

Statement of Shaykh Dr Falah Mandakar regarding the refutation of the claim that Imam al-Nawawi and Ibn Hajar belonged to the Ash‘ari school, and an explanation of the creedal principles of the Ash‘aris, and how these principles contradict the principles of the righteous predecessors (may Allah be pleased with them)

By: Mohamad Mostafa Nassar

X: @NassarMohamadMR

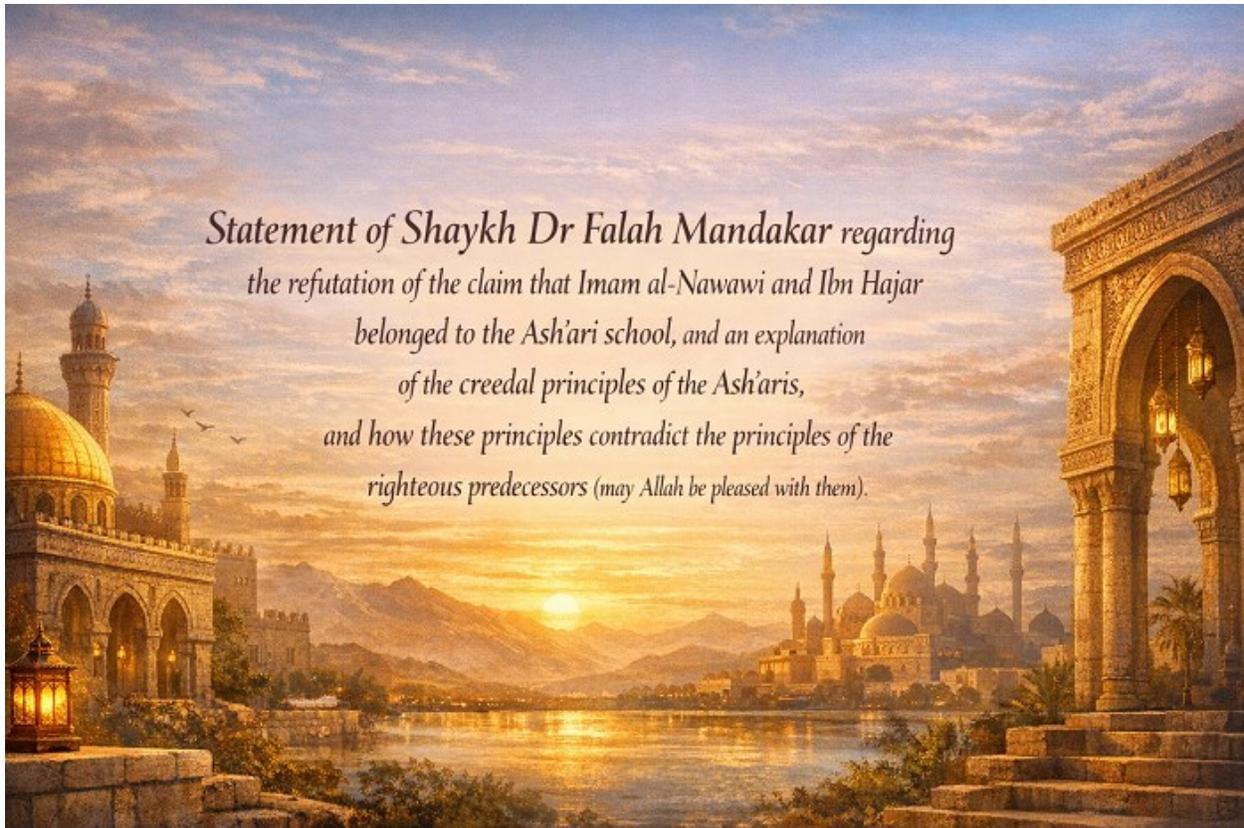
Website: www.Islamcompass.com

Introduction

In later times, the claim became widespread that some of the major scholars of Islam, such as Imam al-Nawawi and Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, may Allah have mercy on them both “rahimahuma Allah”, were among the leading Ashari authorities in matters of creed, and that they adopted the foundations of the Ashari school out of commitment and choice. This claim has been used to justify affiliation with the Ashari school and to present it as representative of the methodology of the majority of scholars.

However, Shaykh Dr Falah ibn Isma‘il Mandakar, may Allah have mercy on him “rahimahu Allah”, examined this claim critically and refuted it, explaining that applying the description of Ashari to these two Imams in an unrestricted manner is inaccurate. This is because neither of them is known to have systematised those three foundations upon which the Ashari school is based. Rather, each of them showed an inclination in some issues, or used expressions that were common in their time, which do not necessitate commitment to the entire school.

From this point came Shaykh Falah Mandakar’s response, in order to clarify the reality of the three foundational principles of the Ash‘aris, and to compare them with the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah and the Salaf, so as to show the fundamental difference between the two methodologies, and to dispel the misconception that those imams belonged to the Ash‘ari school in terms of foundational principles and creed.



*Statement of Shaykh Dr Falah Mandakar regarding
the refutation of the claim that Imam al-Nawawi and Ibn Hajar
belonged to the Ash'ari school, and an explanation
of the creedal principles of the Ash'aris,
and how these principles contradict the principles of the
righteous predecessors (may Allah be pleased with them).*

The response:

The cited text from Shaykh Falah Mandakar, may Allah have mercy upon him “rahimahu Allah”, presents his conception of the three foundational principles of the Ash'aris through tracing the statements of a number of their scholars, such as al-Juwayni, al-Razi, and others, and then compares these principles with their counterparts in the methodology of the Salaf.

The Shaykh also addresses in his discussion the position of the two Imams, al-Nawawi and Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, clarifying whether these principles apply to them or not.

It is clear from the text that the section dealing with “the three foundational principles of the Ash'aris” is the main axis upon which the Shaykh built his analysis and discussion.

Firstly: the text as quoted from Shaykh Falah Mandakar

“The Ash’aris are three issues... meaning that a person is not to be called an Ash’ari, and Ash’ariyyah does not exist, except when these three are found:

The first issue is:

First: giving absolute and obligatory precedence to reason over transmitted text. This is what they say. Al-Razi said it, and al-Juwayni said it... etc.

Second: dividing the transmitted text into two categories: mutawatir and ahad. They say: reports of ahad are not to be used as proof in matters of creed.

Third: the obligation of interpreting all transmitted texts so that they conform to reason.”

Firstly: the text as presented by Shaykh Falah Mandakar

Shaykh Falah Mandakar, may Allah have mercy on him “rahimahu Allah”, said:

The Ash’aris are founded upon three principal issues, and no one is to be called an Ash’ari unless these three foundations are all found in him:

The first foundation: giving absolute precedence to reason over transmitted text, and regarding that as obligatory. This was explicitly stated by al-Razi, al-Juwayni, and others among the leading Ash’aris.

The second foundation: dividing the transmitted textual evidence into two categories: mutawatir and ahad. They say: reports of ahad are not to be used as proof in matters of belief; rather, they are acted upon in matters of fiqh and acts of worship.

The third foundation: the obligation of interpreting the revealed texts so that they conform to the dictates of reason.

Secondly: a summary and explanation of the three foundations of the Ash’aris as stated by Shaykh Falah Mandakar

The first foundation: giving precedence to reason over transmitted text

Shaykh Falah holds that this is the greatest foundational principle among the Ash’aris, and it is the rule upon which their entire creedal methodology is based.

Its meaning is as follows: if a text from the Noble Qur’an or the Prophetic Sunnah “al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah” is received that conflicts with what they regard, according

to their conception, as the requirement of sound reason, they give precedence to reason and interpret the text figuratively or reject it.

Thus, they do not accept the apparent meaning of the revealed texts in matters of creed if they think that these texts conflict with the judgments of reason or its logical principles.

The Shaykh mentioned as one of their examples their view that the attributes of Allah, Most High, such as rising over “al-istiwa”, the hand, and the face, must be figuratively interpreted, because they believe that their apparent meaning is not acceptable to reason.

The summary of this principle is as follows:

Reason is the highest authority, and revelation “al-naql” is presented before it. If it agrees with it, it is accepted, and if it conflicts with it, it is figuratively interpreted or rejected.

The second principle: dividing the texts of revelation “al-naql” into mass-transmitted “mutawatir” and solitary “ahad” reports

Shaykh Falah says that the Ash’aris divide transmitted texts into two categories:

- (1) Mass-transmitted “mutawatir”: this is that which has been narrated by a group from a group in such a way that their collusion upon a lie is inconceivable. According to them, this constitutes proof in matters of creed.
- (2) Solitary “ahad” reports: this is that which has not reached the level of mass transmission “tawatur”. According to them, this is not accepted as proof in matters of creed. Rather, it is acted upon in practical rulings such as prayer, purification, and similar matters.

Therefore, the Asharis reject using solitary reports “ahadith al-ahad” as evidence in matters of creed, such as the reports concerning the divine attributes, seeing Allah on the Day of Resurrection, the punishment of the grave “adhab al-qabr”, and similar matters.

The summary of this principle is as follows:

Nothing is accepted in creed except that which is mass transmitted “mutawatir”. As for solitary reports “ahadith al-ahad”, they yield only conjecture, so belief is not to be built upon them.

The third principle: the obligation of interpreting the texts so that they conform to reason

After accepting some mass transmitted texts, they made it a principle that those texts must be interpreted so that they conform to reason.

For example, His statement, the Most High, “The Most Merciful rose over the Throne” “al-Rahman ala al-Arsh istawa” , Quran (20:5), they do not affirm upon its apparent meaning. Rather, they interpret it by saying, “He took possession” “istawla”.

Shaykh Falah likened this distortion to what the Jews did when they distorted the word “hittah” into “hintah”. He said that the Asharis added the letter lam to “istawa” just as the Jews added the letter nun to “hittah”, drawing a comparison in the basis of verbal distortion.

Thus, in their view, interpretation “tawil” becomes obligatory when the apparent meaning of the text conflicts with reason or with their theological principles.

The summary of this principle:

Religious texts relating to the divine attributes and other matters must be interpreted so that they conform to what reason considers acceptable.

Third: Shaykh Falah Mandakar’s comparison between the foundations of the Ash’aris and the foundations of the Salafi methodology

After Shaykh Falah Mandakar explained the three foundations upon which Ash’ari creed is based, he clarified that, in contrast “fi muqabil” each of these foundations, there is a Salafi foundation that stands in complete opposition to it, and that the two methodologies cannot coexist, because the disagreement between them is not over subsidiary matters, but over the starting points upon which religious understanding is built.

The Shaykh stated that the Salafi foundations are the exact opposite of the Ash’ari foundations in every respect, as follows:

The first foundation according to the Ash'aris: giving precedence to reason over revelation

The Ash'aris make reason the supreme judge over the religious texts. So, if they find a text from the Book of Allah or the Sunnah of His Messenger, may peace and blessings be upon him "salla Allahu alayhi wa sallam", which conflicts with what they regard as definitive rational proofs, according to their claim, they give precedence to reason over the apparent meaning of the text, and they either interpret it figuratively or reject it.

For this reason, the Shaykh said that one of their well-known principles is: "The obligation of giving precedence to reason over revelation when the two conflict."

As for the corresponding Salafi foundation:

The Salaf give precedence to revelation over reason, and they hold that revelation is the highest source of knowledge, and that reason follows it and explains it, rather than ruling over it.

So, if reason assumes the existence of a conflict between revelation and reason, then the defect lies in the rational understanding, not in the religious text.

The fundamental principle according to the Salaf is submission to the texts, and giving precedence to the speech of Allah, the Most High, and the speech of His Messenger, may peace and blessings be upon him "salla Allahu alayhi wa sallam", over every human perspective or exercise of independent reasoning.

The second foundation according to the Ash'aris: differentiating between mass-transmitted reports and solitary reports in matters of creed

The Ash'aris divide the religious texts into mass-transmitted reports "mutawatir" and solitary reports "ahad", and they say: creed is established only on the basis of mass-transmitted reports "mutawatir". As for solitary reports "ahad", even if their chains of transmission are authentic, they yield only probability, so creed regarding the attributes of Allah, the Last Day, or other matters of faith is not to be built upon them.

Accordingly, they reject many authentic hadiths relating to creed on the claim that they are from solitary narrations "riwayat al-ahad".

As for the corresponding Salafi principle:

The Salaf do not differentiate between mass-transmitted reports “mutawatir” and solitary reports “ahad” in terms of evidentiary authority in creed and jurisprudence “fiqh”, because both are from the report of the Prophet, may peace and blessings be upon him “salla Allahu alayhi wa sallam”, and the report of the Prophet, may peace and blessings be upon him “salla Allahu alayhi wa sallam”, if its chain of transmission is authentic and the integrity of its narrators is established, is authoritative in the whole of the religion.

Just as solitary reports “ahad” are accepted in matters of practical rulings, such as prayer and zakah “zakah”, they are likewise accepted in matters of faith, the divine attributes, and the return in the Hereafter “al-maad”.

For this reason, the Salaf say: “The report of a single upright and trustworthy narrator, if authentic, is authoritative in the whole of the religion.”

They hold that rejecting solitary reports “ahad” in creed is a departure from the methodology of the People of the Sunnah and the Main Body “Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah”.

The third principle according to the Ash’aris: the obligation of interpreting texts so that they conform to reason

The Ash’aris hold that the religious texts, particularly the texts concerning the divine attributes, must be interpreted so that they agree with the rational principles they have adopted.

So, if a text appears describing Allah, Most High, with an attribute which, in their view, is not acceptable to reason, they do not affirm it according to its apparent meaning, but rather interpret it.

For example, regarding His statement, Most High, that the Most Merciful rose over the Throne “al-Rahman ala al-Arsh istawa”, they say that the meaning of rose over “istawa” is seized dominion over “istawla”. They interpret the hand as power, and the face as essence, and so on, on the argument that the apparent meanings of the texts conflict with rational transcendence “al-tanzih al-aqli”, according to their conception.

As for the corresponding Salafi foundation:

The Salaf hold that the texts must be understood according to their apparent meaning in a manner befitting Allah, the Most High “Allah ta’ala”, without interpretation “ta’wil” and without distortion “tahrif”.

Thus, they affirm for Allah, the Most High “Allah ta’ala”, the attributes which He affirmed for Himself in His Book, or upon the tongue of His Messenger, may peace and blessings be upon him “salla Allahu alayhi wa sallam”, affirming them without asking how “takyif” and without likening “tamthil”, and declaring Him far above all imperfection without negation “ta’til”.

They do not distort the meanings, nor do they add to them, nor do they make reason a judge over the text. Rather, they believe in the texts as they have come, while consigning the modality to Allah, the Most High “Allah ta’ala”, and declaring Him far above resemblance to created beings.

The summary:

The Ash’aris say: reason takes precedence over revelation, while the Salaf say: revelation takes precedence over reason.

The Ash’aris say: faith is not established except on the basis of mass-transmitted reports “mutawatir”, while the Salaf say: solitary reports “ahad” and mass-transmitted reports “mutawatir” are equal in evidentiary authority.

The Ash’aris say: the text is interpreted so that it agrees with reason, while the Salaf say: the text is understood according to its apparent meaning without distortion and without interpretation “ta’wil”.

Accordingly, Shaykh Falah Mandakar determined that the three Salafi foundations stand opposite to the three Ash’ari foundations in both direction and substance, and that whoever wishes to know the difference between the two methodologies should reflect upon this clear comparison:

The foundations of the Salafi methodology: giving precedence to revelation, and the foundations of the Ash’ari methodology: giving precedence to reason.

The foundations of the Salafi methodology: accepting solitary reports “khabar al-ahad”, and the foundations of the Ash’ari methodology: rejecting them in matters of creed.

The foundations of the Salafi methodology: understanding the text according to its apparent meaning, and the foundations of the Ash'ari methodology: interpreting it and distorting it.

Allah Knows Best.

References: