


# Traditionalism of Hadith and Polemics with Ahl al-Ra'yi in the Discourse of Classical Islamic Law in the Early 9th Century

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## ABSTRACT

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In the 9th Century, a polemic arose between the traditionalism of hadith and the rational approach of Ahl al-Ra'yi in the early development of classical Islamic law. This study departs from the fact that the expansion of Islamic territory and increasingly complex social changes have given birth to various new legal problems that do not always exist in the Qur'an and Sunnah. This condition encourages scholars to perform ijtihad with two main tendencies, namely ahl al-Ra'yi and Ahl al-Hadith. Ahl al-Hadith places the hadith of the Prophet and the narration of the early generations as the main source of law and is careful in using reason. On the other hand, Ahl al-Ra'yi relies more on rational reasoning, qiyas, and ijtihad. This research uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach, by examining classical works and contemporary scientific studies. The results of the study show that the difference between Ahl al-Hadith and Ahl al-Ra'yi is not just a methodological contradiction, but a process of intellectual dialogue that complements each other. This polemic played an important role in forming the basis of the methodology of classical Islamic law and the subsequent development of the fiqh school.

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## INTRODUCTION

Islamic law bases its rule firmly on the Qur'an and Sunnah, which serve as the main source of guidance for Muslims. However, as the Islamic world and social life develop more complex, a number of new problems arise that are not always clearly explained by the two sources. In an effort to understand and create rules based on the principles of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the Companions and their successors practiced ijtihad, or reasoning. In the early classical period, especially the 9th century AD, the development of Islamic law was then colored by intellectual debates between two main tendencies, namely the traditionalism of hadith and the rational approach of Ahl al-Ra'y. (Choiri, n.d.). The polemic between the two not only reflects the different methods of establishing the law,

but also shows how Islamic scientific authority was formed through dialogue and differences of opinion in scientific centers such as the Hijaz, Kufa, and Baghdad.

Both of these approaches, namely the Ahl al-Ra'yi that developed in Kufa, relied more on rational reasoning when no firm evidence was found in the Qur'an and Sunnah, an approach influenced by complex social conditions and limited access to hadith. On the other hand, Ahl al-Hadith, which is based in Medina, places the hadith of the Prophet as the main legal reference and tries to maintain the rule of law by adhering to the history and traditions of the early generations. From this tendency, the traditionalism of hadith developed as an attitude of caution against the excessive use of ra'yu. The central figure in this current is Ahmad Bin Hanbal, who affirms the authority of the hadith as well as the *atsar* of the companions and *tabi'in*, while limiting the role of reason to remain within the framework of the text of revelation. Ahmad Bin Hanbal's thought, as reflected in his works and studied by Ahmad Snobar, shows that the traditionalism of hadith is not a rejection of reason, but an effort to maintain the continuity of Islamic law with the authoritative sources of the early generation. (Zainuddin, 2023)

Various recent studies show that the differences between Ahl al-Ra'y and Ahl al-Hadith are not always contradictory, on the contrary, the debate between the two actually plays an important role in enriching and maturing the methodology of Islamic law, especially in the development of *ijtihad*, *qiyas*, and determining the position of legal sources. From this point of view, the polemic between the traditionalism of hadith and the rational approach can be understood as a process of intellectual dialogue that forms the basis of classical *fiqh*. Departing from this framework, this article examines the traditionalism of hadith and its polemics with Ahl-al-Ra'yi in the discourse of classical Islamic law in the early 9th century AD, highlighting the thought of Ahmad Bin Hanbal as the main representation of hadith traditionalism, and linking it to various contemporary scholarly studies to show that this methodological difference is an important part of the history of Islamic law formation.

Although the differences in approach between Ahl al-Ra'y and Ahl al-Hadith have been widely studied, most previous studies have tended to discuss the two separately, both with an emphasis on the rationalism of Kufa law and on the strengthening of the authority of hadith in the Hanbali school. This research has similarities with previous studies in its attention to the traditionalism of hadith and the role of Ahmad Bin Hanbal, but a different perspective that sees polemics with Ahl-al-Ra'y as a process of historical and methodological dialogue that forms each other. This research approach is in line with the historical framework of hadith traditionalism developed by Ahmad Snobar in *Min al-Nabi*

*ila al-Bukhari*, which traces the formation of hadith authority from the time of the Prophet to the codification period.(Sholihati & Faturrahman, 2025) This research also places the debate between Ahl-al-Ra'y and Ahl al-Hadith as a constructive intellectual dynamic and plays an important role in the formation of classical Islamic legal methodologies, rather than simply a contradiction between two opposing approaches.

## METHOD

The study uses qualitative methodologies and literature research strategies, which rely on analysis of textual material rather than fieldwork. Information about Ahl al-Hadith and Ahl al-Ra'yi, as well as the evolution of early Islamic law, was gathered from classical and modern sources. Scientific works from the past and present are examples of primary sources. Books, academic journal articles, and previous studies relevant to the research topic are examples of secondary sources. In order to comprehensively explain the ideas, opinions, and practices of the two schools and relate them to the social and historical context of the development of classical Islamic law, the data collected are further examined using descriptive, analytical, and historical approaches. Using this strategy, it is shown that the differences between Ahl al-Hadith and Ahl al-Ra'yi are not only mutually exclusive but rather reflect the intellectual exchanges that shaped the evolution of Islamic legal theory.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ahl al-Hadith and Ahl Ra'yi are the two main schools of thought that have shaped Islamic law throughout the history of Islamic thought. Both reflect two different methods of creating Islamic law. While Ahl al-Ra'yi tends to rely on reason and *ijtihad* to deal with issues that are not specifically mentioned in the texts of the Qur'an and Hadith, Ahl al-Hadith concentrates more on the use of textual sources, specifically the Qur'an and Hadith. Both have made significant contributions to the diversity of Islamic law (*fiqh*), which is still growing today, although they are often portrayed as two opposing parties.

Ahl al-Hadith, which translates as "people of hadith" is a term used to describe academics who, after the Qur'an, mainly relied on hadith to create Islamic law. They are very careful in accepting the hadith, emphasizing the importance of the validity of the *sanad* (chain of narration) and the authenticity of the hadith. Since the Prophet Muhammad (saw) was the only person considered an official source for explaining divine revelation, Ahl al-Hadith argued that the truth of Islamic law should be directly related to his words or deeds. (Haris et al., 2023)

On the other hand, Ahl al-Ra'yi can be interpreted as "people of reason" or "rational people". They are scholars who use more rational thinking in formulating Islamic law. Ahl al-Ra'yi do not completely reject the hadith, but they

are more likely to use reason when relevant hadith is not found or is deemed incapable of answering a particular problem. they used *ijtihad* (hard work using reason) to interpret the texts of the Qur'an and hadith and often used the method of *qiyas* to formulate new laws. (Adhari et al., 2021)

#### A. History and development of Ahl al-Hadith and Ahl Ra'yi

The emergence of Ahl al-Hadith and Ahl al-Ra'yi began from the difference in the geographical and social situation of Muslims after the death of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. After the period of Khulafa al-Rasyidin, Muslims developed geographically and culturally, so that the legal problems that arose became more complex. In this problem, two main approaches emerge in answering these new problems, namely the textual approach by Ahl al-Hadith and the rational approach by Ahl al-Ra'yi.

Ahl al-Hadith developed in the Hijaz region, especially Medina which is known as the center of the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Therefore, scholars in the Hijaz rely more on hadith as the main source in establishing the law. They tend to adhere to the authenticity of the hadith text and are very careful in using reason or rationality when setting the law.

Meanwhile, Ahl al-Ra'yi emerged in Iraq, particularly in Kufa, where the society faced new problems that were not specifically discussed in the hadith and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (saw) were weaker than in the Hijaz. Iraqi intellectuals were inspired by this circumstance to base law-making more on *ijtihad* and common sense. They are more adaptive in their interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith, and they more often apply *istihsan* (benefit-based reasoning) and *qiyas* (analogy) to deal with complex legal problems. In essence, both the Umayyad and Abbasid governments had deviated from the path of the caliphate during the leadership of Imam Malik. The Caliphate uses democratic discussions to regulate the transition of power. (Nazela & Rahmi, 2023)

But in reality, the monarchy system prevailed, with power passed from father to son. Otherwise, a coup is usually used to transfer power. As a result, Imam Malik believed that the ruling class at the time was repressive and contrary to Sharia law. Imam Malik managed to get a decent education in Medina despite going through two difficult periods. Outside of Medina, he never studied. This is due to the status of Medina as the center of the advancement of Islamic knowledge. Instead, those who want to learn about Islam must travel to Medina from outside the city. Because of his perseverance, Imam Malik developed into an intellectual who captivated and attracted many people from Medina and its surroundings. Here, Imam Malik imparted knowledge of Islamic doctrine, legal principles, and the process of Islamic lawmaking. Later, Imam Malik received the title of Imam Dar Al-Hijrah, which means "Leader of the Scholars of Medina, Land of Hijrah". Apart from being an accomplished jurist, Imam Malik was also a successful teacher, and many of his students diligently spread his school around the world after inheriting his approach to lawmaking. Imam Malik used the

Qur'an, the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), ijma', Qiyas, the customs of Medina, *maslahah murlahah* (benefits), 'urf (tradition), and *saddu dzari'ah* (preventive measures) to formulate fiqh laws. In Muslim civilizations such as Andalusia and North Africa, the Maliki and Hanafi sects have competed for influence over the past few centuries. Ibn Syihab Al-Zuhri, Abdurrahman bin Harmuz, and Nafi' a Maula Ibn Umar were some of the academics in Medina who taught Imam Malik. Muhammad ibn al-Hasanda Abdullah ibn Wahab was one of the famous disciples of Imam Malik who significantly advanced the Maliki School. *Kitab al-Mudawanah* is among the most famous works of his students. Then Imam Shafi'i, a disciple of Imam Malik, founded the *madhhab fiqh*. (Ash-Syurbasi et al., 1991)

Ahl al-Hadith has several important figures who play a major role in spreading and maintaining traditions. A major figure was Imam Malik bin Anas (d. 795), the founder of the Maliki School who is famous for his great work *al-Muwatta'* which contains *saheeh* hadiths and can be used as a source of law. Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal (d. 855) was also a central figure in Ahl al-Hadith, especially through his work *Musnad*, which contains thousands of hadiths. Meanwhile, Ahl al-Ra'yi was led by figures such as Imam Abu Hanifah (d. 767), the founder of the Hanafi school who was known for often using *qiyas* and *istihsan* in formulating laws. Abu Hanifah's disciples, including Imam Muhammad al-Shaibani and Imam Abu Yusuf, also played an important role in developing the Hanafi school which was known to be more rational and flexible than other schools. (Kurauking, 2017)

#### B. Factors Behind the Emergence of the Ahl-al-Ra'y and Ahl al-Hadith Schools in the Early Development of Classical Islamic Law

In the *Tabi'in* period, the establishment of Islamic law was marked by the emergence of two main intellectual tendencies, namely Ahl al-Ra'y and Ahl al-Hadis. These two groups play a strategic role in bridging the *ijtihad* tradition inherited by the Companions with the expansion of Islamic territory and the increasing complexity of the social life of Muslims in various regions, the need for an interpretation of law that is adaptive to cultural diversity and societal conditions is getting stronger. In this study, the difference in approach between the two schools was formed. Ahl al-Ra'y developed in Iraq, especially in Kufa, an area that was geographically quite far from the center of the Prophet Muhammad's activities, so access to hadith was relatively limited. (Ansori & Munawir, 2022)

In addition, Kufa is known as a region with complex social and economic dynamics, especially in the field of *muamalah*, due to the high intensity of trade and cross-cultural interactions. This condition encourages local scholars to develop more rational and contextual methods of determining law through *ra'yu*, *qiyas*, and *istihsan*. On the other hand, Ahl al-Hadith grew up in the Hijaz area, especially Medina and Mecca, which have a direct proximity to the life of the Prophet PBUH. This factor allows the people in the region to have a broader knowledge of the hadith and practices

of the Prophet, so that the legal approach developed is more oriented to the history and traditions that originate from the sunnah of Rasuullah Saw, (Choiri, n.d.).

The social and cultural challenges faced by scholars in the early days of the development of Islamic law had a profound influence on the way they developed the methods and principles of *ijtihad*. Changes in the conditions of society, the expansion of Islamic territory, and the emergence of new problems that were not directly found during the time of the Prophet demanded an adjustment in the determination of the law. The scholars in this group generally live in a society with complex social dynamics, so they are often faced with legal issues that are practical and contextual. (Sholihati & Faturrahman, 2025). Therefore, Ahl al-Ra'y places reason as an important means of understanding *Nash* (text) and apply it to new situations. The use of logical reasoning, rational analysis, and methods such as scientific discussion and debate are part of the process of seeking law. Through the exchange of views and arguments, Ahl al-Ra'yi scholars have found legal solutions that are not only in harmony with Islamic principles, but also relevant to the needs and realities of an ever-evolving society.

The difference in approach between Ahl al-Ra'y and Ahl al-Hadith can be seen, for example, in determining the mass of *iddah* for pregnant women who have been left behind by their husbands. Kufa scholars tend to establish a longer period of *iddah* through *qiyas* as a form of prudence, while Hijaz scholars adhere to a history that states that the *iddah* of a pregnant woman ends at childbirth. (Jaidi et al., 2024). These differences reflect the influence of social, cultural, and political conditions on the method of determining the law. After the center of Islamic government moved from Medina to Kufa and then to Damascus, the Hijaz region was relatively more stable and less affected by political dynamics, so its legal approach remained textual and conservative. In contrast, Kufa and Damascus developed as regions with diverse social and cultural interactions, encouraging local scholars to develop *ijtihad* that was more flexible and responsive to the realities of society.

In the early days of Islam, the life of the people in the Hijaz region was relatively simple and was not much influenced by foreign culture. As the residence of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and the early center of Islamic rule, the Hijaz has very strong access to the Prophet's hadith as well as the legal traditions that developed during the time of the first three caliphs, namely Abu Bakr, Umar Bin Khattab, and Uthman Bin Affan. This condition makes the scholars in the Hijaz have abundant religious references and tend to maintain a legal approach that adheres to history. In contrast, the territory of Iraq was known to Muslims after the expansion out of the Arabian Peninsula and developed into a meeting center of various cultures, such as the Persians and the Romans. This diversity of social backgrounds gave birth to new, more complex legal issues, while access to the Prophet's hadith was relatively limited due to the few companions living in the region. In addition,

Iraq is also known as a region prone to the emergence of inauthentic hadith histories and various diverse schools of thought, thus encouraging local scholars to be more selective and develop more contextual methods of legal reasoning. (Melchert, 1997b).

Faced with complex social conditions and limited access to hadith, scholars in Iraq have been more selective in accepting history. They apply strict verification standards to ensure the validity of the sanad and the content of the hadith before it is used as a legal basis. This cautious attitude encourages the development of a more rational pattern of legal thinking, with an emphasis on the use of reason and logical reasoning in establishing laws. In contrast, scholars in the Hijaz tend to maintain a more textual and traditional approach, as they are supported by the abundant availability of hadith and their proximity to the religious practices of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). (Zainuddin, 2023).

The tendency of Hijaz scholars to follow the Ahl al-Hadith approach is influenced by several key factors. Their thinking pattern was largely formed by companions and teachers who were known to adhere to the texts of the Shari'ah and were careful in using rational reasoning, such as Ibn Abbas, Abdullah bin Umar, and Abdullah bin Amr bin Ash. In addition, the geographical proximity to the early center of Islamic da'wah made the scholars of the Hijaz have a stronger ruler of hadith and fatwa of the companions, (Haris et al., 2023). References to the Qur'an, the hadith of the Prophet, and the opinions of the Companions were considered acceptable because the new legal difficulties had not arisen much due to the relatively simple social conditions of the early period of Islam. In reality, logical strategies are only applied when such sources do not have explicit legal provisions. Living in the central administrative area, particularly Medina, reinforces a legal tradition that values history and distinguishes it from the approach of Ahl al-Ra'yi, which emerged in other regions and was more selective in accepting the hadith.

Imam al-Shafi'i in *al-Risalah* explained that in his time there were two main tendencies in Islamic thought, namely the group that prioritized hadith and the group that relied more on ra'yu. He mentioned that adhering to the history, so he wrote *al-Risalah* to explain how to use the right postulate. This view shows that the difference in methods between Ahl al-Ra'yi and Ahl al-Hadith had emerged before the time of Imam al-Shafi'i. However, the specialty of Imam al-Shafi'i lies in his ability to rearrange the two approaches into a more systematic and balanced framework of ushul fiqh. By placing *Qiyas* as a method that remains based on the authentic Sunnah, he succeeds in combining the use of reason with the steadfastness of adhering to the *Nash* (text), which later became an important foundation for the development of the next schools of fiqh. (Melchert, 1997a)

### C. The Difference Between Ahl al-Hadith and Ahl al-Ra'yi

As mentioned earlier, there are striking differences between the two schools based on the history of the emergence of Ahl al-Hadith and Ahl al-Ra'yi. The basis of the disputes and debates between these two schools can be found in at least two important areas if examined more deeply:

1. Ahl al-Hadith closely follows the experience of the books of hadith in terms of the use of logical arguments; They do not consider using logical arguments unless absolutely necessary (*idthirar*). In contrast, the scholars of Ahl al-Ra'yi take the opposite position, using logical reasoning (*ra'yi*) without hesitation in situations where neither the text nor the Sunnah can provide a solution.
2. Ahl al-Hadith tend not to speculate on problems that have not yet arisen while they are raising problems (*tafri' al-masail*), but rather focus on providing answers to existing problems. Meanwhile, Ahl al-Ra'yi immediately sought to investigate the law (*istinbath*) and even used reasoning (*ra'yu*) to address hypothetical problems that had not yet arisen. The corridor of abilities and potential of *ijtihad* (as mentioned in the hadith of Mu'adh ibn Jabal) is considered even though the use of *ra'yi* here is not as free as it is often today: “*ajtahidu ra'yi, wa la alu*”.(Abd Rahman, 2020)

## CONCLUSION

This discussion highlights how the social, geographical, and intellectual circumstances of Muslim societies had a significant impact on the early formation of Islamic law. Ahl al-Ra'yi and Ahl al-Hadith are the two main trends in the development of Islamic law identified in this study. In order to understand and create rules derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, scholars in that period were encouraged to perform *ijtihad* (interpretation of texts) due to the growth of the Islamic region and the increasing complexity of life's problems. Ahl al-Hadith prefers to limit the application of reason in the process of law formation, viewing the hadith of the Prophet and the history of previous generations as the main source of Islamic law. Ahl al-Ra'yi, on the other hand, places great emphasis on the application of contextual *ijtihad*, *qiyas* (inferiority), and logical reasoning to legal issues that are not explicitly discussed in religious literature.

The difference in approach between these two schools of thought is closely related to the social and geographical environment in which they developed. While Kufa faced a more complex and diverse social terrain, Medina was known as a region rich in hadith traditions. The difference of opinion between Ahl al-Ra'y and Ahl al-Hadith is essentially a process of complementing intellectual discourse, although it is often interpreted as a conflict. Hadith and reason can be used in harmony, as shown by the ideas of figures such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Abu Hanifah, and al-Shafi'i. As a result, this discussion was crucial for the development of classical Islamic legal methodology and became the basis for later schools of Islamic law.

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