138920 - Meaning of tafweed with regard to the names and attributes of Allah (i.e., thinking that only Allah knows what is meant)

the question

I know what is meant by these four things [with regard to the names and attributes of Allah]: tahreef (distorting the meaning), ta‘teel (denying the apparent meaning), tawqeef (refraining from discussing the meaning) and tamtheel (likening Allah to His creation). But some scholars also speak of a fifth matter, namely tafweed (thinking that only Allah knows what is meant), and I do not know what tafweed is. Can you please explain to me what it means and the evidence for it?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

Tafweed with regard to the names and attributes of Allah, may He be exalted, has two meanings:

1.

A correct meaning, which is affirming the wording and the meaning to which is points, then leaving knowledge of how it is to Allah. So we affirm the beautiful names and sublime attributes of Allah, and we acknowledge and believe in their meanings, but we do not know how they are.

So we believe that Allah, may He be exalted, rose over the Throne in a real sense as befits His Majesty, in a manner that is not like this action on the part of human beings, but how that occurred is unknown to us. Hence we leave knowledge of how it occurred to Allah, as Imam Maalik and others said when asked about this rising over (istiwa’): The rising over is known but how is unknown.

See: Majmoo‘ al-Fatawa by Shaykh al-Islam [Ibn Taymiyah], 3/25

This is the view of Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah: We affirm the attributes of Allah, may He be exalted, without likening Him to His creation or discussing how. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer” [ash-Shoora 42:11].

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Ahl as-Sunnah are unanimously agreed on affirming the attributes that are mentioned in the Qur’an and Sunnah, and interpreting them as they appear to mean, not metaphorically. But they do not discuss how any of them are.

Al-‘Uluw li’l-‘Aliy al-Ghaffaar, p.250

2.

The second meaning of tafweed, which is an incorrect meaning, is affirming the wording without understanding what it means. So they affirm the words only, “The Most Beneficent (Allah) Istawa (rose over) the (Mighty) Throne” [Ta-Ha 20:5], then they say: We do not know what it means or what Allah meant by it!

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

With regard to tafweed, it is known that Allah, may He be exalted, has commanded us to ponder the Qur’an and urged us to understand it. So how can it be possible that we are expected to turn away from understanding it, knowing it and pondering it?

Moreover, the text (of the Qur’an) is intended to guide us, explain to us and bring us forth from darkness into light. But if there are parts of this text the apparent meaning of which is falsehood and disbelief, and we are not expected to understand the apparent meaning or the hidden meaning, or we are expected to understand the hidden meaning without any reference to that hidden meaning in the text, in either case the text that is addressed to us does not explain the truth, and we do not know whether the apparent meaning of the text is falsehood and disbelief.

In fact what these people say about the One Who addressed these words to us, that He did not make the truth clear to us and He did not explain it to us, yet He instructed us to believe in it; and that what He addressed us with and commanded us to follow and refer to does not explain the truth or disclose it, and rather the apparent meaning of these verses may lead to disbelief and falsehood; and that He wanted us to understand from these texts or to conclude from them something for which there is no supporting evidence– all of that amounts to something that it is known from the basic teachings of Islam that Allah and His Messenger are above such a thing and that this tafweed is akin to the views of the distorters and heretics. … Thus it is clear that the view of those who promote tafweed and claim that they are following the Sunnah and the early generations of the ummah is one of the worst views of innovation and heresy. End quote.

Dar' at-Ta'aarud, 1/115

Shaykh Saalih al-Fawzaan (may Allah preserve him) said:

The view of the early generations was not tafweed; rather their way was to believe in these texts as they were revealed and to affirm the apparent meaning that is indicated by these words and their linguistic usage. At the same time, they did not liken any of these (divine) attributes to the attributes of His creation, as Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): "There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer" [ash-Shoora 42:11].

Al-Muntaqa min Fatawa al-Fawzaan, 25/1

Shaykh Ibn Jibreen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The correct view is to refrain from interpreting the texts in a way other than the apparent meaning and to affirm the divine attributes that are mentioned in these texts according to the apparent meanings indicated in these texts, yet refraining from discussion of their nature, leaving knowledge thereof to Allah, and also believing that they are not to be understood in a manner that likens the Lord or any of His attributes to any of His creation. So we should not liken any of His attributes to those of any of His creation or interpret them in a way other than the way they are meant to be understood. End quote.

Fatawa ash-Shaykh Ibn Jibreen, 64/41

Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Razzaaq ‘Afeefi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The view of the salaf is that tafweed applies only to the nature of the divine attributes, not the meaning. End quote.

Fatawa ash-Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Razzaaq ‘Afeefi, p. 104

Shaykh Ibn Baz (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Ahmad said concerning those who promote tafweed: They are worse than the Jahamis. Tafweed means saying: Only Allah knows what it means. This is not permissible because the meaning is known to the scholars. Maalik (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Istiwa’ (rising over) is known, but how it occurred is unknown. This was narrated from Imam Rabee‘ah ibn Abi ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan and from other scholars. The meanings of the divine attributes are known to and understood by Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah, such as pleasure, anger, love, rising over, smiling and so on. These are meanings that are distinct from other meanings. Smiling is something other than pleasure; pleasure is something other than anger; anger is something other than love; hearing is something other than seeing. All of them are known to be attributes of Allah, may He be exalted, but they cannot be likened to the attributes of created beings. End quote.

Fatawa Noor ‘ala ad-Darb by Ibn Baz, p. 65

He also said:

Imam Ahmad (may Allah have mercy on him) and other leading scholars of the early generations denounced those who promoted tafweed and regarded them as innovators because what their view implied was that Allah, may He be exalted, addressed to His slaves something the meaning of which they could not understand or know what He meant by it. But Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, is far above such a thing and Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah know what He, may He be glorified, meant by His words; they ascribe to Him what is implied by His names and attributes and they declare Him to be above anything that is not befitting to Him. They know from His words and

from the words of His Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) that He has the attribute of absolute perfection in all that He has told us Himself or that His Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) has told us about Him. End quote.

Majmoo‘ Fatawa Ibn Baz, 3/55

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Tafweed is of two types; one has to do with the meaning and the other has to do with discussing how.

Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah refrain from discussing how, but they do not reject the meaning; rather they affirm it and explain it. Anyone who claims that Ahl as-Sunnah are the ones who promote tafweed in the sense of saying that only Allah knows the meaning is telling lies about them. End quote.

Liqa’ al-Baab al-Maftooh. 67/24

Secondly:

Some people think that the view of the salaf is tafweed; they misunderstand that from what the salaf said about the hadeeths which speak of the divine attributes: “Let them pass as they came without discussing how.”

But this is an incorrect understanding; rather the view narrated from the salaf indicates that they affirmed the divine attributes according to their meanings, but they stated that they did not know how those attributes were.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The words of Rabee‘ah and Maalik, “The rising over (istiwa’) is not unknown, how cannot be comprehended and belief in it is obligatory”, are in accordance with the words of the others, “Let them pass as they came without discussing how.” They only stated that it is not possible to know the nature of the attribute; they did not deny the attribute itself.

If the scholars had believed in the mere wording, without any understanding of the meaning in a manner that is befitting to Allah, they would not have said “The rising over (istiwa’) is not unknown and how cannot be comprehended”, and they would not have said “Let them pass as they came without discussing how.” In that case the rising over would not have been known; rather it would have been unknown.

Moreover, there would be no need to deny comprehension of the nature of the attribute if he did not understand any meaning from the wording; rather there would be a need to deny comprehension of the nature of the divine attributes when the attributes are affirmed.

Moreover, the one who denies the divine attributes does not need to say “without discussing how”. The one who says that Allah is not on the Throne does not need to say “without discussing how”. Therefore if the way of the salaf was to deny the divine attributes in end of themselves, they would not have said “without discussing how”.

Moreover, their saying “Let them pass as they came without discussing how” implies acceptance of the apparent meaning of the attributes. As these words refer to certain meanings, if the meanings referred to are not what was intended, then they should have said: Let these words pass whilst believing that what they indicate is not the intended meaning, or: Let these words pass whilst believing that Allah is not to be described by what these words indicate. In that case they would not be allowed to pass as they came, and in that case it would not be said “without discussing how”, because denying the nature of an attribute that is not proven is meaningless.

End quote from al-Fatawa al-Hamawiyyah, 5/41

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said something similar:

It is well known that the salaf said some things in general terms and made other statements that were more specific concerning the verses and hadeeths that speak of the divine attributes. An example of a general statement is: “Let them pass as they came without discussing how.”

This was narrated from Makhool, az-Zuhri, Maalik ibn Anas, Sufyaan ath-Thawri, al-Layth ibn Sa‘d

and al-Awzaa‘i.

This phrase is a refutation of those who denied the divine attributes (ta‘teel) and those who likened Allah to His creation (tamtheel). The words “Let them pass as they came” are a refutation of those who denied the divine attributes, and the words “without discussing how” are a refutation of those who likened Allah’s attributes to those of His creation.

This also indicates that the salaf attributed sound meanings to the texts which speak of the divine attributes, in a manner that is befitting to Allah. This is indicated in two ways:

1.

Their saying “Let them pass as they came”. What is meant is accepting the meaning indicated by these words. There is no doubt that this wording affirms the concept in a manner that is befitting to Allah, may He be exalted. If they did not believe that these words (that speak of the divine attributes) had a meaning, they would have said: Let this wording pass and do not discuss its meaning, and the like.

2.

Their saying: “without discussing how”. It is obvious that they affirmed the meanings of these words, because if they did not accept the meanings of these words they would not have needed to say, Do not discuss how. That which is denied does not exist in the first place, so to say that we should not discuss how is meaningless."(Majmoo‘ Fatawa Ibn ‘Uthaymeen, 4/32)

And Allah knows best.