226290 - Who are the Ash‘aris? Are they among Ahl as-Sunnah?

the question

Who are the Ash‘aris? Are they among Ahl as-Sunnah? Is it true that many of the scholars followed the Ash‘ari manhaj (methodology), such as Imam an-Nawawi?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

The Ash‘aris are a group that is named after Imam Abu’l-Hasan al-Ash’ari (may Allah have mercy on him). Al-Ash‘ari passed through several stages, in the first of which he was a Mu‘tazilite, and remained so for approximately forty years. Then he recanted that and followed the view of ‘Abdullah ibn Sa‘eed ibn Kullaab and was influenced by him; that was the second stage. Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal was one of the most vehemently opposed of people to ‘Abdullah ibn Sa‘eed ibn Kullaab and his companions, such as al-Haarith and others, as Imam Ibn Khuzaymah said of him. See: Siyar A‘laam an-Nubala’ (14/380), and Ibn Taymiyah in Dar’ at-Ta‘aarud (2/6).

The scholars differed as to whether al-Ash‘ari recanted the views of Ibn Kullaab in a third stage and agreed completely with the views of Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah, or he continued to follow the views of Ibn Kullaab and did not recant them.

Some scholars thought that he did adopt the views of Ahl as-Sunnah. That was stated by al-Haafiz Ibn Katheer and, among contemporary scholars, Shaykh Haafiz al-Hakami.

They quoted as evidence for that his words in his book al-Ibaanah – which was the last of his books – in which he said:

Our view and our belief is based on adhering to the Book of Allah our Lord, may He be glorified and

exalted; the Sunnah of our Prophet Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him); and what was narrated from our leaders, namely the Sahaabah and Taabi‘een, and the leading scholars of hadith. We hold fast to that, and we also adhere to what Abu ‘Abdillah Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal – may Allah have mercy on him, raise him in status and increase his reward – said, and whatever views he differed with, we differ with them too, because he was the most virtuous of the scholars and the perfect leader, through whom Allah made truth clear, warded off misguidance, and clarified the path. By means of him, Allah suppressed the innovation of the innovators, the misguided notions of those who are misguided, and the doubts of the doubters. May Allah have mercy on him, what a brilliant and respected scholar he was, and how deep was his knowledge.

End quote from al-Ibaanah (p. 20).

This is a clear statement on his part that he came back to the madhhab of the salaf which was represented by Imam Ahmad; he embraced the same views as him, and he opposed the views that were contrary to his. Imam Ahmad himself was vehemently opposed to the Kullaabiyyah; hence he shunned al-Haarith al-Muhaasibi, because he was a Kullaabi.

The second view is that al-Ash‘ari never completely recanted the Kullaabi madhhab; rather he drew close to Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah in many issues.

This view was favoured by Ibn Taymiyah, Ibn al-Qayyim and others. Even though al-Ash‘ari came very close to the path of Ahl as-Sunnah in al-Ibaanah, he still retained some of the views of the madhhab of Ibn Kullaab.

Ibn Taymiyah said: Al-Ash’ari was a student of the Mu‘tazili scholars, and then repented; he was a student of al-Jabbaa’i, and developed an inclination towards the views of Ibn Kullaab. He learned usool al-hadith from Zakariyya as-Saaji in Basra, then when he came to Baghdad he learned other topics from the Hanbalis of Baghdad. That was towards the end of his life, as he himself and his companions mentioned in their books.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (3/228).

See also: Mawqif Ibn Taymiyah min al-Ashaa‘irah by Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan al-Mahmoud (1/390).

Most of the later Ash‘aris do not adhere to the madhhab of Abu’l-Hasan al-Ash‘ari; rather they are influenced by many of the principles of the Jahamis and Mu‘tazilah, and even of the philosophers, and they differ with al-Ash‘ari regarding many of his views. They deny the divine attributes of rising over the Throne (istiwaa’), being exalted, coming down to the lowest heaven (in the last third of the night), the Hand, the Eye, the Foot, and speech. With regard to all these divine attributes, they differ with al-Ash‘ari himself.

Secondly:

The phrase Ahl as-Sunnah may be used in two ways:

1.

In contrast to the Raafidis. In this case, the phrase Ahl as-Sunnah includes the Ash‘aris, the Maturidis and so on, and even the Mu‘tazilah.

2.

The phrase Ahl as-Sunnah may be used in contrast to the people of bid‘ah (innovation). In this case, what is meant is the people of the Sunnah in the true sense; that only includes those who adhere to sound belief, namely the salaf and ahl al-hadith. In this case, the phrase does not include the Ash‘aris or others who mix their theological principles (‘ilm al-kalaam) with some innovated principles, because they differ with Ahl as-Sunnah regarding many principles and issues.

The later Ash‘aris were Jabris with regard to the divine decree, Murji’ah with regard to faith; they denied the divine attributes and did not affirm any of them except seven, because they could be proven rationally, or so they claimed. They denied Allah’s rising above the Throne (istiwaa’), His being exalted above His creation, and they said: He is neither within nor without the universe, neither above it nor below it… And there were other differences too. So how can we call them Ahl as-Sunnah?

Ibn Taymiyah said: The phrase Ahl as-Sunnah refers to those who affirm the legitimacy of the first three caliphs. That includes all groups except the Raafidis.

It may also mean the scholars of hadith and Sunnah in the true sense of the word. That only includes those who affirm the attributes of Allah, may He be exalted.

End quote from Minhaaj as-Sunnah (2/221).

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen said: The term Ahl as-Sunnah includes the Mu‘tazilah, includes the Ash‘aris, and includes those followers of innovation whose innovation does not go as far as disbelief, if we use the term to mean as opposed to the Raafidis.

But if we want to explain the meaning of the phrase Ahl as-Sunnah, we say that Ahl as-Sunnah in the true sense of the word are the righteous forebears (as-salaf as-saalih) who united in their adherence to the Sunnah and followed it. In this case, the Ash‘aris, Mu‘tazilah, Jahamis and so on are not among Ahl as-Sunnah according to this meaning.

End quote from ash-Sharh al-Mumti‘ (11/306).

Thirdly:

It is not valid to attribute to the Ash‘ari madhhab anyone except one who adheres to their methodology in belief. As for those who agreed with them regarding some issues but not others, they cannot be attributed to them.

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen said, discussing al-Haafiz an-Nawawi and al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar:

Is it valid to think of these two men, and others like them, as being Ash‘aris, and can we say that they were among the Ash‘aris? The answer is no, because the Ash‘aris have their own madhhab, with its own understanding of the divine names and attributes, faith, and what will happen in the hereafter. How good is what our brother Safar al-Hawaali said about them on the basis of what he learned about their madhhab, because most people do not understand anything about them except that they differed with the salaf with regard to the divine names and attributes, but there

are many other issues concerning which they differed.

So if someone says something about the divine attributes that happens to be in accordance with their madhhab, we do not say that he is an Ash‘ari. Do you think that if a Hanbali adopted a view of the Shaafa‘is, we would say that he is a Shaafa‘i?

End quote from Sharh al-Arba‘een an-Nawawiyyah (p. 290).

He also said: With regard to these two men in particular, I do not know of anyone today who has served Islam in the field of hadith as they did, and this may be confirmed by the fact that Allah, by His power and might, has caused their books to be accepted and circulated widely among seekers of knowledge and even among ordinary people. Now the book Riyaadh as-Saaliheen is read in every gathering and every mosque, and the people are benefitting greatly from it. I wish that Allah would enable me to write a book like this, from which everyone could benefit at home and in the mosque.

End quote from Liqaa’aat al-Baab al-Maftooh, no. 43.

And Allah knows best.