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***Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, author: Christopher Melchert (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), ix+143
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Christopher Melchert has been known for his works on the formation of Sunni thought. Known as one of George Makdisi's seven students, Melchert's academic life began in the United States and has continued in England. The author conducted research in Istanbul, Cairo and Damascus at different times in his academic career, carried out his academic studies at University of Oxford from 2000 until his retirement. Melchert completed his PhD thesis titled "*The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law: 9th-10th Centuries C.E.*" in 1992 and has produced a number of significant studies since then.¹

Some of his post-2015 studies can be included here since Melchert's studies until 2015 are discussed in Çavuşoğlu's article. Melchert's book *Before Sufism: Early Islamic Renunciant Piety* was published in 2020. In addition, his articles titled "The Inquisition outside Baghdad"² and "Renunciants in Africa under the Aghlabids"³ were published in 2021 and 2022. He has conducted a project on the Mukhtasars of al-Buwayti (Shafi'i), al-Muzani (Shafi'i) and al-Khiraqi (Hanbali).⁴ Among Melchert's studies, it is seen that Ahmad ibn Hanbal and the articles related to him occupy an important place.⁵

Melchert's *Ahmad ibn Hanbal* was authored in English as a contribution to the series "Makers of the Muslim World", which can be translated as "Shapers of the Muslim World", is edited by Khaled El-Rouayheb (Harvard) and Sabine Schmidtke (Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton). This series is devoted to the men and women who have made a contribution to the political, intellectual and religious landscape of the Muslim world throughout history.⁶

With a 40.000-word limit, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal* written by Melchert, is different from a standard biography, at least from classical history books. Melchert shows that the works written in the classical period, such as those of al-Dhahabi, Ibn al-Jawzi and Ibn Asakir are disadvantageous because they contain elements of the period in which they written.⁷ After a short introduction of about 3 pages, Melchert organized his book into 5 chapters. After the first chapter on the life of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the author includes the chapters titled "Hadith", "Law", "Correct Belief" and "Piety" respectively. At this

¹ It is possible to find the Melchert's life and works until 2015 in the article. Ali Hakan Çavuşoğlu, "Christopher Melchert ve Mezheb: Gelenekçi Bir Oryantalistin İslam Hukuk Tarihi ve Ehl-i Sünnet Yorumu", *Sünnî Düşüncenin Teşekkülü: Din-Yorum-Dindarlık*. the author. Christopher Melchert (İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2018), 21-74.

² Christopher Melchert, "The Inquisition outside Baghdad", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 141/1 (2021), 201-210.

³ Christopher Melchert, "Renunciants in Africa under the Aghlabids", *The Maghreb Review* 47/3 (2022), 292-314.

⁴ University Of Oxford (UOO), "Christopher Melchert" (Accessed 17 September 2024).

⁵ Christopher Melchert, "The Piety of Hadith Folk", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34/3 (2002), 425-439; Christopher Melchert, "Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Qur'an", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6/2 (2004), 22-34; Christopher Melchert, *Sünnî Düşüncenin Teşekkülü: Din-Yorum-Dindarlık*, translation Ali Hakan Çavuşoğlu (İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2018), 75-100.

⁶ According to the information available on the website, 44 books have been published so far in this series, the first of which was published in 2005 and the last in 2021. Oneword, "Makers of the Muslim World" (Accessed 12 September 2024).

⁷ Christopher Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), viii.

point, it can be argued that the author tried to address the Ahmad ibn Hanbal's entire intellectual world from various angles. As a matter of fact, there is a clear emphasis in the studies on the history of Islamic sects that some important Islamic thinkers do not have a single identity and that the name being researched should be handled from different perspectives.

In the introduction, Melchert states that while Ahmad ibn Hanbal's life means more than that of his contemporaries, Sunni thought and Hanbali jurisprudence are inevitably the product of this age, and that Ahmad ibn Hanbal's work, *Musnad*, is read today in a different context than when it was composed/documented. Melchert argues that Islamic thought gradually diverged from the principles espoused by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and he was not accepted as the pioneer of the new Sunni thought⁸). Indeed, according to Melchert, the central role in the reshaping of Sunni thought is played by Imam al-Shafi'i, who is defined as moderate-rationalists, and the Shafi'i's led by Ibn Sureyc, who systematized his thought.

In the first chapter of the book, Melchert provides information about Ahmad ibn Hanbal's life, education, family, personality, experiences during the inquisition/*Mihna* and his death.⁹ The most important aspect that draws attention in this chapter is the emphasis on Ahmad ibn Hanbal's attitude of asceticism and his desire to avoid worldly life as much as possible.¹⁰ Similarly, the author defines Ahmad ibn Hanbal's understanding of piety as unremitting seriousness and indifference to the world.¹¹ According to Melchert, although there were some accounts of Ahmad ibn Hanbal's generosity and compassion, the same attitude was not maintained towards non-Sunni enemies and non-Muslims.¹² One of the most important virtues of the study is that it emphasizes the different ways in which the sources deal with the events and the fact that the sources used carry the spirit of the period in which they were written and that the evaluations are made meticulously.¹³

In the second chapter, it is stated that Ahmad ibn Hanbal devoted most of his life to hadith and compiled his main work, *Musnad*, by collection of hadiths.¹⁴ Melchert considers Ahmad ibn Hanbal to be a figure with extreme views within the Sunni in favor of hadith. Ahmad ibn Hanbal considered knowledge of the Qur'an as good and necessary, but not sufficient. According to him, acquiring knowledge through theological reasoning is not necessary and even not good. Knowledge of hadith is paramount and it is necessary to collect them, listen to them from different teachers, write them down and memorize them.¹⁵

The heading "Ahmad's quest for hadith" provides information about Ahmad ibn Hanbal's hadith travels. In this section, it is noteworthy that Ahmad ibn Hanbal never demanded any aid for

⁸ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, viii.

⁹ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 1-18.

¹⁰ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 1.

¹¹ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 6.

¹² Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 7-8.

¹³ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 9.

¹⁴ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 19.

¹⁵ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 22.

narrating or writing hadith.¹⁶ One of the titles the author opens in the “Hadith” section is *Musnad*. The fact that *Musnad* is organized according to individuals/companions rather than according to their subjects is seen as a reflection of the hadith-fiqh antagonism.¹⁷ Finally, in the section on hadith, the information about Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s method of evaluating hadith, namely *al-jarh wa al-ta’dil*, is given and Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s practices are mentioned on the subject.¹⁸

At the beginning of the third chapter, where we find the foundations of Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s understanding of fiqh, Melchert says that he had a fiqh understanding that was more hadith-centered than other systems and more featured to the hadiths of names other than the Prophet. He also says that Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s understanding of jurisprudence did not take into account the difference between what is “required” and what is “recommended”. Perhaps the most noteworthy statement is that Ahmad ibn Hanbal would have found it appalling if his students and the next generation after him had formed a systematic understanding of fiqh.¹⁹

In a passage comparing their understanding of fiqh, Melchert states that Ahmad ibn Hanbal vehemently opposed Malik for speaking through opinion.²⁰ According to Melchert, Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s comments on important jurists have a negative content, as did his later followers.²¹ Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who considers all the narrations of the companions within the scope of *sunnah*, draws a broader framework compared to Shafi’i. According to Melchert, there is also a difference between the two in terms of establishing an understanding of fiqh.²²

According to Melchert, the transmission of Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s opinions through the *masa’il* collections is more reliable than the transmission of the opinions of the imams of the other sect. This is due to the fact that Ahmad ibn Hanbal responded to the questions with short answers, in addition to the transmission of the opinions of the other imams through various interpretive activities.²³ Melchert talks about the course of the Hanbali fiqh tradition and states that if Ahmad ibn Hanbal had witnessed, he would have been more and more disturbed by the practices over time, but these practices also protected the sect from disappearing from the stage of history.²⁴ At the end of the chapter, the author makes brief comments on the relationship and differences between Salafism and Ahmad ibn Hanbal.²⁵

Melchert, who devotes the fourth part of the work to the correct belief/faith, states that he does not find it appropriate to name this chapter *kalam* or theology and the reason for this is that Ahmad ibn Hanbal explains the correct belief in a short way and does not need explanations and detailed evaluations

¹⁶ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 34.

¹⁷ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 42-43.

¹⁸ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 48-57.

¹⁹ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 59.

²⁰ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 64.

²¹ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 64-65.

²² Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 71.

²³ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 68-70.

²⁴ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 79, 81.

²⁵ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 81.

on this subject.²⁶ According to him, a complicated/complex or elaborate belief is not among the requirements of religion.²⁷ Melchert states that the sects that Ahmad ibn Hanbal respectively rejected were the Murji'ah, Qadariyah, Mu'tazilah, Nusayriyah, Jahmiyah, Rafidah and Khawarji. Apart from these, it is also stated that the Shu'ubiyah and the ashhab al-ra'y were also condemned by him.²⁸ In this part, Melchert includes the topic of politics and touches upon Ahmad ibn Hanbal's approach to the subject and states that two different opinions are attributed to him, especially on the issue of whether Ali is fourth in the order of virtue or not.²⁹

The fact that Ahmad ibn Hanbal acted according to what was believed, not what was practiced, when distinguishing between Muslims and non-Muslims, and that his beliefs were intolerant and defensive, suggests that he could be considered a fundamentalist. However, according to Melchert, there are differences between many of Ahmad ibn Hanbal's ideas and fundamentalist beliefs such as his hesitation in expressing his jurisprudential views.³⁰ Analyzing the state of Sunni theology after Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Melchert states that Ahmad ibn Hanbal's objection to theology was more successful than his desire not to write down his jurisprudential views. However, it cannot be said that this objection was completely successful. As a matter of fact, after him, the science of *kalam* was used both in his own sectarian tradition and among Sunnis.³¹

In the last chapter of the book, Melchert states that Ahmad ibn Hanbal lived an uncomfortable and austere life, especially by distancing himself from many of the things that his authority revealed.³² The general characteristics of the early tradition of asceticism are described as accepting the Qur'an as frightening, a focus on the afterlife rather than this world, a low value on worldly activities such as social services and a high value on religious observance, reading the Qur'an in addition to prayer as a manifestation of their devotion/*taqwa*, private/individual worship for God and not for people, and paying very little to live comfortably.³³

According to Melchert, there are some similarities between the piety of Ahmad ibn Hanbal and his teachers and the early ascetics.³⁴ However, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, unlike other ascetics, advocates a doctrine in which extreme austerity is not necessary or even particularly recommended.³⁵ Ahmad ibn Hanbal is said to have favored a moderate lifestyle/Sunni asceticism compatible with raising a family and engaging in trade. This orientation is considered less strenuous than that of early ascetics such as al-Hasan al-Basri and Malik bin Dinar or contemporaries such as Bishr ibn al-Harith.³⁶ Melchert

²⁶ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 83.

²⁷ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 89.

²⁸ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 89-92.

²⁹ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 95-96.

³⁰ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 98-100.

³¹ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 101-102.

³² Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 103.

³³ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 104-108.

³⁴ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 111.

³⁵ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 113.

³⁶ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 113.

explains Ahmad ibn Hanbal's dilemma as a struggle between his admiration for the heroic renunciation of the early Muslims and his desire to emulate it, and the asceticism of his time, which he sees as getting in the way of a moralistic, hadith-based and accessible Islam.³⁷ At the end of the book there is a bibliography, a short list of suggestions for further reading on the subject and an index. The research draws on early Hanbali sources and takes into account modern studies from the West.

Within the context of the criticism of the book, it is seen that the author includes unnecessary and detailed information in some places, such as when he mentions Basra and states that it was once under the control of the British. In addition, in some parts, there are intense comparisons between Islam and Christianity and also Islam and Judaism. Despite all these, the book has important achievements especially in the field of the history of Islamic sects. Among the results of the study are two issues that are heavily emphasized in the book. The first one is that Ahmad ibn Hanbal's students and followers systematized his teachings to a point that he did not like at all. The second point is that Ahmad ibn Hanbal had an understanding of asceticism with a simple and uncomfortable life and an austerity approach by turning away from the world. In addition, Melchert has taken the right attitude in reading the relationship between Shafi'i and Ahmad ibn Hanbal by emphasizing the differences between them. Finally, Melchert's *Ahmad ibn Hanbal* is distinguished by his preference for a holistic approach and his evaluation of the subject from different perspectives.

³⁷ Melchert, *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, 119.

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