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At-Ta'reef wal Irshaad bi 'Aqaa-id Ahlus-Sunnah (A review)

Sekou Marafa Toure*

Precede

Most of the books of Islamic Creed found in Islamic heritage are characterised by their presentation of theology from the perspective of a particular sect out of the major Islamic sects. This methodology has given rise to serious and detrimental problems that affect the *ummah* (Muslim nation) up until this day, and from it stems the issues that divide the *ummah*. It is thus apparent that it is incapable of presenting the issues of theology from the perspective of that which unites the Muslims. It is true that this methodology had been sound at one point during which it had to be applied; it had been the means of expression in dialogues and the way to answer questions related to pertinent matters of the time, as well as to address urgent new issues at that particular time. However, the goal of teaching Islamic Creed in this time of ours academically in specific is not based upon the instabilities and issues that it had once driven it. Hence, it is necessary to change the approach, methodology and discourse to suit the change in impetus to and the goal of authoring such books, as well as the change in the general way of living of the people. It is also worth noting that the universal moral principles associated with such changes do not contradict religion. This review undertakes a new book attempting to respond to a challenge resulted out of the classical discourses and arguments in presenting Islamic worldviews, and hence reality of so called *Ahl Sunnah* wal Jama'ah.

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Introduction to the Book

The book that is before us is entitled “*At-Ta'reef wal Irshaad bi 'Aqaa-id Ahlus-Sunnah wal Jamaa'ah (An Introduction and Guide to the Beliefs of the People Who Adhere to And Unite Upon the Prophetic Traditions)*”, written by Muhammad Yusuf Idrees (He is a temporary Muslim preacher either from Jordan or lives in Jordan. I have not been able to find his biography, nor any other books he has authored). It is a new book, one which I had first come across in 2017 during the annual International Book Fair held in Malaysia. The first edition of this book was in 2016 by the publishers Dar An-Noor Al-Mubeen in Amman, Jordan. The book revolves around four parts - as the author has called it - in three sections; the essence of the book and its ideas are consolidated in **the first part** (page 23-86), which is meant to set the parameters of what is meant by *Ahlu-Sunnah*. **The second part**, which the author also names as the first section, addresses the matter of *Ilahiyyat* or divinity and contains four chapters (page 87-209). This differs from the first part, which is only a “part” and has no sections under it. **The third part**, which is the second section, talks about Prophethood (page 210-270). The author did not divide its subsections into chapters or case studies, unlike the first section, but the matter goes back to normal in the fourth part -and the third section- which studies *As-Sam'iyyaat* (Unseen, i.e. Islamic matters on the basis of hearing the revelation). However, the author employs a different method of sectioning here; he discusses twenty-four issues, and every issue under the *As-Sam'iyyaat* falls under subcategorization like **The First Belief in the Unseen, The Second Belief in the Unseen** and so on (page 271-396). He concludes the book with the chapters of disbelief, atheism and defilement that has been directed towards the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him).

Purpose of Authoring the Book

There is no doubt that the author did not spend his time and effort writing the book due to presence of a deficiency in the clear literary works that already exist in the field of Islamic Creed. He wrote the book to instil in the minds of the masses of the Muslims that the Ash'aris are the elite of *Ahlu-Sunnah wal Jamaa'ah* throughout Islamic history, and that beside them stand the Maturidis, and that the matter is not like the well-known opinion of Shaykh Al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah (661/728 he is one of the prominent scholars of the 8th century AH) which has been adopted by those who came after him and those who have been influ-

enced by him, who then strove to forsake the Ash‘aris and take on the title of *Ahlus-Sunnah wal Jamaa‘ah* according to their opinions. The author sees this as historically and scientifically incorrect.

He explains on page 14 that there are over one billion Ash‘arite Muslims who are spread across the five continents, and that they are *Ahlus-Sunnah*, so it is imperative to educate the Muslims and enlighten them on this reality. He mentioned in a footnote on page 36 that Abu Hanifah was the first of the philosophers of *Ahlus-Sunnah* and described Al-Baghdadi in a similar fashion. He claims that this reality is unknown to the masses of the Muslims due to the strong campaign against philosophy at the hands of those who adopted the opinion of Shaykh Al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah. Therefore, all of this requires counteractive elucidation. This standpoint of his emphasises the reason as to why he wrote the book. And from among that which emphasises the author’s reason behind authoring the book is his statement on page 58: “The virtuous aspects and great contributions of the Ash‘aris are not unknown to researchers and academics, although the general masses of the people are unaware of them”; it is for these people that he had written this book for”. On page 84 he said that he had written the book “to acquaint the masses of the Muslims with the creed of *Ahlus-Sunnah wal Jamaa‘ah*”.

Therefore, the goal of writing the book is for it to be a fulfilment of a defection in existing efforts which has, up until this point, deprived the Muslims and has played a major role in ripping apart the unity between them. The author attempts to persuade the Muslims to accept his opinion in two ways:

- The first of which is in chapter one, whereby he mentioned the statement of nineteen (19) personalities from the fifth century A.H and thereafter who said that the term *Ahlus-Sunnah* has been used in reference to the Ash‘aris (page 23-52), and mentioned the legal opinions of some of the early scholars, as well as the later scholars, in that regard as well. He followed this with the discussion of the topic “The Foremost of the Ash‘aris”(page 53-74).
- Secondly, he repeatedly presented Islamic Creed according to the methodology, style, notion and opinion of the Ash‘arites, **while interjecting all of that with refutations of Shaykh Al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah’s stance in particular.** Indeed, he focused on refuting Shaykh Al-Islam because he believed that he was the first of the callers to such ideas, and that he is the leader and source of all those who have adopted his opinion. It is be-

cause of this that the author has often used to term “school of the taymiyyeen”.

It seems that the author has substantiated some of the claims that the Ash'arites are the indeed *Ahlu-Sunnah wal Jamaa'ah*, and then supported that with the discussion of the opposing opinion. What concerns me is that is this explanation of his going to play a role in uniting the Muslims or increase their disunity?!

Analytical Examination of the Book

Objectively reading the book is difficult as most readers already have stances on the issues being discussed. This is due to what we have mentioned earlier in the introduction regarding the effect that the existing methodology in dealing with such issues. Thus, the reader is either Salafi; who has been nurtured in an environment that is associated with the noble Prophetic Traditions and thus he attains his knowledge from the scholars of the jurisprudential school, or he is Ash'arite; who has studied in a university that adopt the Ash'ari views in its teachings and are founded upon it. Therefore, one of them is going to adore this book and consecrate its idea, while the other is going to demonise it and warn against it as a critical response to what it contains of aberrations and transgressions. The issue with this book is similar to that of the book by Mohamed Said Ramadan Al-Bouti: “Salafiyah: A Blessed Time Period, Not an Islamic Ideology”. Nonetheless, if I were to be objective and impartial, leaning neither to this nor that, I would bring reader's attention to the following:

- Categorizing and marginalizing others in the name of searching for “the strongest evidence” does not solve the problem, because the issue is in the evidence itself and in understanding it. Perhaps the author was harsh when speaking about those of the “Taymiyyeen” who oppose his views and did not try to praise them in any regard.
- Perspectives need to be broadened when it comes to issues of theology, while still maintaining that the fundamentals of the religion are exemplified in the scriptures that the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him) himself had presented to the tribes of Mecca early days of Islam. As well as in the discourse of Ja'far that had taken place in front of An-Najaashi, and that of Abu Sufyan in front of Heraclius. The related understandings of these principles that are a result of the development of time or the emergence of

new developments must be presented in the light of Islamic thought and discourse and be a point of discourse. Therefore, the Ash‘arite and the Salafi will discuss such issues from the perspective of the Islamic schools of thought, and not from the perspective of belief and disbelief, or *sunnah* and innovation.

- With such an approach it would be possible for this historical issue and considerations to be applicable to the issues of our time. Perhaps this is what the callers to “New Ilm Kalam” or reviving Islamic dialects are interested in; so, generally speaking, their intention is actually to discuss the methodology and that which is being presented.

- Some researchers have attempted to write about the fundamentals of the religion without falling into the claws of such historical issues that surround literary works on creed. And without making it known that there are Ash‘arites, Maturidis and Salafis, or rather without bringing up the disputed issues which are few in comparison to the vast majority which are agreed upon. From books that have been written on such method al’islam ‘aqidat washarieah wa’akhlaq , ‘aqidat almuslim , almuhkam fi al ‘aqidat , rakay’iz al’iiman, al ‘aqayid al’iislamiyah al ‘aqidah al’iislamiyat wa’ussaha and others. These books have been authored for the academic purposes and for instruction in the universities in the area of creed, as well as for the simplification of its issues. If there had been some references in these books to sensitive issues, they would not cause the Muslim nation to become divided or polarised such that they would fight and oppose each other and not come together as one.

- I would recommend to my fellow researchers and the one who is interested in reading this book to do so with an eye free of any previous judgements so that the book is not void of benefit, which would otherwise be the case should he approach it whilst adhering strongly to a particular school of thought. It is preferred that one steers clear of such an approach as far as possible. I also recommend that the concern of the scholars be that of what unites the masses, and not to fish in muddied waters under the pretext of substantiation or other fallacies which take away that which is necessary to be said and abandon that which is explicit!

The following are a few observations regarding the methodology of the book:

- Lack of proper academic referencing, so there are numerous unsubstantiated statements. Perhaps the author's excuse is that he had written the book from the angle of a scholar who is addressing the general masses, and not from that of an academic researcher.
- In part one, the author did not mention the death dates of those whose sayings he had cited, nor did he mention the century in which they had lived in. Additionally, he did not mention them in chronological order.
- The author had furnished the book with both a prologue and an introduction; in both he addressed the points of the virtue of knowledge, the importance of affiliation with the people of knowledge, and the status of *Ahlu-s-Sunnah* and their efforts in Islamic thought only generally. He did not clarify his methodology nor state the reason for writing the book explicitly in either of these opening statements. Similarly, he did not discuss his methodology in the division of the book into sections. Perhaps the excuse is that this literary work is not meant to be academic, but rather it is in the position of a scholar '*Shaikh*' addressing students and teaching them
- Typographical errors have been found. Though they are inevitable in any book or human work, perhaps they could have been avoided had the earlier edition been thoroughly revised. Examples of such include that on the following pages: 98, 120, 128, 129, 131, 139, 144, 149, 178, 179, 187, 191, 198, 201, 204, 211, 216, 239, 284, and 299.

Lastly, for the sake of Allah, tell me: what is the sin of this Indian, Russian, African, American or Asian who gets caught in the midst of this old historical conflict when he makes his way to an Arab country to learn the Islamic sciences; where he gets associated to a particular school of thought and perceived to be prejudiced against the other schools, resulting in the comprehensive, common points between the schools to be lost for no other reason except for differences in methodologies. He leaves innocent, absent-minded, loving Islam and the Muslims, but knowing that Islam according to so-and-so is correct, and Islam according to so-and-so is to be rejected, and thus will associate himself with only a particular row from the disjointed rows of the Muslims!