, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb excommunicates the Ottomans, their allies, and whoever does not excommunicate them. He also accuses these groups of *shirk* and refers to them

210 Qur’ān 98:1, 6.

211 1 IBN ABĪ YA‘LĀ, *supra* note 45, at 342.

212 10 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 183, at 91.

213 IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB, *supra* note 186, at 33.

as *mushriks*. This functions to justify *jihād* campaigns against all the putative “Muslim” lands surrounding the Saudi state. Expressing his views, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb says:

You have also heard the [Ottoman] *mushriks* say: “*Shirk* is the worship of idols but not that of the pious [dead].” ... Allah has blessed you with the acknowledgment of the *mushriks*’ scholars regarding all of this. You have heard their admission that the practices taking place in the Two Holy Sanctuaries [Mecca and Madina], Basra, Iraq, and Yemen are acts of *shirk* [i.e., associating] with Allah. They have admitted to you that the religion whose people they support—and who they claim are the great majority—they have admitted to you that their religion [i.e., that of the Ottomans] is [in fact] *shirk*.<sup>214</sup>

Commenting on the need for *jihād* against such *mushriks*, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb says, “May Allah have mercy on the one who reflects for himself and contemplates what Muḥammad brought from Allah of enmity toward *mushriks*, whether near or far, excommunicating them, and fighting them until religion is entirely for Allah.”<sup>215</sup>

Contemporary Ottoman figures often accused Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his followers of being “Khārijīs.” Eminent Ottoman religious scholars with this view include the Mālikī jurist Aḥmad al-Sāwī (d. 1241/1825)<sup>216</sup> and the Ḥanafī jurist Ibn ‘Ābidīn (d. 1252/1836).<sup>217</sup> For Ottomans, Wahhābīs resembled Khārijīs because they promoted illegitimate mass *takfīr* and political rebellion. Notably, many jurists regard Khārijīs as *kāfirs*. Hence, labeling Wahhābīs as “Khārijīs” can be interpreted as implicitly excommunicating them. Ottoman scholars’ loyalty to their government naturally shaped their intensely negative judgements of Wahhābism.

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214 10 IBN QĀSIM, *supra* note 183, at 7–8.

215 1 IBN ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB, MUFĪD AL-MUSTAFĪD FĪ KUFR TĀRIK AL-TAWHĪD 298 (Jāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa‘ūd 1206 AH).

216 3 AḤMAD AL-SĀWĪ, ḤĀSHIYAT AL-SĀWĪ ‘ALĀ TAFSĪR AL-JALĀLAYN 255 (Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī 1926).

217 4 IBN ‘ĀBIDĪN, *supra* note 120, at 262.

## CONCLUSION

In the present article, I have sought to make four contributions to scholarship on *takfīr*. First, I have traced the long-term development of *takfīr* doctrine among the *ahl al-ḥadīth*/Ḥanbalīs, while explicating the views of Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyya, and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. The article has highlighted key differences between these figures. Thus, the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* (including Ibn Ḥanbal) promote *takfīr* for denying Allah’s attributes but not for *shirk* or non-application of the *sharī‘a*. Significantly, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* excuse many persons guilty of denying Allah’s attributes, and do not call for *jihād* against them. Meanwhile, Ibn Taymiyya promotes *takfīr* for denying Allah’s attributes, for *shirk*, and for non-application of the *sharī‘a*. However, Ibn Taymiyya typically excuses offenders, and does not call for *jihād* against them (with the Mongols being a limited exception). Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb promotes *takfīr* for *shirk* and for non-application of the *sharī‘a*. He limits excuses and calls for *jihād* against offenders.

Second, I explain the origins and development of the “excuse for ignorance” as a crucial component of *takfīr* doctrine. The excuse plays a fundamental role in determining how *takfīr* doctrine is applied. Scholars who minimize the excuse’s scope (e.g., Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb), thereby encourage *takfīr* and conflict between Muslim groups. Scholars who maximize the excuse’s scope (e.g., Ibn Taymiyya), foster more tolerance for Muslim groups with divergent theological views. Nevertheless, since Ibn Ḥanbal’s time, the notion of excuse has been somewhat vague, leading to major disagreements about how it is to be understood. For example, who counts as “ignorant” and deserving of the excuse? Is the class of ignorant people limited to new converts and the like? Or does it include ordinary laypersons and even deviant religious scholars? Moreover, how much evidence does a person need before he or she is no longer considered ignorant? Is it enough to simply read the Qur’ān or hear about Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s teachings? Or is it necessary for someone to counter all of a deviant’s misleading arguments with evidence? Is there a time limit for this educational process, or can it continue indefinitely?

Third, by taking a long-term view, I have explained the role of historical contingency in shaping *takfīr* doctrine, showing that *takfīr* doctrine moved along an unpredictable trajectory and was reoriented multiple times by particular events. Thus, Muslim thinking on *takfīr* first moved from a focus on non-application of *sharī'a* to a focus on denying Allah's attributes, then to a focus on *shirk*.

Fourth, I have highlighted the role of politics in shaping *takfīr* doctrine. Among other things, I demonstrated how Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyya, and Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb advocate loyalty to their governments and reject excommunicating them or rebelling against them. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya worked to protect his Mamluk government by excommunicating an invading Mongol force. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb excommunicated all governments and societies surrounding the Saudi state in Najd, legitimating Saudi expansion against the rival Ottomans and their allies. The Ottomans responded by implicitly excommunicating Wahhābīs as Khārijīs. Although *takfīr* doctrine cannot be reduced to politics, political loyalties affect how this doctrine is understood and applied.