

**A Critique of Contemporary**  
**Puritan/Salafi Discourse**  
**On the Issue of the *Mawlid***  
**And its Classification as *Bid'ah***

By

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**“It is our duty  
to proceed from what is near to what is distant,  
from what is known to what is less known,  
to gather the traditions from those who have reported them,  
to correct them as much as possible,  
and to leave the rest as it is,  
in order to make our work help anyone who seeks truth  
and loves wisdom”**

**Al-Bīrūnī (d.1050)**

## **ABSTRACT**

In the contemporary Salafi/Puritan discourse, the traditional Muslim practice of celebrating the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*) is consistently termed as '*bid'ah*,' i.e. an innovation. In the Puritan discourse, all 'innovation' is considered reprehensible.

In the first half of this study, I attempt to prove the inherent error and contradiction in the Puritan approach to the issue of innovation in Islam. I argue that the Puritan understanding of what constitutes *bid'ah* and the conditions for its acceptability and rejection, is flawed, both from a textual and a logical point of view, and is in fact contrary to the way of the Prophet himself and his Companions (the *salaf*); thus belying their claims to 'Puritanism,' and '*Salafism*.'

Puritans base their discourse on certain *ḥadīth* such as, "Every *bid'ah* is misguidance," and "Whoever innovates in this matter of ours that which is not of it, it is to be rejected," as well as certain statements by the *ṣaḥābah*, and the works of al-Shāṭibī.

In this work, I critically analyze these *ḥadīth* and statements from a fresh point of view, substantiating my points with an abundance of essential scriptural evidences and historical data, which Puritans have long ignored or evaded. I also discuss other relevant issues such as the concepts of *tark* and the 'good *bid'ah*' in considerable detail.

Traditionally, the jurists of Islam have termed 'beneficial' practices that appeared after the era of the Prophet as either '*bid'ah ḥasanah*' (good innovation) or '*sunnah ḥasanah*' (good practice/tradition), the latter being the position of those scholars whom the Puritans claim to be inspired by. My point is that the difference is only semantical and not really conceptual, as both schools agree on the acceptance of a certain amount of 'good' innovations in Islam, albeit with different terminologies.

In the second half of the paper, I use the contentious issue of the *mawlid* as my case-study of the practical implementation of the conflicting approaches towards *bid'ah*. After studying the origins and development of the *mawlid*, as well as looking at some of the early discussions and arguments around it, I conclude that the *mawlid*, if proven to be based upon sound Islamic principles and evidences, cannot then be considered a reprehensible *bid'ah*, as Puritans, based upon a questionable logic, consider it to be.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Statement of the Problem

The tendency for Puritanism has always been present in the history of Islam, and can even be considered as somewhat inherent to the faith. However, the present day ‘Salafi’ Puritan movement owes its origins to the Wahhābiyyah sect that was initiated about two hundred years ago in the Najd province of present day Saudi Arabia by the militant reformer Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-al-Wahhāb (d.1206<sup>1</sup>). He called his sect, the ‘Salafiyyah,’ i.e. followers of the *salaf* (the first Muslims).

He called on Muslims to ‘return’ to the ‘pure Islam’ of the Prophet and his Companions, which he claimed had been wrought over the centuries by numerous innovations. He espoused the ‘original Islam,’ based solely on the Qur’ān and *sunnah*.

However, Ibn-‘Abd-al-Wahhāb was actually influenced by the Puritanical thought of the controversial 7<sup>th</sup> century scholar and prolific writer Ibn-Taymiyyah (d.728) who had become notorious in his age for rejecting ‘the over-veneration of the Prophet and saints by Muslims.’ Ibn-‘Abd-al-Wahhāb revived Ibn-Taymiyyah’s thought which had been dead for five centuries, and making it even more literalistic and puritanical than the original, turned it into a new radical absolutist school of thought (Ibn-Taymiyyah himself had never claimed to follow a separate school of thought). Armstrong writes:

“He (i.e. Ibn-‘Abd-al-Wahhāb) was a typical reformer, in the tradition of Ibn Taymiyyah. He believed that the current crisis was best met by a fundamentalist return to the Quran and *sunnah*, and by a militant rejection of all later accretions, which included medieval *fiqh*, mysticism and *falsafah*, which most Muslims now regarded as normative. Because the Ottoman sultans did not conform to his vision of true Islam, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (sic) declared that they were apostates and worthy of death. Instead, he tried to create an enclave of pure faith, based on his view of the first *ummah* of the seventh century.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, I will only be using Arabic *Hegira* dates in this work, as they are of more relevance in my outlining of the development of the concepts of *mawlid* and *bid’ah* than the English dates.

<sup>2</sup> Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History* (London: Phoenix Press, 2003), p.114.

Since then, Wahhabism remained an obscure sect limited to the Arabian desert – with Ottoman and Azharite scholars officially excommunicating it – until it was established as the only officially accepted form of Islam in the newly created theocratic kingdom of ‘Saudi’ Arabia in 1932. Ibn-Sa‘ūd, the ancestor of the royal family of ‘Saudi’ Arabia had accepted Wahhabism at the hands of Ibn-‘Abd-al-Wahhāb himself.

Thus, through this new privilege of becoming the official Islam of the holy lands – and through Saudi petro-dollars – the Puritan movement extended its influence all over the Islamic world and has by now become a major ideological and political force in it. Most contemporary ‘Islamist,’ ‘Fundamentalist,’ ‘Terrorist’ groups...etc are staunch adherents of Salafi Puritanism. Most moderate reformists are also Puritan influenced.

This present study is a critique of the contemporary Salafi/Puritan discourse on the traditional Muslim practice of celebrating the Prophet’s birthday (hereby referred to as *mawlid*), which is a key point of conflict between Traditional and Puritan Muslims.

In the Puritan discourse, the practice of *mawlid* has consistently and categorically been termed as ‘*bid‘ah*.’ Although the word *bid‘ah* simply means ‘innovation,’ Puritans use the word and the concept with a negative connotation only. Thus, their argument runs as follows: ‘Commemorating the *mawlid* is a *bid‘ah*, and *bid‘ah* can only be reprehensible, thus commemorating the *mawlid* is reprehensible.’

In this study, I assert the fallacy of this logic and methodology on the grounds that it goes against a sound understanding of what really constitutes *bid‘ah*, and the conditions for the acceptability and rejection of *bid‘ah*, as deduced from the *sunnah*.

As the Puritans have based their logic on certain famous *ḥadīth* such as, “Every *bid‘ah* is misguidance,” and “Whoever innovates in this matter of ours that which is not of it, it is to be rejected,” I have critically analyzed these *ḥadīth* from an objective and fresh point of view, highlighting many pertinent points not raised before.

I substantiate my points with a lot of ‘ignored’ yet extremely relevant and essential scriptural evidences and historical data. Puritans have long neglected/evaded these evidences, despite their claim of strict adherence to the textual evidences.

I also discuss other vital issues which assist in the understanding of the concept of *bid'ah* and are directly related to it, such as the issues of *tark* and the 'good *bid'ah*,' ending with a critical review of the main traditional schools of thought regarding *bid'ah*, especially that of al-Shātibī which the Puritans claim to espouse.

Although my critique of the narrow Puritan re-interpretation of *bid'ah* is a general one and can be applied to all their usages of the concept; nevertheless, in this study, it is in particular reference to the issue of the *mawlid* and is specifically applied to it. I believe its application and operation in the context of the *mawlid* issue reflects its application in most other cases as well.

Indeed, nowhere have the Puritans themselves invoked the notion of *bid'ah* more than in the context of the *mawlid* issue. I think this makes it a good case study for the understanding of contemporary *bid'ah* polemics.

In Part Two, I study the origins of the *mawlid*, giving a brief history of its development and gradual acceptance among the masses and the scholarly fraternity. I look at some of the early discussions and arguments regarding *mawlid*, especially the well-researched *fatwā* of al-Suyūṭī and his refutations of al-Fākihānī and Ibn-al-Hājj's negative comments about the *mawlid*. I then scrutinize the Puritan stance on the *mawlid*.

Proponents of the *mawlid* accept the fact that it is an innovation in the historical sense, but nevertheless, strongly assert that the practice falls under accepted Islamic principles and does indeed have a basis from the Qur'ān and the *sunnah*. It is therefore categorized by them as a 'good/beneficial *bid'ah*.'

In the Conclusion, I argue that the *mawlid*, if it is in fact proven to fall under and be based upon established Islamic principles, as its practitioners claim, then it can not be termed as a *bid'ah* in the negative sense. It may either be termed a *sunnah* or a *bid'ah ḥasanah*, depending on which definition one relies on in defining a '*bid'ah*.'

As the common claim that the *mawlid* is a 'good *bid'ah*' only increases the antagonism of the literalist Puritan, I believe the more acceptable term, *sunnah ḥasanah* – which simply means a 'good practice' – would be more appropriate in our polemical context.

Classical Islamic scholars have termed ‘beneficial’ practices and traditions that arose after the era of the Prophet and his Companions as either ‘*bid‘ah ḥasanah*’ (good innovation) or ‘*sunnah ḥasanah*’ (good practice/tradition), the latter being the position of those scholars whom the Puritans claim to be inspired by.

Thus, in perspective, the difference is semantical and not really conceptual. Both schools *accept* that there are ‘innovations’ that are acceptable and are indispensable, but one school does not wish to use the word ‘innovation/*bid‘ah*’ for them, due to the negative usage of this term in the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet.

In the light of this, I believe that both the proponents and antagonists of *mawlid* are mistaken in terming the practice a *bid‘ah*. The latter, for insisting on calling it a *bid‘ah* despite the Qur’ānic and *sunnah* evidences presented in support of it; and the former for concluding through these same evidences that it is a ‘good *bid‘ah*’ while a more appropriate conclusion should have been that it shouldn’t be termed a *bid‘ah* at all.

### **The Hypotheses**

1) According to its proponents, the concept of commemorating the *mawlid* is based upon and derived from established Islamic principles and there is substantial scriptural evidence to this effect.

2) Starting from the time of the Prophet and the *ṣahābah* themselves, many innovations were accepted in Islam. However, while many traditional scholars divided innovation (*bid‘ah*) into ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ those classical scholars whom the Puritans claim to rely upon, opposed the terming of beneficial novel practices – with scriptural basis – as ‘innovations,’ they rather preferred to use the term ‘*sunnah ḥasanah*.’

3) Thus, according to both approaches, the *mawlid* cannot be termed as a *bid‘ah*. The Puritan discourse on *mawlid*, then, is in contradiction to both approaches vis-à-vis *bid‘ah* and displays a lack of coherency in the methodology of determining *bid‘ah*. To be sure, the Puritans are guilty of misusing the concept of *bid‘ah* as a tool for condemning all that goes against their specific puritanical vision of Islam.

## **The Delimitations**

I will not be doing a detailed study of the concept of *bid'ah* in all of its various dimensions, neither do I intend to analyze all the specifics of the *mawlid* phenomena and the sociological, theological and cultural nuances related to the controversy regarding it, without of course denying the role they also play in the discourse.

The primary aim of this study is to critically analyze the application of the concept of *bid'ah* in the context of the *mawlid*, from the point of view of its proponents and its opponents. My study will focus on this specific point.

In expounding upon the Traditional and Puritan positions on *bid'ah* and *mawlid*, I will be using recognized expositions of these points of view from key classical and contemporary works.

My primary references in this debate will be the Qur'ān and *sunnah* as they are the unanimously accepted sources of Islamic law, and more so because Puritans claim to rely upon them only. In explaining these evidences however, I use my own judgment and discretion. I also rely on the explanations of past scholars who are accepted as authorities by both Traditionalists and Puritans, especially those who are particularly held in high esteem by the latter and are considered as the ideological 'fathers' of the Puritan trend, such as al-Shāṭibī and Ibn-Taymiyyah.

I use the words, 'traditional,' 'classical,' 'orthodox,' and 'mainstream,' synonymously to refer to the past thousand year tradition of Islamic scholarship crystallized in the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence.

Although Puritans are critical of these orthodox schools and often call for the establishment of 'one single school of thought based on the Qur'ān and *sunnah*,' they nevertheless do not deny them in totality, and in fact, heavily rely on their works and methodologies, and consider them as normative; for the most at least.

All translations of Qur'ānic verses, *ḥadīth's* and quotations from Arabic works are mine. Certain Arabic terms have been left un-translated as they are generally more recognizable to readers in their Arabic form than in an English rendition.

However, for the benefit of those untutored in Arabic, I have included a detailed glossary of all important Arabic terms used, at the end of the paper. I have also transliterated all keys Arabic words and terms.

### **The Importance of this Study**

The importance of this study lays in the fact that right through the previous century into the present one, the *mawlid* continues to remain one of the most controversial and divisive traditions among the worldwide Muslim community.

Generally speaking, it is still a very popular practice, but, as there is hardly a Muslim community that has not been affected by Puritan tendencies, opposition to it also thrives, especially among the reform-minded youth, who are untutored in traditional sciences.

The entire debate is essentially based upon conflicting understandings of the concept of *bid'ah*. Unfortunately, contemporary works on the *mawlid* are very vitriolic and subjective in nature and no significant effort is made to clearly explain and unveil the hermeneutic of the Other.

I anticipate that my study will contribute towards an understanding of the relationship between *mawlid* and *bid'ah* that is harmonious with the varying classical positions that are the basis for contemporary discourses, thus narrowing the gulf between them.

While being a critique of contemporary vitriolic discourses, particularly by the Puritan/Salafi group, I also hope that this study and the new insights it will provide, will also set the standard for further studies of the usage and misuse of the concept of *bid'ah* in various other issues of contention as well.

# PART ONE: GENEALOGY OF *BID'AH*

## Introduction

Etymologically speaking, *bid'ah* is derived from the word *bada'a*, which basically means inventing something new that did not exist before. Literally, the word *bid'ah* is translated as, “innovation, novelty; heretical doctrine, heresy.”<sup>3</sup>

In the context of Islamic Law, *bid'ah* specifically refers to ideas, practices and habits that did not exist in the time of the Prophet and were introduced by later generations. Al-Nawawī defined *bid'ah* as thus:

“The *bid'ah*, according to the *sharī'ah*, is innovating something that did not exist during the time of the Messenger of Allah – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – and it is divided into good and bad.”<sup>4</sup>

Although many innovations were incorporated into the fabric of Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxis by later Muslims – in fact by the *ṣahābah* themselves – nevertheless, the idea of and more so the word *bid'ah*, has continued to evoke a negative connotation with many Muslims as it supposedly implies that Islam is not complete and is open for additions by fellow human beings, thus compromising its divine purity.

From a traditional Islamic viewpoint, *tashrī'* (i.e. legislation) was the right of God and His Prophet only. Unlike the Jews and the Christians who were considered to have added numerous theological and practical innovations in their religion, Muslims were to shun all *bid'ah*'s, or, at least what was *regarded* as a *bid'ah* by the scholars.

The anathema to *bid'ah* or religious innovation, regardless of the various and conflicting understandings of it, stemmed directly from the following verse of the Qur'ān which continues to play a major role in shaping the Muslim psyche:

“*This day have I perfected for you your religion, completed My favor upon you and have chosen for you Islam as your religion*”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary*. p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Nawawī, *Tahdhīb al-Asmā wa al-Lughāt*, p.104.

<sup>5</sup> The Holy Qur'an, 5:3.

It is narrated that the famous companion ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb wept at the revelation of this verse. When asked for the reason for his weeping by the Prophet, he said, “We used to be in receipt of our religion, but since it is completed, that which is complete can only decrease!” The Prophet remarked: “You have spoken the truth.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the revelation of this verse before the demise of the Prophet by a few months laid the foundation of the firm Muslim conviction that Islam was ‘complete.’ In fact, all religion was supposed to be finally complete, as the Islam was believed to be the final revelation of God to mankind, abrogating all that came before it.

The message was complete, with nothing to be added, and nothing to be removed. God’s Will had been done and the Prophet had fulfilled his duty. Anything ‘new’ was going to be a *bid‘ah*, an innovation.

The Prophet himself warned in the famous ‘*ḥadīth* of *bid‘ah*’:

“Beware of *muḥdathāt al-umūr* (newly invented matters), for every *muḥdathah* (newly invented matter) is *bid‘ah* (innovation), and every *bid‘ah* is *ḍalālah* (misguidance).”<sup>7</sup>

And in another narration:

“The best of speech is the book of Allah, and the best of guidance, the guidance of Muḥammad. And the worst of matters are the newly invented ones, and every *bid‘ah* is misguidance.”<sup>8</sup>

In another famous *ḥadīth*, he is reported to have said:

“Whoever innovates in this matter (religion) of ours that which is not of it, it (that innovation) is to be rejected (*man aḥdatha fī amrina hadhā mā laysa minu fa- huwa radd*).”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibn-Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, Sūrat al-Mā’idah.

<sup>7</sup> *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*, Vol.1, p.371.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Vol.2, p.80 (no.2002).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Vol.1, p.371 (no.2550) and *Ṣaḥīh Muslim*, Vol.2, p.77 (no.1718).

## Understanding “Every *Bid‘ah* is Misguidance”

While not contesting the authenticity of the above-mentioned ‘*ḥadīth* of *bid‘ah*,’ there has been a great deal of difference regarding what was meant by the term *bid‘ah* in these and other similar narrations from the Prophet.

What defines a *bid‘ah*? What was the Prophet actually referring to when he said “Every *bid‘ah* is misguidance”? What are the parameters of the ‘innovation’ which is so harshly condemned in this *ḥadīth*? Did the Prophet reject all innovation and development in the understanding and practice of Islam?

Puritan scholars consider these *ḥadīth* to be most general in their meanings and applicability. *Bid‘ah* thus includes ‘every new practice, related to the religion, that did not exist during the time of the Prophet.’ All such practices are to be out rightly rejected.

Nevertheless, one notices that even the most literalist of Puritan scholars use their discretion and add the condition, ‘related to the religion,’ when explaining the meaning of *bid‘ah* in this *ḥadīth*. Thus, despite their claims to sticking to the ‘letter of the Law,’ even *they* compromise the supposed generality of the *ḥadīth*.

The *ḥadīth* reads, “Every innovation is misguidance,” not ‘Every *religious* innovation is misguidance.’

If one were to consider this *ḥadīth* to be as generally applicable as possible, then *every* innovation, religious *and* worldly should be considered as misguidance. However, no scholar has ever understood it as such, for the obvious reason that the lifestyle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century disappeared with it and to try to revive it is impossible.

Thus, the intended meaning and the practical applicability of the *ḥadīth* have inevitable limitations, even with those scholars who vehemently claim the opposite.

Even the previously mentioned ‘verse of perfection,’ which announced the completion of the faith, was not the final revelation of God to the Prophet, and other Qur’ānic verses were revealed after it.

The celebrated *ḥadīth* master, *al-ḥāfiẓ* Ibn-Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d.852) wrote in explanation of the *ḥadīth* of *bid‘ah*:

“And what is meant by his saying ‘And every innovation is misguidance,’ is that (innovation) which is innovated without any specific or general basis from the Law.”<sup>10</sup>

The famous Andalusian exegete of the Qur’ān, al-Qurtubī (d.671) also mentioned that in the *ḥadīth* of *bid‘ah*, the Prophet was only referring to those innovations that did not concur with the Qur’ān, *sunnah* or the practice of the *ṣaḥābah*.<sup>11</sup>

Another great *ḥadīth* master, al-Nawawī (d.676) elaborates on this point further, stating that the *ḥadīth* of ‘every *bid‘ah*’ is actually ‘*āmm-makhṣūṣ*, i.e. general-specific.

He states that by the words “All *bid‘ah*,” the Prophet had meant “Most *bid‘ahs*,” as most innovations are devoid of any substantiation from the *sharī‘ah*, thus they undoubtedly constitute misguidance. However, those innovations that can be supported by the *sharī‘ah* and are Islamically beneficial are not included in this *ḥadīth*. He then uses the example of Umar and his calling the practice of making the *tarāwīḥ* prayers in congregation a ‘good *bid‘ah*,’ to substantiate his point.<sup>12</sup>

I believe these explanations, which are rejected by the Puritans, are quite concurrent with the way of the Prophet himself, as he himself would accept the initiation of new acts in Islam as long as they entailed spiritual or material benefits and did not conflict with the principles of the *sharī‘ah*; and would reject things that were otherwise.

It is probably for this reason that the great majority of past and present scholars of Islam have agreed with al-Nawawī’s understanding that novel matters in Islam may not be rejected simply because they did not exist in the era of the Prophet but must be evaluated and judged according to the broad-based standards of the *sharī‘ah*.

They concur with him that the *ḥadīth* of *bid‘ah* does not refer to all new matters without restriction, but only to those whose validity cannot be corroborated by the criteria set by the *sharī‘ah*.

<sup>10</sup> Al-‘Asqalānī, *Fat’h al-Bārī*, Vol.13, p.254.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Qurtubī, *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, Vol.2, p.86.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Nawawī, *Shar’h Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Vol.4, p.154.

I must emphasize that the use of the word '*kull*' (every) in the *ḥadīth* does not necessarily indicate an absolute generalization, as is violently claimed by the Puritans. Both the Qur'ān and *sunnah* are replete with examples of similar generalizations that are not applicable without restriction, but are rather qualified by restrictions found in other primary textual evidences.

Some of Qur'ānic verses and *ḥadīth* that can be cited as examples of this are:

1. "*And that a man can benefit from nothing; except what he strived for.*"<sup>13</sup>

Despite this tone of generalization, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence that a person benefits from his fellow Muslims' prayers, the intercession of the Prophet, the prayers of angels for him, the funeral prayer over him, charity given by others in his name, and the recitation of Qur'ān for him. Even Puritan scholars do not deny that the word 'nothing' in the verse is not to be understood literally in an unrestricted sense.

2. "*Verily you and what you worship apart from Allah are the fuel of Hell.*"<sup>14</sup>

Although this is a general expression, all exegetes of the Qur'ān concur that Jesus, his mother, angels and holy persons that are worshipped apart from Allah, are *not* included in this denunciation as they are not the 'fuel of Hell,' but the dwellers of Paradise, as attested to by a large number of *other* verses of the Qur'ān.

3. "*But when they forgot what they had been reminded of, We opened unto them the doors of everything.*"<sup>15</sup>

As the above verse is in reference to the disbelievers, the scholars are in consensus that the 'doors of everything' here refer to worldly matters only, for the doors of eternal mercy, guidance, and Paradise have not been opened for disbelievers.

4. In a rigorously authenticated *ḥadīth*, the Prophet is reported to have said:

"No one who prays before sunrise and before sunset will enter Hell."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Holy Qur'ān, 53:39.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 21:98.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 6:44.

Again, this is a generalized expression that certainly does not mean what it's outward generality implies. All scholars agree that a person who prays the *fajr* (morning) and *'aṣr* (mid-afternoon) prayers referred to here, but neglects all other prayers and obligatory works, is certainly not meant by this *ḥadīth*. It is rather a generalization that is qualified/limited by other texts or whose intended referent is particular.

The famous Ḥanafī jurist, Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī (d.1041) tried to make sense of the generalization in this *ḥadīth* by stating that the Prophet promised salvation from Hell to those who perform the *fajr* and *'aṣr* prayers because they are the most difficult prayers to perform timewise, therefore those who perform them are most likely to perform the rest of the Prayers.<sup>17</sup>

5. In another rigorously authenticated *ḥadīth*, the Prophet said:

“That person shall not enter Paradise in whose heart is an atom's weight of pride.”<sup>18</sup>

Taking a large number of Qur'ānic verses and *ḥadīth* into cognizance, orthodox scholarship has concurred that a Muslim will eventually enter Paradise, no matter how sinful or immoral he is. The above *ḥadīth* however seems to explicitly implicate otherwise. For this reason, scholars rejected the apparent meaning of the *ḥadīth* and interpreted it to mean that a person with pride in his heart will not enter Paradise *initially* but will definitely do so *eventually* as having pride does not negate his belief in Islam.

6. In another rigorously authenticated *ḥadīth*, the Prophet said:

“It is not permissible for anyone to carry a weapon in Makkah.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite this overt and general command, we find that prominent early Muslim jurists such as Imam Mālik, Imam al-Shāfi'ī and others have allowed the carrying of weapons in Makkah if there is a need for it.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Vol.2. p.114.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* (commentary), Vol.2. p.114.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Vol.5, no.91.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* Vol. 4, p.111.

<sup>20</sup> *Al-Mālikī, Fī Riḥāb al-Bayt al-Ḥarām*, p.192.

Contemporary Puritan scholars in Saudi Arabia hold the same opinion as well. In fact, Imam Muslim himself, the narrator of the *ḥadīth*, places it under the heading, “The Chapter on the prohibition of carrying a weapon in Makkah *without need*.” (emphasis mine)

According to these scholars, the above *ḥadīth* is and *can* only be in reference to carrying weapons in Makkah *without* a need, as the Prophet himself carried a weapon in Makkah when he conquered it and allowed other *ṣahābah* to do so as well.

In summary, the Puritan argument of the absolute necessity of sticking to a literal and generalized meaning of the *ḥadīth*, “All *bid’ah* is misguidance,” without taking into consideration other relevant *ḥadīth* which set limitations to it, is without any basis as far as the established methodology *ḥadīth* interpretation is concerned.

According to the principles of this methodology, interpreting the *ḥadīth* in question would in fact be a case instance of *takhsīs al-‘āmm*; a common procedure of *uṣūl al-fiqh* by which an apparently unqualified and general statement is qualified and restricted to avoid contradicting another authentic statement or necessary principle.

It is a well-known principle in the science of *ḥadīth* explanation that when there seem to be disparities between authenticated *ḥadīths*, it is obligatory to reach an accord between them, because in reality they constitute a single *ḥadīth* coming from the same source.

The generalized *ḥadīth* that appear without further qualification and restriction are therefore qualified by those that furnish the logical qualifications and limitations. The combined implication of *all*, is what is intended by the Law-giver. Otherwise, one would have to accuse the divine Law-giver of contradicting of himself, for there would be no other way to explain the discrepancy between the general and the specific.

## Understanding “Whoever innovates in this matter of Ours”

The oft-quoted *ḥadīth*, “Whoever innovates in this matter (religion) of ours, that which is not of it, it (that innovation) is to be rejected,”<sup>21</sup> also needs to be re-looked at.

When employing this *ḥadīth* in their arguments against popular Islamic practices, Puritan scholars do not take into cognizance the words “that which is not of it,” which are actually the key in understanding this *ḥadīth*, as well all *ḥadīth* on *bid‘ah*.

Upon careful reflection, one sees that the Prophet is only condemning those innovations that contradict Islamic beliefs and principles and cannot therefore be *incorporated* into Islam. One would perhaps understand the purport of the *ḥadīth* if it is read turned around: ‘Whoever innovates in this matter (religion) of ours, that which is *of it*, it is *not* to be rejected.’ This is the obvious and logical conclusion from the wording of the *ḥadīth*.

This understanding of the *ḥadīth* also corresponds with the traditional Islamic criteria for discerning *bid‘ah*, i.e. the strength of its substantiation from the *sharī‘ah*, or lack thereof. Traditional scholarship agrees that any *bid‘ah* that cannot be substantiated from the principles of the *sharī‘ah* and is alien to the faith, in its purpose or its practice, is definitely to be rejected.

However, an innovation that is not alien to the faith does not have to be rejected. Indeed it stands a good chance of acceptance if it serves the goals and objectives of the *sharī‘ah*, for then it will not be considered as innovating something in the religion that is “not part of it.” It will be considered an innovation that is actually sanctioned and desired by the religion. It will be considered as ‘part of the faith.’

Another important point to note about the *ḥadīth* in question is that it clearly refers to innovations ‘in the religion’ (“in this matter of ours”), thus falsifying the Puritan assertion that innovations are only allowed in worldly matters and not in religious ones. Most classical jurists have also understood it as such, as we will expound upon later.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Vol.1, p.371 (no.2550) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Vol.2, p.77 (no.1718).

## The Hadith of the ‘Good Innovation’

When discussing *bid'ah*, Puritan scholars hardly ever mention the famous authentic *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet explicitly encourages innovation! That *ḥadīth* is:

“Whoever establishes (*sanna*) in Islam a good practice (*sunnah ḥasanah*), then he will earn it’s reward and the reward of whoever does it after him, without any decrease in their reward. And whoever establishes in Islam a reprehensible practice, he will earn the punishment for it and the punishment of whoever does it after him, without any decrease in their punishment.”<sup>22</sup>

In this *ḥadīth*, the Prophet clearly distinguishes between good and bad innovations, openly encouraging Muslims to establish good practices and warning them of innovating bad practices. He also uses the term *sunnah ḥasanah* for good innovations.

Those jurists who supported the division of *bid'ah* into good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable, have justifiably used this *ḥadīth* to substantiate their theory.

Indeed, the *ḥadīth* does set a limitation to the other *ḥadīth* on *bid'ah*, which though general in wording, can now be understood to refer to bad innovations only.

Puritan scholars usually try to ignore this *ḥadīth* or undermine its importance in the context of discussing innovation, as it inevitably destroys the very foundation of their discourse, i.e. innovation can only be bad and was out rightly rejected by the Prophet.

However, recently, some Puritan scholars have tried to ‘explain away’ the *ḥadīth* as not referring to innovation at all. They reckon that the words, “establishes a good practice,” actually mean, “revives an already established good practice which was done by the Prophet.” Thus, according to them, the *ḥadīth* is not about “introducing a *bid'ah*, but about reviving a *sunnah*.”<sup>23</sup>

However, even a cursory reading of the wording of the *ḥadīth* will reveal the fallacy of this explanation. Firstly, the Prophet does not say “my *sunnah*,” which he would have if he was referring to the reviving of *his sunnah*.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Vol.3, p.152

<sup>23</sup> Al-‘Uthaymīn, *Al-Ibdā‘ fī Kamāl al-Shar‘ wa Khaṭar al-Ibtidā‘*, p.19.

Secondly, the word '*sanna*' means 'establishing/innovating' but does not by any means denote 'reviving.' Most importantly, if the 'good practice' mentioned in the *ḥadīth* refers to a good practice 'done by the Prophet,' then the 'bad practice' should also refer to a 'bad practice done by the Prophet'!

The Puritan explanation of the *ḥadīth* would mean that the Prophet is saying, 'Whoever revives a good practice of mine, will be rewarded, and whoever revives a bad practice of mine will be punished.'!

Realizing the futility of these far-fetched explanations, some Puritan scholars have attempted to classify the *ḥadīth* as being abrogated by the other general anti-*bid'ah* *ḥadīth*. Again, they have not been able to substantiate this claim by any acceptable methodology. From a *usuli* point of view, the generalization does not override the exception; rather the exception limits the general, as the *ḥadīth* in our case does.

It is noteworthy that al-Nawawī mentions this *ḥadīth* in the "Chapter about the one who establishes a Good or a Bad practice," which he positions right after the "Chapter on the Prohibition of Innovation and New Matters" in which he mentions the *ḥadīth* that condemn *bid'ah*; thus implying that the former limits the latter.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, most of the *ṣaḥābah* and the early Muslims seem to have understood it as such, and are recorded to have established many 'good practices' in Islam seeking the reward promised by the Prophet, as I will illustrate later on.

A large number of rigorously authenticated *ḥadīths* demonstrate that many of the *ṣaḥābah* initiated new acts, forms of invocation, prayers, and other practices, that the Prophet had never previously done or ordered to be done. Rather the *ṣaḥābah* did them because of their inference that such acts were of the general good that Islam had encouraged the like of. They understood this to be in accordance with the '*ḥadīth* of the good *bid'ah*' and more so in accordance with the general commandments of the Qur'ān ordering the believer to strive in doing all kinds of good, such as:

*"And do good, that you may succeed."*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Al-Nawawī, *Riyād al-Ṣāliḥīn*.

<sup>25</sup> The Holy Qur'an, 22:77.

“And whosoever does good voluntarily, then surely Allah is Appreciative (and) Knowing.”<sup>26</sup>

“And whosoever does good voluntarily, it will be better for him.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Issue of Tark (Omission)**

Puritan discourse about *bid'ah* and prohibition are usually abound with the argument that, ‘The Prophet did not do that,’ ‘It is not established that the Prophet ordered that,’ ‘The Prophet did not celebrate *mawlid*’...etc. They constantly deduce prohibition from the Prophet’s *tark*, i.e. his *not* doing or omission of doing something.

However, a careful study of the traditional principles of Islamic jurisprudence will reveal that by and large, *tark* was never considered to indicate prohibition. According to traditional jurisprudence, the ultimate proof of the Puritans is a non-proof.

To elaborate, *tark* means that the Prophet or his *ṣahābah* left something or did not do it, without there being a *ḥadīth* or narration which would indicate that it is a prohibited or disliked matter. For example, the Prophet did not translate the Qur’ān into a foreign language and did not ride an elephant, but he did not declare the prohibition of these actions as well.

According to traditional scholarship, the *non-prohibition* of these actions is justification enough to consider them permissible. The Prophet’s *tark* in these and all such cases can imply many things other than prohibition. He may have not done something due to his habit, as his refusal to eat desert-lizards as it was not the custom of his tribesmen to eat them. Yet, he allowed others to eat them. He may also have not done something due to forgetfulness, like his omission of something in the ritual Prayer.

There are also cases of the Prophet not doing certain actions out of fear of imposing them on his community, like not performing the voluntary *tarāwīh* prayer regularly. The same reason has been given for his hesitancy to consistently observe many other devotional practices. His wife ‘Ā’ishah is reported to have said:

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<sup>26</sup> The Holy Qur’ān, 2:158.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 2:184.

“I never saw the Messenger of Allah – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – praying the ‘prayer of the sunrise’ ever, *but I pray it*, for the Messenger of Allah would avoid something and he would like to do it, fearing that that the people would also do it, and (then) it would become obligatory upon them.”<sup>28</sup> (emphasis mine)

The Prophet may also have not done some things due to not paying attention to them. For example, he is reported to have given his sermons leaning on a date palm trunk, not thinking of using a chair until the *ṣahābah* suggested it and then he used it. There are also instances of the Prophet not doing something in order to avoid causing a negative reaction from his people, such as his hesitation to re-build the Ka’bah on the original foundations of Abraham or his refusal to execute the hypocrites, as documented in the books of *sīrah*.

Thus, the Prophet or his *ṣahābahs* not doing of a certain action, if not accompanied by a text indicating its prohibition, does not constitute a proof. At best, the only ruling that can be incurred from *tark* is the permissibility of leaving the action in question and that there is no interdiction in not doing it. However, one cannot deduce the prohibition of an action only through *tark*, especially when the action has a viable basis from the *sharī’ah*. That would in fact amount to prohibiting that which is not prohibited.

For example, after mentioning the evidence of the Ḥanafīs and Mālīkīs for it being disliked to pray two *rak’ahs* before the *maghrib* prayers “since Abū-Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān did not pray it,” the celebrated Andalusian jurist Ibn-Ḥazm (d.456) replied:

“If it (their claim) was sound, *there still would be no proof in it* because it does not say that they were forbidden that.”<sup>29</sup> (emphasis mine)

Further evidence for the assertion that *tark* does not entail prohibition is that while we *do* find many Qur’ānic verses and *ḥadīth* commanding the believers to obey and follow the Prophet, we do not find anything that says “Leave what he left” or “Do not do what he did not do.” The Qur’ān’s command is clear:

“*Whatever the Messenger gives, you should accept; and whatever he forbids, you should forgo.*”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Ṣaḥīh Muslim*, Vol.2, p.156.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn-Ḥazm, *Al-Muḥallā*, Vol. 2, p.254.

Thus, the command to forgo is only for those matters that he has forbidden. As for new matters that did not exist in the Messenger's time, and therefore are not mentioned positively or negatively by him; they would be judged by the broad and comprehensive standards of the *sharī'ah* given by him.

If they fall under the general good encouraged by the *sharī'ah*, then they cannot be pronounced as forbidden simply because they were not done by the Prophet or his Companions. Such a logic would defy the universal nature claimed for the Islamic *sharī'ah*, particularly by the Puritans themselves.

The only exceptional case in which *tark* was considered as an indication of prohibition was with regards to the specific obligatory worship rituals taught by the Prophet, as they were considered divinely ordained and complete.

Thus, a Muslim may not add anything to the format of the prescribed prayers as taught by the Prophet, as they were inspired by divine revelation. Thus, the Prophets' *not* doing of a certain action in the prescribed prayer would be considered as a sign of that action's prohibition or at least, disliked-ness in the prayer.

However, other than in this narrow sphere of divinely ordained worship rituals; *tark* was not considered as an indication of prohibition by early or later jurists of Islam.

Even the great forerunner of the Puritan movement, Ibn-Taymiyyah (d.728) rejected the usage of *tark* as a proof on occasions. For example, while discussing the controversy regarding the correct ruling on entering public toilets, he wrote:

“No one should try to prove the detestability or non-recommendation of entering public toilets by the fact the Prophet, Abū-Bakr and ‘Umar did not enter them. For this can only be a proof if they had refused to enter them and purposely avoided them, or they had the means/chance of entering them and they did not.”<sup>31</sup>

However, to justify those innovations they approved of, and yet condemn those they did not approve of, Ibn-Taymiyyah and al-Shāṭibī after him (whose unique views we will discuss in detail later on), tried to distinguish between two types of *tark*:

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<sup>30</sup> The Holy Qur'ān, 59:7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Majmū' Fatāwā Ibn-Taymiyyah*, Vol.21, pp.313-319.

a) That action/practice which was omitted/not done by the Prophet despite there being a need for it (*mā turika ma‘a wujūd al-muqtada lah*).

This type of *tark*, according to them, is a sign of prohibition. They put all the innovations they do not approve of under this category, and state that such innovations are therefore prohibited.

b) That which was omitted because of their being no need for it in the Prophet’s time or there being an obstacle to it. In this case, *tark* is not considered to constitute a proof of prohibition.

By this (and other) explanations, Ibn-Taymiyyah and al-Shāṭibī justify all the indispensable innovations initiated by the *ṣahābah* and later generations, such as the collection and translation of the Qur’ān., the congregational *tarāwīḥ* prayers, and the compilation of the *ḥadīth*...etc.

They claim that the Prophet did not do these things because there was no need for them in his time or there were certain obstacles to their realization, thus their omission by the Prophet cannot be considered as an indication of their prohibition.

In fact, Ibn-Taymiyyah asserts that any action which can be supported by the *sharī‘ah*, will be considered a *sunnah* – the opposite of *bid‘ah* – even if the Prophet did not do it due to a lack of need for it. He writes:

“And we have distinguished between the *sunnah* and the *bid‘ah*. And we explained that the *sunnah* is any action that can be proven from the *sharī‘ah* to fall under (the parameters of) obedience to Allah and His Messenger, whether it was done by the Messenger of Allah – may Allah grant him peace and blessings – himself, or done in his era, or it was not done by him nor done in his era, for the lack of need for it then or due to an obstacle to it.”<sup>32</sup> (emphasis mine)

We say, even if *tark* is accepted to be divided into these two types, nevertheless, to decide which category of *tark* does a particular practice fall under remains bound to the subjectivity of the jurist in question.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Majmū‘ Fatāwā Ibn-Taymiyyah*, Vol.21, pp.313-319.

For example, with regards to the commemoration of the *mawlid*, Puritans claim that if there was any benefit in it, the Prophet would have practiced it, for there was a need for it and there was no obstacle to it

However, proponents of the *mawlid* disagree with this. They claim that there was no need for it during the era of the Prophet and his *ṣaḥābah*, as everyone knew of the incidents of his birth, and that they didn't need to commemorate him on a particular day because of the simple fact that he was personally present with them everyday.

Furthermore, there were also much political, economical and social constraints on the early *ummah* that didn't allow much time for commemorations, and the primary duty of the Muslims then was to concentrate on the essentials of the faith – the preservation, propagation and interpretation of the Qur'ān and *sunnah* – than on commemorating historical incidents such as the *mawlid*.

The need for such a commemoration and the conditions that were suitable for it only arose among later generations of Muslims. A contemporary Egyptian jurist Mutawallī al-Darsh writes in his *fatwā* regarding *mawlid*:

“In the seventh Islamic century people became more involved in worldly affairs, and the living experience of the *shari'ah* was in decline. As a result, scholars took the opportunity to remind people of that great event in the history of humanity. In this commemoration, Muslims revive the memory of the Prophet's achievements.”<sup>33</sup>

Obviously, the Prophet himself and his *ṣaḥābah* were not 'more involved in worldly affairs,' nor did they have a need to revive the memory of his achievements, as they were living through it. Therefore, they had no need to commemorate his birthday.

However, as later Muslims developed a need for such a commemoration and the values that it represented and propagated, they were permitted to do so by the jurists of Islam, as I will demonstrate later on.

This kind approach is not exclusive to proponents of the *mawlid* only. Even Puritans have used the same logic. Prominent contemporary Puritanist scholar, Jamal Zarabozo writes:

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<sup>33</sup> Al-Darsh, *Fatwā on Mawlid*, p.2.

“There are some actions that the Prophet (pbuh) did not perform for some constraining reason. For example, the Prophet (pbuh) did not gather together the Qur’ān (although his companions did so after his death). This was because there was a preventive reason that kept him from doing so; that is, the Qur’ān was still being revealed during his lifetime so it was not possible for him to gather it all together before his death. *Once that preventive reason has been removed, then there is no harm in performing that act.*”<sup>34</sup> (emphasis mine)

### **Positive Early Approaches towards Bid‘ah**

The early generations of Islam seem to have had divergent views and attitudes regarding the meaning of *bid‘ah* and what should be the correct approach towards it.

Contrary to the contemporary Puritan claim that the ‘practice,’ ‘acceptance,’ and ‘division,’ of innovations into good and bad are the legacy of ‘misguided’ medieval Islam; a careful study of the lives of the *salaf* – the early generations of Islam – shows that innovations were not as anathema to them as they are to 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘Salafis’!

While, there was always a justifiable fear and caution of adding into the religion that which was not of it; many carefully introduced innovations, considered to be beneficial for Islam were accepted without any or little opposition.

Study of *ḥadīth* and *sīrah* literature will show that the *ṣaḥābah* added and introduced many new practices into Islam, during the Prophet’s time and after him as well. They were not reprimanded in this by the Prophet or by other *ṣaḥābah*.

Most of these ‘early innovations’ have been accepted as normative by the Puritans themselves and are hardly ever condemned, as condemning them would mean condemning the *ṣaḥābah* of the Prophet, which is tantamount to apostasy as far as Sunni Islam is concerned. Furthermore, it will also render the Puritan claim to ‘Salafism’ as meaningless, for the the term ‘*salaf*’ first and foremost implies the *ṣaḥābah*.

Keeping this in mind, Puritan scholars do not usually dwell on the topic of the innovations done by the *ṣaḥābah*, but take them for granted, or simply overlook them.

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<sup>34</sup> Zarabozo, *Concept of Bid‘ah in Islam*, p.3.

## Innovation in the Era of the Prophet

In the following pages we mention a few examples of ‘innovations in the religion,’ introduced by the *ṣaḥābah* in the era of the Prophet, and approved by him:

1. The famous companion Bilāl’s practice of always praying two *rak’ahs* after completing the *wudu* (ritual ablution), something the Prophet had never taught.

It is narrated in an authentic *ḥadīth* that the Prophet once asked Bilāl, “How he reached a high station in Paradise,” and Bilāl answered by mentioning this practice. The Prophet approved of it.<sup>35</sup>

The famous *ḥadīth* master Ibn-Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī wrote in his celebrated commentary on *Bukhārī* called *Fat’h al-Bārī*, after mentioning this *ḥadīth*:

“We learn from it, the permissibility of using *ijtihād* in timing worship.”<sup>36</sup>

In this incident, Bilāl specifies the time and specific mode (two *rak’ahs*) of worship, and earns a ‘high station in Paradise’ in return! Innovation however, is supposed to lead to Hell as in the famous *ḥadīth* of *bid’ah*.

2. The incident of the man who innovated the standard supplication after the *rukū’* (bowing) posture in the ritual prayer. It is narrated in an authentic *ḥadīth* that once when the blessed Prophet raised himself from the position of *rukū’*, he heard a man say the following devotional words in praise of Allah: “*Rabbanā wa laka al-ḥamd ḥamdan kathīran tayyiban mubārakan fih.*”

After the prayer was finished, the Prophet called on the man saying, “I saw thirty and more angels competing to write down your supplication.”<sup>37</sup>

The point here is that the Prophet did not reprimand the man for adding into the ritual prayer a supplication not taught by him, despite the fact that he himself had said in a famous *ḥadīth*: “Pray as you saw me pray.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*, Vol.2, p.133.

<sup>36</sup> Al-‘Asqalānī, *Fat’h al-Bārī fī Shar’h Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*, Vol.2, p.133.

<sup>37</sup> *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Ṣalāh, Vol.1, p.501.

Ibn-Hajar al-‘Asqalānī writes in his *Fat’h* after mentioning this story:

“It is used as an evidence to prove the permissibility of innovating (*iḥdāth*) a *dhikr* in the *salah* which is not *m’athūr* (attributed to the Prophet), as long as it does not contradict the *m’athūr*, and the permissibility of raising your voice with *dhikr* as long as it does not disturb (anyone).”<sup>38</sup>

3. The famous incident of the man who introduced the commencing-supplication in the ritual prayer. It is narrated in an authentic *ḥadīth* that a man joined the congregational prayer with the blessed Prophet and said the following devotional words, “*Allāhu akbar kabīra wa al-ḥamdu lillāhi kathīra wa subḥān Allāhi bukratan wa aṣīla.*”

After the prayer was done, the Prophet summoned the man, who said: “I did not intend by (saying) them save goodness.” The blessed Prophet said: “I saw the doors of the heavens open for them.” The innovated supplication became standard practice.<sup>39</sup>

4. The story of the man who always used to recite the same *sūrah* (chapter) of the Qur’ān – *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* – while leading the people in prayer. When the people complained about this to the blessed Prophet, he summoned the man and asked him the reason for his insistence on reciting the same *surah* every time?

When the man replied that it was due to his love for this *surah* that describes Allah, the Prophet said: “Your love for it has earned you Paradise,” and in another version, “Glad tidings to him (i.e. the man) that Allah loves him.”<sup>40</sup>

In this incident again, we do not find the Prophet censuring the man for specifying a certain *surah* and sticking to it in the prayer without any instruction or permission from him. Rather, we find him praising the man. His enquiring of the man’s intention and motivation clearly illustrates that innovations are to be judged by the intention and motivation behind them.

5. The story of the *ṣaḥābah* who used the *Fātiḥah*, the opening chapter of the Qur’ān as a cure. Bukhārī narrates in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* in that a group of *ṣaḥābah* who were on a journey passed by a certain tribe and asked them to host them but were refused.

<sup>38</sup> Al-‘Asqalānī, *Fat’h al-Bārī fī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Vol.1, p.501.

<sup>39</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Vol.1, p.184.

<sup>40</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Tawhīd and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Vol. 1, p.331.

Soon after however, the chief of the tribe got bitten by a snake and the tribesmen approached the *ṣahābah* for treatment. One of the *ṣahābah* agreed to cure him on the condition that they are paid with sheep. When they agreed, he continuously recited the *Fātiḥah* and spat on the sick chief until the man was relieved through the apparent healing power of the *sūrah*.

Upon their return to Madinah, they informed the blessed Prophet of what had happened. He approved of what they did and said in amazement: “And who informed *you* that it (i.e. the *Fātiḥah*) was a cure,” and asked for his share of the sheep.<sup>41</sup>

Again, we see the Prophet giving his approval to a practice not taught by him, and one that is specifically related to the Qur’ān itself. On the contrary, we see him asking for *his* share, thus attributing their innovative action to himself as he was the one who taught them the *Fātiḥah*, regardless of the fact that they used it in manner not prescribed by him, but innovated by them. This also supports the contention of those scholars who stated that every ‘acceptable’ innovation should be termed a ‘*sunnah*.’

6. The story of the man who prayed to Allah with a supplication that contained the ‘Greatest Name of Allah’ (*Ism Allāh al-‘A‘zam*). It is narrated that once when the blessed Prophet entered the mosque and heard a man praying to Allah with a certain peculiar supplication, he said:

“By the One in Whose Hands is my life, he (the man) has asked Allah through His Greatest Name, by which if asked, He will give, and if called, He will answer.”<sup>42</sup>

We see in this narration that the man prayed to Allah with a supplication he made up himself but nevertheless got the highest degree of approval from the Prophet; contrary to the Puritan claim that any supplication not taught by the Prophet is an ‘innovation’ and is to be rejected.

7. Abū-Hurayrah narrated that the blessed Prophet saw a group of people praying in a corner of the mosque, so he asked, “What are they doing?” He was answered, “They are people who do not know the Qur’ān, so Ubayy ibn Ka‘b is leading them in prayer, and they follow him.” So the blessed Prophet said, “It is correct what they do.”

<sup>41</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Bab al-Nafth fi al-Ruqyah, Vol. 2, p.854.

<sup>42</sup> *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, *al-Nasā‘ī*, *Abū-Dawūd* and *Ibn-Mājah*, Book of Supplications.

The fact that the Prophet did not know what they were doing shows that they were obviously not praying the obligatory prescribed by him (which he would lead personally), and neither were they praying any other prayer commanded or suggested by him. Yet, upon hearing their justification, the Prophet approved of what they were doing and did not censure their rationalization of ‘an innovation.’

These were some well-known incidents, and a thorough study of *ḥadīth* literature will reveal many more such incidents. These authentic stories clearly show that doing things that the Prophet did not do or in a manner that he did not do – and this is the essence of *bid’ah* – was something many *ṣaḥābah* did and were approved in this by the Prophet himself, as long as their actions were beneficial to them, spiritually or otherwise, and did not contradict Islamic principles.

In the above-mentioned narrations, we find the *ṣaḥābah* specifying times and modes for worship, adding self-made supplications into the ritual prayers, healing through particular *surahs* of the Qur’ān; all without any instruction from the Prophet.

Neither the Prophet nor the *ṣaḥābah* considered these actions to be in contradiction of the *ḥadīth* that “All innovation is misguidance.”

Certain Puritan scholars contend that the practices innovated by the *ṣaḥābah* during the Prophet’s time were approved by him, thus they are to be considered *sunnah* and cannot be used as evidences for the validity of ‘good innovation’ by later generations.

However, my point here is not that they are *not sunnah* – they *are* because of the later Prophetic approval of them – but that the fact that the Prophet did not censure those Companions for introducing new practices in the religion, as long as they were not contrary to Islamic principles, is a clear Prophetic approval of ‘good innovations.’

The *ṣaḥābah* must have understood it as such also as they *continued* to introduce ‘good innovations’ into Islam, after the demise of the Prophet as well, as we will demonstrate. Had it been necessary to stick to practices established by the Prophet only and offensive to use one’s *ijtihād* with regards to *‘ibadat*, the Prophet would have certainly told it to those *ṣaḥābah* and would have never approved of their ‘innovations.’ In fact, not doing so would have gone against his prophetic duties.

## Innovation in the Era of the *Ṣaḥābah*

Examples of well-known *religious* innovations introduced by the *ṣaḥābah* after the passing away of the Prophet include:

1. The collection of the Qur’ān in one book by Abū-Bakr, with the co-operation of senior *ṣaḥābah*. ‘Umar had proposed the idea after the massacre of a large number of Qur’ān-memorizers in the battle of Yamamah. Initially, Abū-Bakr opposed it by saying:

“How can I do something the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, did not do?”

‘Umar did not accept this argument and convinced him to do so, saying: “By Allah, this is something good” (*huwa wallāhi khayr*).

Abū-Bakr then approached the famous *sah.ābī* Zayd bin Thābit for the project, and he was also hesitant to do something “the Prophet had not done,” but agreed when Abū-Bakr repeated the words of ‘Umar to him: “By Allah, this is something good.” The rest of the *ṣaḥābah* also did not object, and the Qur’ān was collected in one book.<sup>43</sup>

The importance of this event in understanding the early approach towards innovation cannot be underestimated as it is regarding the holy Qur’ān itself, which is most sacrosanct in Islam. The fact that the *ṣaḥābah* dared to deal with the Qur’ān in a way not dealt with or commanded by the Prophet clearly reflects their liberal, if cautious, attitude vis-à-vis innovation.

2. The performance of the *tarāwīḥ* prayer in congregation in the nights of the month of Ramaḍān with twenty *rak’ahs*, behind one *Imām*. This practice was established by Caliph Umar when he noticed that the people’s separate prayers and recitations were causing confusion in the mosque. So he ordered them to pray together. After that, when ‘Umar contrasted the beauty in people praying together, with the disorder before, he remarked, “What an excellent *bid’ah* is this!”

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<sup>43</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb Fadā’il al-Qur’an, ḥadīth no. 4679.

Bukhārī narrates from ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd-al-Qārī that, “One night in Ramaḍān I went out with ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb to the mosque and the people were separated in different groups. One man was praying on his own and another man praying with a group behind him following his prayer. ‘Umar said, ‘I think that it would be better for all these people to join together behind one reciter.’ So he decided to gather them behind Ubayy bin Ka‘b. Then another night I went out with him and all the people were praying behind one reciter. ‘Umar said: ‘What an excellent *bid‘ah* is this!’”<sup>44</sup>

This saying of the jurist/caliph ‘Umar, among the most innovative ones of the *ṣaḥābah*, clearly illustrates that the *ṣaḥābah* did not consider all *bid‘ah* to reprehensible. We do not read of any one of them objecting to ‘Umar’s innovation with regards to a purely religious matter. The action of ‘Umar clearly belies the Puritan claim that only ‘worldly’ innovations were allowed by the early Muslims, not religious ones.

In the case of the *tarāwīḥ* Prayers, ‘Umar innovated the following matters that did not exist during the era of the Prophet, but became standard Sunni practice after that:

- a) To perform them every night.
- b) To perform them in the first part of the night.
- c) To perform them in congregation.
- d) To perform them behind one reciter only.
- e) To recite the entire Qur’ān in them.
- g) To perform them in 20 *rak‘ahs*.

Except for the number of *rak‘ahs*, the Puritans have taken the rest of these ‘Umariyan innovations for granted and also practice them like mainstream Muslims. ‘Umar’s action and saying in this case became the basis for the controversial concept of the ‘good innovation’ developed by later jurists. For example, al-Suyūṭī quotes the ‘father of Islamic jurisprudence,’ Imam al-Shāfi‘i (d.204):

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<sup>44</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and al-Muwatta‘a*, Kitāb Ṣalāt al-Tarawīḥ.

“Al-Shāfi‘ī said: ‘*Bid‘ah* is of two kinds, a praiseworthy one, and a blameworthy one. What conforms to the *sunnah* is praiseworthy, what contradicts it is blameworthy.’ And he (i.e. al-Shāfi‘ī) supported it (i.e. his claim) with the saying of ‘Umar, ‘What an excellent *bid‘ah* is this.’”<sup>45</sup>

The famous Dhāhirī (literalist) and anti-Shāfi‘ī jurist Ibn-Ḥazm (d.456) wrote:

“Innovation in religion is anything that is not found in the Qur’ān and was not (reported) from the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, except for the matters which are related to the tradition of the Prophet by his Companions with the intention of good. Thus, such a thing as the action of ‘Umar al-Khattāb in calling for congregational *tarāwīḥ* prayers is permissible (*mubāḥ*)...for innovation can be contemptible when it cannot be related to, supported by, or linked to, legal proof.”<sup>46</sup>

Another master of *ḥadīth* and jurisprudence, Ibn-Athīr (d.630), writes:

“Innovation can be divided into two kinds; one of guidance (*bid‘at hudā*) and one of misguidance (*bid‘ah ḍalālah*). The innovation which meets the general needs required by Allah and His Messenger is praised, for example good actions and deeds of generosity, which are commended and rewarded. An example of this was ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb’s action in calling for congregation in performing the *tarāwīḥ* prayers. This was claimed by himself to be an ‘excellent innovation.’ On the other hand, innovation contrary to the wish of Allah and His Messenger is contemptible.”<sup>47</sup>

Ḥanafī *ḥadīth* master al-‘Aynī (d.855), and Mālikī master al-Zurqānī (d.1122), also conclude in their commentaries on Umar’s saying, “This is an excellent innovation,” that *bid‘ah* is indeed divided into acceptable and unacceptable types.<sup>48</sup>

3. ‘Umar also innovated the ‘Islamic’ calendar, dating from the migration of the Prophet from Makkah to Madinah. In the context of our discussion on the *mawlid*, this is significant, as ‘Umar gave importance to a date not given any importance to by the Prophet. By this he set the precedent for marking and commemorating important dates from the life of the Prophet.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Amr bi’l-Ittibā’*, p.37.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn-Ḥazm, *Al-Muḥallā*, Vol.1, p.161.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn-Athīr, *Al-Nihāyah fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth wa al-Athār*, Vol.1, p.79.

<sup>48</sup> Al-‘Aynī, *Shar‘h al-Bukhārī*, Vol.11, p.126, and al-Zurqānī, *Shar‘h al-Muwaṭṭa’*, Vol.1, p.238.

4. ‘Umar also moved the *Maqām Ibrāhīm* (Shrine of Abraham’s footprints) away from the Holy Ka‘bah, while during the time of the Prophet and his successor Abū-Bakr, it was left attached to it. None of the *ṣaḥābah* opposed him, thus it became a unanimously agreed upon innovation.

5. The introduction of an extra earlier *adhān* for the Friday prayers by the third ‘rightly guided’ caliph, ‘Uthmān. None of the *ṣaḥābah* objected to this, and it became standard practice.<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that the Prophet had specified the *adhān*’s for each prayer and their timings, by divine inspiration before his passing away.

Yet, ‘Uthmān dared to introduce another *adhān* as a matter of public benefit, with the approval of the *ṣaḥābah*. The Puritan has a tough choice of either claiming that all the *ṣaḥābah* consented to a major *bid‘ah*, or the hard fact that they did not consider every innovation in the religion to be necessarily reprehensible.

6. The fourth caliph ‘Alī’s allowing of two *‘Īd* prayers to take place in one city, while the tradition of the Prophet and the first three caliphs was to have only one *‘Īd* prayer per city.<sup>50</sup> In fact, many jurists still maintain that having more than one *‘Īd* prayer in a single city is unacceptable, although they dare to call it an ‘innovation’ so as to avoid condemning a senior Companion as ‘Alī. The majority of scholars however, accepted this ‘good innovation’ of ‘Alī reasoning that it is based on providing convenience for Muslims, and the *sharī‘ah* supports the creation of convenience for Muslims.

In summary, based on the above-mentioned and many other examples, mainstream scholarship has traditionally displayed a very relaxed attitude towards ‘beneficial’ innovations, in the temporal *and* the religious realm. Only those innovations which were deemed un-Islamic or harmful to the fabric of Muslim society were rejected.

The Puritans claim to follow the way of the *salaf*, particularly the *ṣaḥābah*; yet we see a stark dissimilarity between the formers and the latter’s approach towards, and understanding of the concept of *bid‘ah*. Here, the ‘Salafis’ clearly seem to be stricter than the *salaf* themselves!

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<sup>49</sup> *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Ṣalāt, ḥadīth no.1107.

<sup>50</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Minhāj al-Sunnah*, Vol.3, p.691.

## Analyzing Puritan Arguments

Before I continue, I find it necessary to dispel certain confusing Puritan assertions regarding the issue of early innovations in Islam, or more specifically the innovations initiated by the *ṣaḥābah*.

Although innovations introduced by the *ṣaḥābah* are too many to be ‘explained away,’ Puritan theorists have nevertheless tried to validate or make excuses for some of the more famous ones, especially those of the first four ‘Rightly Guided Caliphs.’

Puritan ideologue Ibn-Taymiyyah vainly tries to justify the innovations done by the *ṣaḥābah* by saying that, “And whatever is done in the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, without any disapproval, is not a *bid‘ah*.”<sup>51</sup>

Yet, the *ḥadīth* of *bid‘ah*, which Ibn-Taymiyyah himself maintains to be understood in the most literal and general sense without any limitations, does not make an exception for the innovations of the *ṣaḥābah*. If anything, the Prophet’s command would *first and foremost* apply to the *ṣaḥābah* as it was *them* whom he was addressing.

In another attempt, a contemporary Puritan writer tries to *explain away* ‘Umar’s innovations with regards to the *tarāwīḥ* prayers, Abū-Bakr’s compilation of the Qur’ān, and ‘Uthmān’s introduction of an extra *adhān* – major religious innovations which are till today rejected by the anti-*ṣaḥābah* Shi‘ite sect – with the following line of reasoning:

“When Umar united the people behind a single imam, he was reinstating a practice of the Prophet (saw) who had discontinued leading *taraweeh* (sic) prayers publicly because, as related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim, he feared it would be made obligatory upon them. After that, people prayed *taraweeh* (sic) separately until Umar realized the benefit in reinstating congregational prayer.

Moreover it is not to be forgotten that ‘Umar is considered from the ‘Rightly Guided Caliphs,’ whose practices was endorsed by the Prophet himself. ‘Umar’s own use of the word “*bid‘ah*” in this instance was in the linguistic sense i.e. in comparison to the practice of praying separately and not in reference to the *sunnah*.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā‘ al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*, p.311.

Among the four whose practice was endorsed by the Prophet (saw) was Abū-Bakr also, who ordered the collection of all Qur’ānic verses after many of those who knew it by heart were killed in battle to protect it.

So too was ‘Uthmān, who ordered it’s standardization in one *muṣḥaf* [i.e. book]. Here there was an urgent need to protect the Scripture from partial loss and later alteration. Needless to say, these actions were part of the fulfillment of Allah’s promise:

“*And verily we shall protect it (i.e. the holy book).*” (Holy Qur’ān 15:9)

A pre-dawn *adhān* by Bilāl was done with the approval of the Prophet (saw) and was seen to be beneficial in that it brought attention to the fact that dawn was approaching for those unaware or asleep. The same principle was applied by ‘Uthmān in alerting, by *adhan*, those busy in the markets that the time for *jumu‘ah* (Friday) prayer was near.

The *mihrāb* (prayer niche) became a necessity as Islam spread and many new *masjids* were built in distant lands so that upon entering one could know the direction of the *qiblah*. As townships grew, minarets enabled the sound of the *adhān* to reach greater numbers of people, just as today microphones placed on them serve the same purpose.”<sup>52</sup> (end of quote)

The purpose of quoting this long passage is to show the inherent and inevitable contradictions in the Puritan discourse on innovation.

We will begin with the claim that innovations introduced by the *ṣaḥābah* should not be considered *bid‘ah* at all, but *sunnah*, as they were ‘pre-endorsed by the Prophet’ in the following *ḥadīth*:

“Follow my tradition and the tradition of the rightly guided successors after me. Hold on to it with your teeth (*Alaykum bi-sunnatī wa sunnat al-khulafā’ al-rashidīn. Uddū ‘alayha bi’n-nawājidh*).”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Umm Muhammad, *The Observance of al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*, p.19.

<sup>53</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Vol.1, p.371.

Regarding this, firstly, I would like to mention that the *ḥadīth* does not identify the “rightly guided successors;” thus, limiting the term to the first four caliphs requires substantiation. Even historians are not agreed upon who is included among the “rightly guided successors,” some also including the Prophet’s grandson al-Ḥasan bin ‘Alī, ‘Abd-Allāh ibn al-Zubayr and the pious Umayyad Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd-al-Azīz.<sup>54</sup>

The *ḥadīth* in its generality could include all ‘rightly guided scholars’, as some *ḥadīth* commentators have actually speculated based on the famous *ḥadīth* which states that, “Scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets.”<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, the fact that the second ‘rightly guided Caliph’ ‘Umar, himself called his action a *bid‘ah*, clearly refutes this claim. The assertion that his usage of the word ‘*bid‘ah*’ was in the linguistic sense is senseless.

‘Umar, among the most knowledgeable of the *ṣaḥābah*, certainly would have been aware of the *ḥadīth* that condemn *bid‘ah*. If his innovations regarding the *tarāwīḥ* prayers were *sunnah*, as the Puritans claim them to be, why would he then describe them as *bid‘ah*, something that was so apparently condemned by the Prophet.

His usage of the word *bid‘ah* with the addition of ‘excellent’ clearly implies that he believed in the ‘division’ of *bid‘ah* into the categories of good and bad, and that he did not consider the *ḥadīth* that condemn *bid‘ah* to include each and every *bid‘ah*, neither conceptually *nor* linguistically. The various innovations introduced by ‘Umar can bear further testimony to his liberal understanding of *bid‘ah*.

The claim that ‘Umar was justified in his innovation because he was simply ‘re-instating a practice the Prophet had discontinued for the fear of it becoming obligatory’ is silly. For all jurists agree that practices discontinued by the Prophet are considered abrogated and the believers should discontinue them as well.

‘Umar not only re-instated the practice but also institutionalized it in the manner he saw fit. The Caliph knew well that what he had done was an innovation, thus he himself called it a *bid‘ah*, albeit an ‘excellent one.’

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<sup>54</sup> Al-Haytamī, *Al-Ṣawā‘iq al-Muḥriqah*, Vol.2, p.642.

<sup>55</sup> *Sunan Abū-Dāwūd, Tirmidhī and Ibn-Mājah*, Kitāb al-Faḍā’il.

The third point here is that the exclusion of innovations introduced by the *ṣaḥābah* from being implied in the *ḥadīth* of *bid'ah* is in itself a limitation of the latter by those who claim it to be absolute in its generality, thus contradicting themselves.

If the *ḥadīth* of *bid'ah* can be accepted as open for qualification by the Puritans, then there should be no problem with the further qualifications deduced by mainstream scholarship based on many other *ḥadīth* and principles of *fiqh*, as we will illustrate in the coming pages. Yet we find the Puritans adamant on rejecting these on the claim that the *ḥadīth* of *bid'ah* should be understood in general terms as its literal wording implies.

Finally, whether or not an action introduced by the *ṣaḥābah* can technically be termed as *bid'ah* is not really the point of contention here. What we are trying to prove is that the *ṣaḥābah* did introduce innovations in religious and non-religious matters after the demise of the Prophet and did not consider this to be in contravention of the Prophetic injunction against *bid'ah*.

Whether their innovations (or any 'acceptable' innovation) should be termed as *bid'ah* or *sunnah* is an issue that has been debated by classical scholars as we mentioned. Indeed, the writer contends that the proper term for 'acceptable' innovations in Islam should be *sunnah ḥasanah* and not *bid'ah ḥasanah*. And this should include beneficial innovations introduced by the *ṣaḥābah* and by authoritative scholars of all generations.

The attempt of the Puritan writer to explain away the innovations of the *ṣaḥābah* and the first generations as "a lawful means to facilitate the practice of already established religion"<sup>56</sup> also does not amount to much as the innovations of later generations could easily be justified on the same grounds as well, as has been the case.

Indeed, the Puritan writer herself tried to justify 'Uthmān's introduction of an extra *adhan* on Fridays on the basis that a "pre-dawn *adhān* by Bilāl was done with the approval of the Prophet....and 'Uthmān used the same principle."

This is a clear acknowledgment from the Puritan camp itself that innovations can be accepted if they are based on principles applied during the time of the Prophet. The traditional Muslim understanding of *bid'ah* is no different than this, yet it is condemned by the Puritans.

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<sup>56</sup> Umm Muhammad, *The Observance of al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*, p.18.

The writer's statement that, "The *miḥrāb* [an innovation that was introduced *after* the era of the first four Caliphs] became a necessity as Islam spread," is also an honest admission that the spread and growth of the faith must necessitate certain innovations for the adaptation of the faith to the needs of the times.

That the Puritan position is hypocritically contradictory is also evident from Puritan forerunner Ibn-Taymiyyah's treatment of the *adhān* issues in his refutation of the Shi'ites. When the latter condemned the third caliph 'Uthmān for the introduction of an extras *adhān* for the Friday prayers, Ibn-Taymiyyah defended 'Uthmān's innovation with all his scholarly might.

However, in the same book, he considered the Shi'ites' addition of the words '*ḥayyā 'alā khayr il-'amal*' ('come towards the best of actions') in the normal *adhāns* "a false innovation," because, "those who narrated the *adhān* [i.e. from the Prophet] did not mention this addition." This, despite his own admission that some of the *ṣaḥābah* might have used those words during the *adhan*.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, 'Uthmān's addition of an extra *adhān* was deemed valid, but the Shi'ite addition in the normative *adhāns* was termed an evil innovation, while the fact is that both additions were innovations and both had some kind of textual or rational justification, with the Shi'ite addition seeming to have a stronger basis from the *sunnah*.

This, and many other examples will clearly demonstrate that the Puritan 'rejection of innovation' is more of an ideological weapon against their theological opponents, such as the Shi'ites and the Sufis, than a real war on innovation. It has, in fact, proven to be a very effective tool in the battle for religious supremacy. The charge of 'Innovation' has always been a great means of vilification and disparagement of the Other in Islamic history, as most heretical sects were called 'the people of innovation.'

However, from our detailed discussion, we can safely conclude that the practice of the *ṣaḥābah*, the first and most important generation of Muslims, clearly seems to support the view that the Prophet left the door of innovation open, not closed; the criteria of its acceptability or rejection being its conformation to the goals and objectives of Islamic legislation and faith.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Minhāj al-Sunnah*, Vol.3, pp. 692-693.

## Negative Early Approaches to *Bid'ah*

Despite the various 'good' innovations introduced by many *ṣaḥābah*, one nevertheless does find instances of certain early Muslims taking very strict stances against what they considered to be an innovation. We will analyze a few cases Puritans tend to rely on and frequently cite.

For example, it is narrated that a man sneezed in the presence of the *ṣaḥābī* Ibn-ʿUmar and said the *sunnah* words: “All praise is for Allah (*al-ḥumdu lillah*)” adding to it, “and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah (*Wa al-Salām ʿala Rasūl-Allāh*).”

Ibn-ʿUmar became infuriated and said: “And I also say, ‘peace be upon the Messenger of Allah,’ but this is not how we were taught (i.e. taught by the Prophet to say after sneezing).”<sup>58</sup>

There is also the famous story – a favorite of Puritans – of the senior Companion ʿAbd-Allāh ibn Masʿūd, that once when he saw a group of people sitting in the mosque of Kufa reading certain *dhikrs* (prayers) in a specific manner, he condemned them in the harshest of words and called their action a *bid'ah*.

It is also narrated that the celebrated Imām Mālik (d.179), used to reject the *sajdat al-shukr* – the prostration of thankfulness done by pious Muslim upon receiving good news – as a *bid'ah*, saying that he did not hear of it being practiced by the Prophet or his Companions (Some later Mālikīs permitted it after discovering reports that the Prophet and his Companions *did* actually do it!).

He is also frequently quoted by Puritans as saying, “What was not part of the religion during the time of the Prophet and his Companions is not part of the religion today.”

However, after careful study, we find that even these and other such condemnations were bound to the limitations of context and differing understandings of *bid'ah*. For example, al-Suyūṭī explains Ibn-ʿUmar’s condemnation as not being a general one but specifically against the addition of something to a prayer already taught by the Prophet; which is something rejected by all scholars, and not Ibn-ʿUmar only.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Hāwī li'l-Fatāwā*, Vol.1, p.254 (citing al-Hakim).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Vol.1, p.254.

The famous contemporary Yemeni jurist ‘Abd-Allāh bin Maḥfūz also contends in his work on *bid‘ah* that it is indeed a reprehensible *bid‘ah* to increase or decrease in any mode of worship or prayer specified by the *sharī‘ah*, but not so in something that the Law-giver has encouraged us to do without specifying any limits.<sup>60</sup>

This explanation makes sense as Ibn-Umar himself is narrated to have done things that were not taught or practiced neither by the Prophet nor by other *ṣaḥābah*.

For example, his following of and praying at sites where the Prophet had sat or prayed. Indeed, Puritan ideologue, Ibn-Taymiyyah, an avowed enemy of the veneration of historic sites, dared to to accuse Ibn-‘Umar, a senior *ṣaḥābī*, of introducing a *bid‘ah* into Islam by doing that!<sup>61</sup>

‘Ibn-Umar was also famous for performing the *salāt al-duḥā* (voluntary prayer done after the sunrise) in congregation, something which the Prophet had not done. When asked if it was not an innovation, Ibn-‘Umar replied: “The best innovation I did is this innovation.”<sup>62</sup>

Strangely enough, Ibn-‘Umar is also well-known to have added his own wordings to certain prayers taught by the Prophet himself, such as the *tashahhud* which is recited in the daily prayers,<sup>63</sup> and the *talbiyah* that is chanted during the pilgrimage.<sup>64</sup>

Even Mālik’s anti-*bid‘ah* stand seems to be actually directed at those who were taking certain practices – especially innovated ones – as obligatory in the religion while the Prophet had not made them obligatory. In this, he is no different from any other jurist, for all agree that obligation can only be legislated by the divine Law-giver.

However, apart from the issue of assigning an obligatory nature to them, we see Mālik as having a liberal attitude regarding innovation, as he approved of all the innovations of the generations before him and even added some of his own. For, he is famous for having increased the number of *rak‘ahs* in the *tarāwīḥ* prayers in the Mosque of Madinah, from the 20 that ‘Umar had innovatively standardized, to 36 *rak‘ahs*.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Bin-Maḥfūz, *Al-Sunnah wa al-Bid‘ah*, p.198.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā‘ al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*, Vol.1, p.390.

<sup>62</sup> Al-‘Asqalānī, *Fat‘h al-Bārī*, Vol.3, p.795.

<sup>63</sup> *Sunan Abū-Dāwūd*, Kitāb al-Ṣalāh.

<sup>64</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Vol.2, p.170.

<sup>65</sup> Al-Nawawī, *Al-Majmū‘*, Vol.3, p.526.

His reasoning was that the people of Makkah would perform ritual circuits around the Ka‘bah after every four *rak‘ahs*, thus gaining more reward than the people of Madinah. He reasoned that to catch up with them in reward, the latter should perform an extra four *rak‘ahs* after the four normative ones. Thus, in Mālik’s *tarāwīḥ* prayers, another 16 *rak‘ahs* were added in to the original 20.<sup>66</sup>

This is despite the fact that it has not been established that the Prophet ever prayed more than 10 *rak‘ahs* for the *tarāwīḥ* prayers, or any prayer for that matter!

Mālik was also from the first people to collect and codify the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet in a book (his famous *Muwaṭṭā*) despite the fact that the Prophet had generally forbidden the writing of *ḥadīth*,<sup>67</sup> and the few senior *ṣaḥābah* who had written some *ḥadīth* had burned their collections, committing those *ḥadīth* to memory only.

Mālik is also famous for never riding an animal, but walking bare feet in the streets of his native holy city of Madinah as long as he lived, in honor ‘for the soil on which the Prophet had walked.’

Again, this is a form of veneration for the Prophet, which was neither commanded by him nor practiced by any of the generations before Mālik. Yet we find him doing it without being condemned as an innovator.<sup>68</sup>

Puritan works frequently quote a whole array of anti-*bid‘ah* statements by prominent early Muslims. However, upon careful observation and study, one realizes that most such statements are primarily referring to innovations in the realm of theology rather than in the realm of practical expressions of the faith and acts of worship.

The term *bid‘ah* was primarily used for referring to the heretical beliefs and practices of the ‘unorthodox’ sects such as the Kharijites, Shi’ites, Mu’tazilites, Qadrites, Jahmites...etc, who were called the *ahl al-bid‘ah* (people of *bid‘ah*). For example, when Mālik was asked “Who are the people of *bid‘ah*?” he replied:

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<sup>66</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Hāwī li’l-Fatāwa*, Vol.1, p.348.

<sup>67</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Zuhd, no.2002.

<sup>68</sup> Check Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ’s *Al-Shifā* (Chapter on Exalting the Prophet and the Necessity to Respect and Honor him) for more examples of Mālik’s *innovative* veneration of the Prophet.

“The people of *bid‘ah* are those who speak about the Names of Allah, His Attributes, Speech, Knowledge and Power, and do not keep quiet about (those things) which the *ṣahābah* and those who followed them in goodness kept quiet about.”<sup>69</sup>

A glance at most of the anti-*bid‘ah* statements made by early Muslims will show that they use the word ‘*hawā*’ synonymously with the word, *bid‘ah*. The word literally means ‘whim,’ and in the context of Islamic history was used to refer to the heretical tendencies of heterodox sects. The word’s constant synonymous usage with the word *bid‘ah* clearly illustrates that during the early centuries of Islam, the word *bid‘ah* was mainly used for referring to heretical beliefs rather than new practices; contrary to the modern Puritan usage of the word, where it is primarily used for devotional acts.

Even, Ibn-Mas‘ūd’s condemnation of the gathering of *dhikr* has been explained as being against the gatherings of the heretical Kharijite sect, as they were notorious for forming their own circles apart from the gatherings of the *ṣahābah*.

There is proof that the people he had condemned in this particular incident were actually Kharijites who were hostile to the *ṣahābah* and wanted to outdo them in worship and piety.<sup>70</sup> Thus the condemnation was not as much against gathering to recite *dhikrs* than it was against the meetings of a misguided faction.

Refuting the idea that Ibn-Mas‘ūd was against the gatherings of *dhikr* in general, al-Suyūṭī mentions that Imam Aḥmad narrated in his *Kitāb al-Zuhd* that Abū-Wā’il said:

“(How wrong are) These people who claim that ‘Abd-Allāh (Ibn-Mas‘ūd) used to prohibit from *dhikr*! I never sat with ‘Abd-Allāh in a gathering except that he made the *dhikr* of Allah in it.”<sup>71</sup>

Another explanation of Ibn-Mas‘ūd’s condemnation could be that he condemned something that was innovated by the new generation without the approval of the Companions of the Prophet, who were the elders of the community at that time. This is supported by the words of his condemnation which say, “Have you overridden the Companions of the Prophet?”

<sup>69</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Amr bi’l-Ittibā’*, p.29.

<sup>70</sup> *Sunan al-Dārimī*, No: 210.

<sup>71</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Hāwī li’l-Fatāwā*, Vol.2, p.31.

Thus, he condemns them for overriding the *ṣaḥābah*, not the Prophet! Accordingly, we do not find Ibn-Mas‘ūd condemning any of the various innovations that were introduced by the *ṣaḥābah* themselves.

In fact, Ibn-Mas‘ūd’s ‘watchfulness’ over the *sharī‘ah* was not limited to innovated matters only but even to the *sunnah* of the Prophet, when people started considering it as obligatory. For example, Bukhārī narrates him as saying:

“You should not give away part of your prayer to Satan by thinking that it is necessary to turn (after finishing the prayer) towards one’s right side only. Indeed I have seen the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and give him peace, often turning towards his left side.”<sup>72</sup>

Explaining this saying of Ibn-Mas‘ūd, *al-ḥāfiẓ* Ibn-Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī writes:

“Ibn-al-Munīr said: ‘This saying indicates that recommended acts may become disliked (*makrūh*) if they are elevated from their position (of being recommended). Right-sidedness (*tayammun*) is recommended (*mustahabb*) in all acts of worship, but when ‘Abd-Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd feared that people will begin to consider this recommended act as necessary, he pointed out to its offensiveness.’”<sup>73</sup>

Thus, in this case again, as in the incident of the *dhikr*, we see that Ibn-Mas‘ūd’s condemnation is not really for the action itself but the context in which it is done.

In fact, like Ibn-‘Umar, Ibn-Mas‘ūd is also narrated to have changed and added to the wordings of the *tashahhud* prayer which was taught by the Prophet himself to be read in the daily obligatory prayers.<sup>74</sup> This would count as a major innovation.

It is also a clear proof that Ibn-Mas‘ūd did not consider the door of ‘beneficial’ innovation to be closed by the passing away of the Prophet. Or else, the otherwise conservative Ibn-Mas‘ūd would not have dared to make additions and changes in prayers taught by the Prophet himself.

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<sup>72</sup> *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*, No: 814.

<sup>73</sup> Al-‘Asqalānī, *Fat’h al-Bārī*, Vol.2, p.437.

<sup>74</sup> *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*, Vol.8, book 74, no: 281.

One also notices that the negative attitude of certain early Muslims towards innovation seems to be more of a cautionary measure than a legal ruling or formal judgment on the matter. However, caution cannot be understood as prohibition.

In order to preserve the original ‘way of the Prophet,’ and due to their faithful adherence to it, many among the *salaf* would be wary of any innovative matter, even if it was beneficial and fitted the definition of an acceptable innovation. Al-Suyūṭī points to this when he writes:

“And they (i.e. the early Muslims) would detest any new matter *even if it was permissible*, (in order) to preserve the original (*sunnah*).”<sup>75</sup> (emphasis mine)

### **The Mainstream Approach**

The approach that the majority of the early and later jurists of Islam took vis-à-vis *bid‘ah* was of dividing all innovations into good and bad, with a difference of opinion regarding the terming of ‘good’ innovations as ‘good *bid‘ah*.’

Some considered the word *bid‘ah* to imply ‘bad/unacceptable innovations’ only, thus inapplicable to any ‘acceptable’ innovation, the condition of acceptability being its falling under the parameters of the goals and objectives of the *sharī‘ah* as exemplified in the Qur’ān and the *sunnah*.

Thus, not every practice that originated after the era of the Prophet was to be termed a *bid‘ah*, rather only those practices that contradicted with the teaching of the Prophet.

Consequently, for this group, accepting certain innovations as ‘good’ was not deemed to be a violation of the generality of the *ḥadīth* of *bid‘ah* (“every *bid‘ah* is misguidance”) as the *bid‘ah* referred to in this *ḥadīth* was understood to be novel practices that *contradicted* the *sharī‘ah*.

These were indeed considered to be stemming from misguidance and rejected. However, any novel practice that aided towards the fulfillment of any *sharī‘ah* specified goal or good was not to be termed *bid‘ah* at all. Thus, there was no contradiction.

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<sup>75</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Amr b’il-Ittibā’*, p.36.

This important distinction *had* to be made, as by the end of the first century after the demise of the Prophet, various ‘beneficial’ innovations had been incorporated into the fabric of Islam by the *ṣahābah* and their successors.

Most of these were unanimously accepted by the *ummah* and had become indispensable by the end of the first century. For example, the adding of diacritic marks and dots in the Qur’ān, the collection and categorization of the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet in the form of books, the codification of the *sharī’ah*...etc. Thus, even the strictest and most literalist of jurists had to explain the *ḥadīth* of *bid’ah* in a way that would accommodate these innovations.

Therefore we see that even Ibn-Taymiyyah, the forerunner of the Puritan movement, and a vehement advocate of the absolute generality of the *ḥadīth* of *bid’ah*, tried to solve the dilemma of indispensable good innovations by giving two choices:

“Either to say that, whatever (innovated action) is proven to be good, then it is not (considered) from the *bid’ahs*...Or to say that whatever (innovated action) is proven to be good, then it is an exception from this generality (that all *bid’ahs* are bad).”<sup>76</sup>

His student and prominent Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn-Rajab (d.795) writes:

“*Al-Bid’ah*: That which was innovated, without a basis in the *sharī’ah* which may point to it. As for that (innovation) which has a basis in the *sharī’ah*, then it is not (termed) a *bid’ah* according to the *sharī’ah*, although it may be termed a *bid’ah* (innovation) from a linguistic point of view.”<sup>77</sup>

The famous Shāfi’ī jurist Ibn-Ḥajar al-Makkī al-Haytamī (d.974) wrote that:

“If it (i.e. any action) is based on a proof from the *sharī’ah*, it will not be called a *bid’ah* in terms of the *sharī’ah*, whether or not it (i.e. that action) was done during the era of the Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him.”<sup>78</sup>

Thus, al-Haytamī is very clear that the criterion for terming an innovated action as a condemnable *bid’ah* is to verify it’s substantiation from the sources of the *sharī’ah*.

<sup>76</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā’ al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*, pp.270-271.

<sup>77</sup> Ibn-Rajab, *Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm wa al-Ḥikam*, Vol.3, p.114.

<sup>78</sup> Al-Haytamī, *Al-Fatāwā al-Hadīthiyyah*, Vol.1, p.125.

If this can be established, then it will not be considered a *bid'ah*, even if the action in its present form was not practiced in the Prophetic era.

For al-Haytamī, the novelty of the form does not render an action a *bid'ah*, as long as the driving idea or basic concept behind it is found in the sources of the *sharī'ah*.

This point is important to note, as proponents of the *mawlid* have persistently used certain textual proofs to prove that the concept of *mawlid* existed during the time of the Prophet. They then claim that this alone is enough to excuse the present form of *mawlid* celebrations from being termed as *bid'ah*.

The famous 12<sup>th</sup> century 'independent' jurist al-Shawkānī also contended that any action that falls under the general good promoted by the *sharī'ah* should simply be accepted without being called a 'good *bid'ah*' as that would contradict the statement of the Prophet, "Every *bid'ah* is misguidance."<sup>79</sup>

This approach was adopted by a minority of jurists only and was most exemplified in the works of al-Shāṭibī, which we will discuss later on.

The majority of jurists however, followed Caliph 'Umar's terminology,<sup>80</sup> and understood and used the term *bid'ah* in a more general sense, without distinguishing between the legal and the linguistic usage of the term. For them, the term *bid'ah* was to be understood in the literal sense as anything innovated after the time of the Prophet.

Whether or not that innovated practice was acceptable to the *sharī'ah* did not make any difference in its being called a *bid'ah*. However, taking beneficial innovations into account, they divided *bid'ah* into *ḥasanah* (good), and *sayyi'ah* (bad). The *ḥadīth* of *bid'ah* was explained as referring to 'bad' *bid'ahs* only.

The first one to articulate this approach was the great legal genius of Islam and master linguist, Imam al-Shāfi'ī (d.204).

Prominent Shāfi'ī scholar al-Bayhaqī (d.458) narrates with a sound chain that al-Shāfi'ī said:

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<sup>79</sup> Al-Shawkānī, *Nayl al-Awtār*, Vol.2, p.79.

<sup>80</sup> We discussed Umar's statement in detail in the chapters on "Innovation in the Era of the *Ṣaḥābāh*" and "Analyzing Puritan Arguments."

“Innovated matters (*muhdathāt*) are of two kinds. One is an innovation which contravenes something in the Qur’ān or the *sunnah*, or a report from a Companion or the consensus of the scholars; *this is* the innovation of misguidance (*bid’ah dalalah*).

The other kind is whatever good that has been innovated and does not contravene any of the above; this is an innovation that is *not* blameworthy.”<sup>81</sup> (emphasis mine)

In another, briefer statement, he states:

“Innovation is of two kinds: the praiseworthy innovation and the blameworthy innovation. Whatever conforms to the *sunnah* is praiseworthy, and whatever contravenes the *sunnah* is blameworthy.”<sup>82</sup>

Explaining the *ḥadīth* of *bid’ah*, the great classical *ḥadīth* master Ibn-Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī writes:

“The root meaning of *bid’ah* is that which occurs without prior example. In the *sharī’ah*, it is what opposes the *sunnah* and therefore is blameworthy. However, if it consists of what is considered good in the *sharī’ah*, then it is good, and if it consists of that which is considered bad in the *sharī’ah*, then it is bad. Otherwise, it is in the category of permissible matters (*mubah*). It is [thus] divided unto the five rulings.”<sup>83</sup>

Prominent Shāfi’ī jurist, al-Nawawī (d.676) writes:

“The Prophet’s saying, ‘Every innovation’ is a *general-particular* and refers to *most innovations*. The linguists say, ‘Innovation is any act done without a previous pattern,’ and it is of five different kinds.”<sup>84</sup> (emphasis mine)

Al-Wansharīsī mentioned that the Mālikīs, despite their strong stance against certain ‘innovation,’ unanimously agreed with the division of *bid’ah* into the five categories.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Al-Bayhaqī, *Manāqib al-Shāfi’ī*, Vol.1, p.469.

<sup>82</sup> Abū-Nu’aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliya*, Vol.9, p.113.

<sup>83</sup> Al-‘Asqalānī, *Fat’h al-Bārī*, Vol.4, p.353.

<sup>84</sup> Al-Nawawī, *Shar’h Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Vol.6, p.21.

<sup>85</sup> Al-Wansharīsī, *Al-M’iyār al-Mughrib*, Vol.1, pp.357-358.

Major Mālikī jurists such as Ibn-al-‘Arabī (d.543) and al-Qarāfī (d.684) have supported this view in their works on the principles of jurisprudence.

The great Ḥanafī jurist Ibn-‘Ābidīn (d.1252) also maintained the division of *bid‘ah* into the categories of the compulsory, the recommended, the permissible, and the disliked, giving examples for each.<sup>86</sup>

However, the credit for standardizing this approach is usually given to the great classical jurist, *al-Qāḍī* Izz-al-Dīn bin ‘Abd-al-Salām (d.660), known as the *sultān al-‘ulamā*, i.e. king of the scholars. He wrote in *al-Qawā‘id*, his masterpiece on *Usūl*:

“Innovation is divided into obligatory, forbidden, recommended, disagreeable and permissible, and the way to know which is which, is to match it against the *sharī‘ah*.”<sup>87</sup>

Due to Ibn-‘Abd-al-Salām’s high standing in the world of traditional Islamic jurisprudence, his division of innovation into the five categories gained widespread acceptance among later jurists and became the standard view till recent times. A prominent contemporary exponent of this approach elaborates on this division with the following examples:

“Furthermore, the scholars have divided *bid‘ah* (innovation) into five types:

1. *Wājibah* (Obligatory): For example, the refutation of the people of heresy, learning Arabic grammar (as it is a means of understanding the Qur’ān)...etc.

2. *Mandūbah* (Recommended): Like building garrisons and schools, making the *adhan* on Minarets and starting welfare schemes which didn't exist in the early age (of Islam).

3. *Makrūhah* (Disliked): Like excessively decorating mosques and adorning Qur’āns.

4. *Mubāḥah* (Permissible): Like using a sieve and variety in food and drink.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibn-‘Ābidīn, *Al-Hāshiyah*, Vol.1, p. 376

<sup>87</sup> Ibn-‘Abd-al-Salām, *Qawā‘id al-Ahkām*, Vol.1, p.125.

5. *Muḥarramah* (Prohibited): This includes whatever is innovated in opposition to a *sunnah*, what does not fall under the general principles of the *sharī'ah*, and what does not include any Islamically desired benefit in it.”<sup>88</sup>

As we can notice from these examples, the proponents of this view do not make a distinction between worldly and religious innovations, but rather measure them all by the one and same yardstick.

### **Al-Shāṭibī's Innovative Approach**

The great Andalusian Islamic scholar, linguist and jurist, Abū-Is'hāq al-Shāṭibī (d.790) wrote in detail on the subject of *bid'ah* and caused a stir with his anti-mainstream views. His *magnus opus* on *bid'ah*, the *Kitāb al-I'tisām*, is the main source of inspiration for modern-day Puritan movements, who brought the book back to life after it's being disregarded by mainstream scholarship for centuries.

Ironically, when al-Shāṭibī expounded his fresh views on *bid'ah*, he himself was accused of *bid'ah* and innovation, as he had gone against the standard mainstream view! Al-Shāṭibī writes in repudiation of the mainstream categorization of *bid'ah*:

“Dividing *bid'ah* into good and bad and applying the five (types of) rulings on it (i.e. compulsoriness, recommendation, permissibility, disliked-ness and prohibition) is in itself an innovated matter lacking any substantiation from the *sharī'ah*. It is in fact an anomaly, as the essence of *bid'ah* is that it (is something that) lacks any substantiation from the *sharī'ah*, neither from its texts, nor its principles.”<sup>89</sup>

However, despite al-Shāṭibī's vitriolic rhetoric against Ibn-'Abd-al-Salam's division of *bid'ah* into the five categories, a close examination of his views reveal that there isn't much of a real difference between the two schools of thought, except in the semantics of the word *bid'ah*.

Al-Shāṭibī, does not consider any innovated action that has a basis in the *sharī'ah* as a *bid'ah* at all.

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<sup>88</sup> Al-Mālikī, *Ḥawl al-Iḥtifāl bi Zikrā al-Mawlid al-Nabawī al-Sharīf*, p.7.

<sup>89</sup> Al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Muwāfaqāt*, Vol., p.191.

According to al-Shāṭibī, an action can only be considered as obligatory or recommended if it can be substantiated from the Qur'ān or the *sunnah*, at least in principle, in which case it would be meaningless to call it a *bid'ah*, for it would be considered as part of the general good that God has commanded us to do anyways.

Ibn-'Abd-al-Salām follows the same method in judging innovation but concludes that even if the innovated action falls under the general good commanded by the *sharī'ah*, it would still be called a *bid'ah*, as it is something that did not exist during the time of the Prophet. He however adds the word *ḥasanah* (good) to it to distinguish it from those innovations that cannot be substantiated by the *sharī'ah*, which he terms as *bid'ah sayyi'ah* (bad *bid'ah*).

Al-Shāṭibī's claim that 'the division of *bid'ah* into different categories lacks any substantiation from the *sharī'ah*,' is blatantly untrue. Ibn-'Abd-al-Salām and his predecessors in dividing *bid'ah*, like Imam al-Shāfi'i, took inspiration from the following authentic saying of the Prophet which we discussed in detail earlier on:

“Whoever establishes in Islam a good practice, he will be rewarded for it and will (also) get the (same) reward of all those who do it. And whoever establishes in Islam an evil practice, he will be punished for it and will (also) get the (same) punishment as (that of) all those do it.”<sup>90</sup>

They also substantiated their claim from the explicit statement of the caliph Umar regarding his command to the people to pray the *tarāwīḥ* prayer in congregation:

“What an excellent *bid'ah* is this.”<sup>91</sup>

Despite his lengthy exposition, al-Shāṭibī is also reluctant to give a single definition of *bid'ah*. Basically, he gives two definitions of *bid'ah*, one that includes 'ibādāt, i.e. worship rituals only and excludes 'ādāt, i.e. the habits, mores, customs...etc, and another one that includes them both.

The first definition follows thus:

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<sup>90</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Vol.3, p.152.

<sup>91</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb Ṣalāt al-Tarāwīḥ.

“An innovated way/practice (*tarīqah*) in religion, that resembles/rivals (*tuḍāhī*) the way of the *sharī‘ah*, and which is intended to be followed in order to strive in the utmost in the worship of Allah.”<sup>92</sup>

The second definition is the same except that the clause on worship, “in order to strive...” is replaced with the broader, “with the same intention that the *sharī‘ah* aims for.”<sup>93</sup>

Al-Shāṭibī’s qualification of “in religion” excludes any worldly innovation, a departure from previous understandings of *bid‘ah*, which included both the religious and worldly matters in their definitions of *bid‘ah*. Al-Shāṭibī can therefore be considered as the first jurist to limit *bid‘ah* to matters of worship only.

The implications of this approach can be far-reaching. For al-Shāṭibī is basically stating that there are many areas of life – in fact everything except matters of worship – where the concept of *bid‘ah* cannot be applied. This – to the disdain of his fundamentalist admirers – can further imply that these areas of life are not controlled by the *sharī‘ah*, thus contradicting the consensus of all jurists.

His qualification of, “that resembles/rivals the way of the *sharī‘ah*” is also significant as it clearly seems to exclude innovations that are *not* intended to resemble the practices of the *sharī‘ah*. The word ‘*tuḍāhī*’ also means ‘rival,’ thus al-Shāṭibī’s definition could also exclude any innovation that is not intended to rival the *sharī‘ah*.

In fact, al-Shāṭibī even goes on to assert that where this intention of resembling or rivalry with the *sharī‘ah* as an act of worship is absent in a new matter, such a new matter will *not* be regarded as *bid‘ah*, even though there is a similarity between it and a *sharī‘ah* approved action in actuality!<sup>94</sup>

Thus, we can deduce that even al-Shāṭibī does not accept the *ḥadīth* that condemn *bid‘ah* in their generality but limits them to innovations in religion and matters of worship only, and more specifically those innovations that are intended to resemble or rival the divinely revealed *sharī‘ah*.

<sup>92</sup> Al-Shāṭibī, *Al-‘Itisām*, Vol.2, p.22.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. Vol.2, p.23.

<sup>94</sup> Al-Shāṭibī, *Kitāb al-‘Itisām*, Vol.2, p.24. He writes: “Fa kullu ma ukhturi‘a fī al-dīni mim mā yuḍāhī al-mashrū‘ wa lam yuqṣad bihi al-ta‘abbud, fa qad kharaja ‘an ḥādhihi al-tasmiyah.”

Nevertheless, both his definitions of *bid'ah* would still exclude most of the various *religious* innovations of the first three centuries that were unequivocally accepted as part and parcel of the Islamic framework. These and many other legal, political, cultural, social *innovations* had become indispensable by al-Shāṭibī's time.

Al-Shāṭibī's solution to this dilemma was introducing the concept of *al-maṣlahah al-mursalah*, which could be loosely translated as meaning, 'matter of general benefit,' with the implication that it is something that is not explicitly mentioned by the texts, in which case it would have been termed *wājib* (obligatory), *mustahabb* (recommended) or *sunnah*. The *sharī'ah* rejected all *bid'ahs*, but accepted the *maṣlahah mursalah*. Conceptually speaking, they were the one and same thing, but the latter 'sounded' more '*sharī'ah* compliant' than the former, as the term *bid'ah* was looked upon negatively.

So, according to al-Shāṭibī, any new/innovated action which would benefit the general public and/or would serve the *maqāṣid* (goals) of the *sharī'ah* would be termed *maṣlahah mursalah* and not *bid'ah*, which by definition can only be something that is in opposition to the *sharī'ah*.

*Al-Maṣalih al-mursalah* on the other hand, would demonstrate the kind of new things where both the intention and the act conform with the objectives of the *shari'ah*. An example of this would be the levying of new taxes in addition to those prescribed in the texts; where both the act and the intention conform with the goals of the *sharī'ah*.

Al-Shāṭibī further illustrates his concept of *al-maṣalih al-mursalah* with the following events from Islamic legal history: the collection of the Qur'ān; determining the penalty for using intoxicants; allegiance to a less qualified person for an office in the presence of a better qualified one.

He identifies three common elements in all his examples. First is the element of suitability with the objectives of the *sharī'ah*. *Al-Maṣalih al-mursalah* do not clash with the fundamentals and the evidences of the *sharī'ah*. Secondly, they are rationally intelligible. Therefore, the concept of *al-maṣalih al-mursalah* cannot be applied to the '*ibadat* (matters of worship) because the latter are not always rationally intelligible in detail.

Thirdly, the *maṣāliḥ al-mursalah* refer to the following principles: protection of (human) necessities; removal of impediments harmful to religion; and protection of an indispensable means to the ends of the Law.<sup>95</sup>

For al-Shāṭibī, it is because of this conformity of *al-masalih al-mursalah* with the objectives of the *sharī'ah* that they cannot be associated with *bid'ah*, which in his understanding can only be counter the *sharī'ah*. He is adamant that the two are completely opposed to each other, strongly disagreeing with the jurists who identified *al-maṣāliḥ al-mursalah* as nothing else but what they had termed as 'good' *bid'ah*.

On the contrary, al-Shāṭibī contends that what mainstream scholarship considers as 'good *bid'ah*' is actually *maṣlahah mursalah*; what they consider to be a 'bad *bid'ah*' is simply *bid'ah*.

This is evident from the fact that both schools of thought use the same examples for their particular concepts, such as the collection of the Qur'ān in a book form, the institutionalization of the *tarāwīḥ* prayers, studying innovated disciplines such as *naḥw*, *kalām* ...etc.

The primary difference then, is one of semantics, than of concepts. On his own acknowledgement, al-Shāṭibī *accepts* certain innovations in Islam, within the parameters defined by him, but he refuses to term them 'innovations,' rather they are 'matters of public benefit.' In perspective, al-Shāṭibī's concept of *maṣlahah mursalah* does not apply to anything *but* innovation, i.e. to those actions, practices and phenomena that did not exist in the time of the Prophet.

In fact, contrary to contemporary Puritan explanations, al-Shāṭibī himself interprets the "good practice" (*sunnah ḥasanah*) encouraged by the Prophet in the '*ḥadīth* of good *bid'ah*' (which we discussed in detail earlier on) as referring to "innovating a new beneficial practice," and not "reviving an already established *sunnah*" as the Puritans like to interpret it.<sup>96</sup> This *ḥadīth* is the primary basis for the concept of the 'good innovation.'

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<sup>95</sup> Al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Itiṣām*, Vol.3, pp.113-115.

<sup>96</sup> Al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Itiṣām*, Vol.1. p.178.

Strangely enough, from a historical point of view, the term ‘good *bid’ah*’ has more basis than the innovative *maṣlahah mursalah* which is mentioned nowhere in the Qur’ān, *sunnah* or even in the terminology of the *ṣaḥābah*. However, we find the second caliph ‘Umar using the words ‘good *bid’ah*’ for his institutionalization of the *tarāwīḥ* prayers, without any censure.

A contemporary Puritan/Salafi writer tried to distinguish between the *maṣlahah mursalah* espoused by al-Shāṭibī (which is translated as ‘public interest rulings’) and the ‘good innovation’ espoused by mainstream scholarship, by stating that:

“It is universally agreed among all Muslim scholars that the *sharī’ah* was established for the benefit of mankind and to prevent harm. *Within the limits of Islam, anything deemed to be good for Muslims in general or prevents harm to them is valid as long as it has not been forbidden in itself in either the Quran or the sunnah.*

Rulings by scholars on specific cases for public benefit (*maṣaliḥ mursalah*) are valid when there is a genuine need or overall benefit, not merely a personal preference. Such a ruling is not instituted as an end in itself, but only as a means to avoid harm. In contrast, *bid’ah* is intended not as a means but as an end in itself, while any religious act done for itself can only be ordained by Allah.”<sup>97</sup> (emphasis mine)

According to this Puritan writer, the conditions for an ‘innovated action’ to be acceptable as *maṣlahah mursalah* is that it should be, ‘within the limits of Islam,’ ‘deemed good for the Muslims/or prevents harm from them,’ ‘not being forbidden by the Qur’ān or *sunnah*,’ and finally, ‘there must be a genuine need for or overall benefit in it, not a personal preference.’

What the writer fails to understand is that the mainstream understanding of and criteria for ‘good *bid’ah*’ is basically the exact same as her *maṣlahah mursalah*. No traditional scholar justifies a ‘good innovation’ which is ‘harmful to Muslims,’ ‘outside the limits of Islam,’ or, ‘forbidden by the Qur’ān.’ In the case of the *mawlid*, it is only to be seen if it conforms to these criteria or not. This we will do in the following pages in detail.

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<sup>97</sup> Umm Muhammad, *The Observance of al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*, pp.18-19.

Vehemently censuring the usage of innovations done by the *ṣaḥābah* as evidence for the existence of ‘good *bid‘ah*,’ the Puritan writer says:

“No one has the right to compare such *improvements sanctioned by the sharī‘ah* to *bid‘ah*, which has no basis therein and was forbidden by the Prophet (saw). To those defending the concept of good *bid‘ah*, Imam ash-Shāṭibī replied, ‘since *bid‘ah* is not religion, it is not subject to the rulings which apply to religious acts, i.e. obligatory, desirable, permissible, disliked or prohibited. So classifying *bid‘ah* as good or bad is in itself an innovation with no precedent.’

One who speaks of good *bid‘ah* is in fact referring to one of two things: either legitimate rulings such as those previously mentioned *which are not bid‘ah at all*, or actual *bid‘ah*, which cannot possibly be good since the Prophet (saw) declared, ‘Every *bid‘ah* is misguidance.’ ”<sup>98</sup> (emphasis mine)

The writer fails to convincingly show us any essential difference between the *religious* innovations of the *ṣaḥābah* – conveniently termed as ‘legitimate rulings/improvements sanctioned by the *sharī‘ah*’ – and ‘actual *bid‘ah*’?!

The claim that the innovations of the *ṣaḥābah* were ‘sanctioned by the *sharī‘ah*’ lacks substantiation, and if anything, is an acknowledgment by the Puritan writer that practices originating after the demise of the Prophet can indeed be considered as ‘sanctioned by the *sharī‘ah*;’ a bold claim by a Puritan propagandist!

On the other hand, the Puritan argument is actually an implicit, yet obvious, assertion that the Prophet’s declarations against *bid‘ah* were *not* addressed to the *ṣaḥābah*, but were actually meant for later generations of Muslims. Apparently, the *ṣaḥābah* had full liberty to indulge in innovation!

However, both the jurists of Islam and common sense concur that the *ṣaḥābah* were the first and foremost addressees of the Prophet’s declarations. Nowhere in the *ḥadīth* on *bid‘ah*, nor in the works of early scholars, do we find the claim that the *ṣaḥābah* or some of them such as the first four caliphs, were given a free license to ‘innovate’ in the religion, to the exclusion of all others.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p.18.

Indeed, the *ṣaḥābah* themselves and the generations that immediately followed them do not seem to have understood it as such.

The understanding of the early as well as later scholars of Islam was actually the same, namely that the criteria in determining what is a ‘contemptible *bid‘ah*’ – the one termed by the Prophet as ‘misguidance’ – were the universal and all-encompassing principles of the *sharī‘ah*. Whatever conformed to them was good and acceptable, even if it was an innovation in the chronological sense, and whatever did not comply with them was the ‘misguidance’ condemned by the Prophet. Any other understanding would mean that not only the *ṣaḥābah*, but even the Prophet himself supported *bid‘ah*!

The many *ḥadīth* I have cited also disprove the Puritan claim that ‘good innovations’ can only be accepted in ‘worldly matters’ and not in ‘religious matters. If this was the case, then it should mean that modern day *Salaḥī* Muslims must travel to Makkah on camels and fight their enemies with swords as both the *Ḥajj* and *Jihād* are religious matters. However, even the most radical of Puritans do not espouse that.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It is unanimously accepted that *sunnah*, which primarily implies ‘the way of the Prophet’ is the opposite of *bid‘ah*. Both, the mainstream and the Puritan schools of thought agree that the *sunnah* is the second most important source of the *sharī‘ah*, and anything that contradicts it is to be rejected.

In the case of innovation, we find that the ‘*sunnah* of the Prophet,’ as deduced from his actions and his words, was to *accept* – and not *reject* – innovations if they were of benefit to Islam and did not contradict its principles.

From this point of departure, we observe that many of the *ṣaḥābah* performed various acts of worship through their own personal reasoning (*ijtihād*), and the *sunnah* of the Prophet in these cases was to *allow* those acts if they conformed with the *sharī‘ah*.

This then, would be the *sunnah* of the Prophet regarding innovation. The *ṣaḥābah* followed this *sunnah*, and it is on the basis of it that traditional Islamic scholars established the rule that any new/innovated matter must be judged according to the principles and primary texts of the *sharī‘ah*.

Whatever is attested to by it as being good would be acknowledged as good, and whatever is attested to by it as being a contravention and bad, would be rejected as a blameworthy innovation.

The former was termed by most scholars as a *bid'ah ḥasanah* (good innovation) in view of it lexically being termed an innovation. Others however, termed it as *sunnah ḥasanah* (good practice) following the *ḥadīth* of the 'good innovation,' and others yet as *maṣlahah mursalah* (matter of public benefit).

In fact, the writer contends that as long as the primary texts of the *sharī'ah* attest to it's being acceptable, it should not be called a *bid'ah* at all, rather an inferable *sunnah*. A good example of this inferable *sunnah* would be the various disciplines of the *sharī'ah* that are studied today, with all their details and terminology. All of these were unknown to the first generation of Muslims, yet when they came into being, they were not rejected as *bid'ah*.

For example, books of detailed exegesis of the Qur'ān were not known to the first generations of Islam, nor was the term *tafsīr* current among them, yet when *tafsīr* literature came into being, it was not rejected as a *bid'ah* because it served an end endorsed by the *sharī'ah*, i.e. preserving an essential aspect of the revelation, the understanding of the Qur'ān.

The same is true of most other branches of Islamic sciences, such as *'ilm al-jarḥ wa al-t'adīl* or "the science of weighing positive and negative factors for evaluating the reliability of *ḥadīth* narrators," or *'ilm al-kalām*, "the science of the tenets of Islamic creed," and other disciplines of the *sharī'ah*.

*Bid'ah* for the early Muslims did not pertain to the means, as much as it did to the ends; and in this case, those ends whose validity was questionable from an Islamic point of view. Where the end was justified, the means to it was given the same ruling, as the 'father' of the jurists of Islam, Imam al-Shāfi'ī (d.204) is reported to have said:

"Anything which has a support (*mustanad*) from the *sharī'ah* is not a *bid'ah*, even if the early Muslims did not do it."<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Al-Bayhaqī, *Manāqib al-Shāfi'ī*, Vol.1, p.469.

For example, the blessed Prophet never prayed in a mosque built of concrete, with glass windows, carpeted floors, calligraphy carvings, high pulpits, minarets, domes and so on; yet these are unanimously not considered *bid'ah*, because believers have been commanded to come together in mosques to perform the prayer, and better buildings are a means to carry out this command more comfortably and conducive.

Although, strictly speaking, these innovations are not necessities, and the Prophet willingly shunned some of them (such as the decoration of mosques), yet Muslims of all persuasions have accepted them as part and parcel of Islamic culture.

We may conclude by stating that as it has been established that the *sunnah* of the Prophet was to *accept* 'good innovations,' then the contemporary Puritan/Salafi approach of rejecting them, would amount to going against the *sunnah*, and it is unanimously agreed that any action or 'understanding of the faith' that goes against the *sunnah* is the *bid'ah* of misguidance that the Prophet was condemning, thus the contemporary Puritan of understanding of *bid'ah*, is itself a contemptible *bid'ah*.

## **PART TWO: GENEALOGY OF THE MAWLID**

### **Origins of Formal Mawlid**

*Mawlid* celebrations as we know them today have developed over many centuries, and it is difficult to ascertain exactly when and where the first *mawlid* celebrations took place. Various claims have been made but none decisive.

However, according to the historical records available to us, the ‘first’ official *mawlid* celebration was held by the Shi‘ite Fatimid rulers of Egypt, who reigned there between the years 357 and 567. Fatimid caliph, al-Mu‘izz-li-Dīn-illāh is recorded to have started the celebrations in Cairo in the year 362. Historian Ibn-Kathīr (d.774) mentions that the Fatimids innovated many celebrations, among which were the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, as well as the birthdays of ‘Alī, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, Fāṭimah and the ruling sovereign.<sup>100</sup> The historian al-Maqrīzī also mentions it.<sup>101</sup>

In the year 488, all of these celebrations were stopped upon an order from Caliph Al-Musta‘li-billah (d.495), due to the influence of his commander-in-chief Badr-al-Dīn al-Jamali, a powerful man who conformed to the Sunni way. However, the prohibition did not last long, and al-Musta‘lī’s son, Caliph al-Āmir-bi-Aḥkām-illāh recommenced them in 495, after which they continued unabated till our times.<sup>102</sup>

The staunch Sunni Ayyubids, who took over Egypt after the hated Fatimids, also did not stop the *mawlid*, but rather patronised it; despite the fact that they discontinued many other Fatimid practices in their mission to abolish the Shi‘ite legacy of the latter. It seems that by that time, mainstream Sunni scholarship had accepted the *mawlid* as a ‘good *bid‘ah*,’ in spite of its Shi‘ite Fatimid origin.

For example, the prominent Mālikī jurist of Alexandria under the Fatimids, Abū-Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Walīd al-Turtūshī (d.520) authored a comprehensive book on the innovations of his time entitled *Kitāb al-Ḥawādith wa al-Bida‘*, one of the first works of its type and which greatly influenced the style and structure of later works on the subject of innovation.

<sup>100</sup> Ibn-Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, Vol.11, p.172.

<sup>101</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā‘iz wa al-I‘tibār*, Vol.1, p.490.

<sup>102</sup> Ibn-al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī-t-Tārikh*, Vol.8, p.302.

In this book, al-Turtūshī took a very strict and rather extreme approach in his listing of religious innovations under the Fatimids. He lists, among other things:

- Reciting the Qur’ān with melody
- Numbering the *sūrahs* and punctuating the Qur’ān
- Placing collection-boxes in the mosques
- Eating and drinking in the mosques
- Selling goods in the mosques
- The *alfiyyah* prayer of mid-*Sha’bān*, and the *raghā’ib* prayer of *Rajab*
- Not working on Fridays
- Raising the hands and the voice during supplications
- Wearing a turban without passing it under the chin
- Dragging one’s clothes behind oneself on the ground
- Mixing of the sexes in the mosque on the nights of *Ramaḍān* for *tarāwīḥ*
- Renting the services of a person to perform the pilgrimage by proxy, etc.<sup>103</sup>

Al-Turtūshī considered the above-mentioned matters as contemptible innovations although many of them have basis from the *sunnah* and the practice of the *ṣaḥābah*, and are differed upon issues among the Sunni schools of thought, with many not considering them as innovations at all. Yet, due to his anti-Fatimid stance, he defends the *tarāwīḥ* prayer as not being an innovation, because the Shi’ite Fatimids had considered it as such.

Nevertheless, despite this obvious anti-Fatimid bias and strict approach towards *bid’ah*, al-Turtūshī never mentions or condemns the *mawlid*. There is no doubt that he must have witnessed it since it was a regular public celebration in Egypt during his time, and it involved more people than many of the other innovations he does mention!

If he did indeed consider it to be an innovation, then this would be a glaring omission on his part, particularly in view of the fact that he was especially intent on censoring the innovations that he deemed were connected to the Fatimid regime.

Al-Turtūshī’s non-inclusion of the *mawlid* in his long list of innovations is a clear indication that despite his opposition to the Fatimids and their innovations, he, like most other Sunni scholars, did not consider the *mawlid* celebration to be a blameworthy innovation, even if it was started by the hated Fatimids.

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<sup>103</sup> Al-Turtūshī, *Kitāb al-Ḥawādith wa al-Bida’*.

Another major Egyptian scholar of *ḥadīth* from around the same period, *al-ḥāfiz* Abū-Shāmah (d.665), writes in his work that was also authored *against* innovations:

“And among the best of that which was innovated in our times is what was done in the city of Irbil every year at the occasion of the Prophet’s birth, such as the distribution of charity and display of beauty and happiness. For besides being a form of kindness to the poor, it also expresses love and honor for the Prophet, may Allah bless him and give him peace, and (its shows) veneration for him in the heart of the doer, and (his expression) of gratefulness to Allah for His favor (on us) in creating His Prophet whom He sent as a mercy to the worlds.”<sup>104</sup>

Here, Abū-Shāmah was referring to the 7<sup>th</sup> century Iraq based Sunni ruler Abū-Sa‘id al-Kawkabri, brother-in-law of the great Sultan Saladin. Kawkabri is accredited with popularizing the *mawlid* among the Sunni mainstream and used to celebrate the *mawlid* in his capital city of Irbil (Kurdistan) in a very grand manner.

The historian Ibn-Khallikān (d.682), a native of Irbil, described it as thus:

“The pomp with which he [Kawkabri] celebrated the birthday of the Prophet surpassed all description.”<sup>105</sup>

Surprisingly, the famous historian al-Dhahabī (d.748), a student of Ibn-Taymiyyah, the avowed enemy of innovations, writes of al-Kawkabri in glowing terms and calls him a ‘follower of the *sunnah*’; thus indicating that the scholars of the time did not consider the *mawlid* to be an ‘evil innovation,’ for it is doubtful that an ‘innovator’ would be called a ‘follower of the *sunnah*.’ Al-Dhahabī wrote:

“He (al-Kawkabri) loved charity...*He would forbid any reprehensible matter to enter into his country*...Words are too poor to describe his celebration of the noble *mawlid al-nabawi*. People used to come all the way from Iraq and Algeria to attend it... he was a good and humble man, a follower of the *sunnah*, who loved the scholars of *fiqh* and *ḥadīth*...he was killed in battle.”<sup>106</sup> (emphasis mine)

<sup>104</sup> Abu-Shāmah, *Al-Bā‘ith ‘Ala Inkār al-Bida’ wa al-Ḥawādith*, p.13.

<sup>105</sup> Ibn-Khallikān, *Biographical Dictionary* (trns by De Slane), Vol.2, p.539.

<sup>106</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’*, Vol.22, p.336.

Ibn-Kathīr, who also had Puritan inclinations, wrote about Kawkabri:

“ ...[T]he triumphant king Abū Sa‘īd al-Kawkabrī, one of the generous men, great leaders, and noble kings. He left good impressions and he used to celebrate the honorable *mawlid* in the month of *Rabī‘ al-Awwal* and it used to be a huge celebration. Besides this, he was a man of sound judgment, brave, intelligent, a scholar and a just ruler, may Allah have mercy on him and enhance his abode...and he used to spend three-hundred thousand *dinars* on the *mawlid*...he died in the year 630 while he was besieging the French in the city of Acre, after a glorious and blameless life.”<sup>107</sup>

A contemporary Egyptian Mufti describes the scenario as thus:

“In the seventh Islamic century people became more involved in worldly affairs, and the living experience of the *sharī‘ah* was in decline. As a result, scholars took the opportunity to remind people of that great event in the history of humanity. In this commemoration, Muslims revive the memory of the Prophet’s achievements.”<sup>108</sup>

In Iberia and the North African lands of Islam, the *mawlid* was officially introduced by the Marinid sovereign of Morocco, Abū-Yusuf Yaq‘ūb in the year 691 and immediately gained immense popularity.<sup>109</sup>

7<sup>th</sup> century historian Ibn-Khaldūn mentions how poems were recited on the occasion.<sup>110</sup> Andalusian historian al-Maqqarī mentions that verses from the Qur’ān would be recited and animal sacrifices used to be made.<sup>111</sup>

The practice was further popularized by the influential Sufi orders, who with their emphasis on the veneration of the Prophet, gave it great importance and made it the primary event in their spiritual calendar. For example, Sidi Aḥmad al-Tijānī, the patron saint of Fez and founder of the powerful Tijaniyyah Sufi order which claimed millions of followers all over northern and sub-Saharan Africa, ordered all his followers to celebrate on the night of the *mawlid* with singing the praises of the Prophet.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Ibn-Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, Vol.13, p.136.

<sup>108</sup> Al-Darsh (Shaykh Mutawalli), *Fatwā on Mawlid*, p.3.

<sup>109</sup> Al-Salawī, *Al-Istiḡā‘ fi Akhbār al-Maghrib*, Vol.3, p.290

<sup>110</sup> Ibn-Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, pp. 864, 881 and 885.

<sup>111</sup> Al-Maqqarī, *Azhār al-Riyād*, Vol.1, p.245.

<sup>112</sup> Sukayrij, *Kashf al-Hijāb*, p.54.

The practice also gained the patronization of most Muslim ruling dynasties, such as the Ottomans Caliphs, the Alawites in the Maghreb, the Mughals in the East, as well as the Sharifs of the Hijaz.

In due course, the *mawlid* gained widespread acceptance among the scholars and the masses of nearly all Muslim lands, regardless of their theological, juristic and spiritual persuasions, and became a firmly rooted part of traditional Islamic culture.

The renowned *ḥadīth* master al-Shakhāwī wrote in the 9<sup>th</sup> century that:

“The practice of *al-mawlid al-nabawi* has not been related from any of the pious forebears from the first three centuries; rather it was innovated after that. After which, the people of Islam in all the lands and in all the great cities, have continued to celebrate in the month of the Prophet’s birth by preparing great and glamorous feasts, and they distribute charity in it’s nights, express happiness, increase their devotions and give special attention to reading the story of the prophetic birth, and they obtain immense blessings by it.”<sup>113</sup>

The *mawlid* also became a major event in the holy city of Makkah, the spiritual centre of the Muslim world. 7<sup>th</sup> Century historians Abū-al-’Abbās al-Azafā and his son Abū-al-Qāsim al-Azafī, write about the *mawlid* celebrations Makkah:

“Pious pilgrims and prominent travelers testified that on the day of the *mawlid* in Makkah, no activities are undertaken, and nothing is sold or bought, except by the people who are busy visiting the Prophet’s noble birthplace and rushing to it. On this day, the Ka‘bah is opened and visited.”<sup>114</sup>

Famous 8<sup>th</sup> century Muslim traveler Ibn-Battutah<sup>115</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century Makkan historians, al-Nahrawālī<sup>116</sup> and Ibn-Zahīrah,<sup>117</sup> also mention the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday in Makkah during the month of *Rabī’ al-Awwal*, with special ceremonies at the original house of his birth.

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<sup>113</sup> Al-Ṣāliḥī, *Subul al-Ḥudā wa al-Rashād*, Vol.1, p.439.

<sup>114</sup> Al-Azafī, *Al-Durr al-Munazzam*, p.196.

<sup>115</sup> Ibn-Baṭṭūṭah, *Al-Riḥlah*, Vol.1, p.309/347.

<sup>116</sup> Al-Nahrawālī, *Al-I’lām bi-A’lām Bayt Allāh al-Ḥarām*, p.205.

<sup>117</sup> Ibn-Zahīrah, *Al-Jāmi’ al-Latīf*, p.326.

From the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards, we also witness the emergence of a whole genre of works, in poetry and prose, dedicated solely to the birth of the Prophet and the events related to it. Prominent classical scholars who authored such works on the *mawlid* include, *al-ḥāfiz* Ibn-al-Jawzī (d.597), Ibn-Daḥyah (d.633), *al-ḥāfiz* Ibn-al-Jazarī (d.660), Ibn-al-Qayyim (d.751), *al-ḥāfiz* Ibn-Kathīr (d.774), *al-ḥāfiz* al-Iraqī (d.808), *al-ḥāfiz* Ibn-Nāsir-al-Dīn al-Dimashqī (d.842), *al-ḥāfiz* al-Sakhāwī (d.902), Ibn-Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d.974), *al-ḥāfiz* Ibn-al-Dayba‘ (d.944), Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī (d.1014) and others.

Some of these works, especially the poetic ones, began to be recited in *mawlid* gatherings with melodious tunes, and gradually, their recitation became a standard practice. The reciters would usually recite the lineage of the Prophet first, then the story of his pregnancy and then mention the happenings on the night of his birth, then the actual birth.

These *mawlid* poems of which there are a great many in most Islamic languages, attained such popularity – especially as being a source of ‘prophetic blessings’ – that they came to be recited on all important occasions such as birthdays, death anniversaries, important political events, occurrence of a calamity...etc.

Another practice that gained widespread popularity in *mawlid* gatherings was the act of standing up in respect (*qiyām*) and reciting blessings upon the Prophet, at the mention of his birth. It is not known when exactly this popular practice started.

Some ascribe it to an incident of the influential Shāfi‘ī scholar, Taqī-al-Dīn al-Subkī, who was known as *Shaykh-al-Islām*. His son, Tāj-al-Dīn al-Subkī mentions about him that:

“Once he attended a recital of the Qur’ān at the Umayyad Mosque, and sat in the niche of the *ṣaḥābah*, with the judges and eminent people of the region before him. Then when the reciter recited (famous poet) al-Sarsari’s eulogy of the Prophet ...and reached the line where he says ‘*wa an yanhaḍ al-ashrāf ‘inda samā’ihī*’ (and that the noble people stand up when they hear his mention), emotion overcame the *Shaykh al-Imam* (al-Subki) and he stood up in that state. The people felt that they also had to stand and they also stood, and great spiritual intimacy was experienced.”<sup>118</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyyah al-Kubrā*, Vol.10, p.208.

The famous Mālikīte jurist of the Azhar, Shaykh ‘Illīsh (d.1299) asserted that this *qiyām* was “a *bid‘ah mustahabbah* (recommended innovation) because of it being an expression of happiness, joy and respect.”<sup>119</sup>

In recent times, the *mawlid-al-nabawi* remains a major festival and a public holiday throughout the Muslim world, though it has lost some of its traditional flair in some societies due to Puritan influences, and is totally outlawed in Puritan Saudi Arabia.

A common format for a *mawlid* (also known as *milad/mawlud/mawliidi/mevled* in different countries) gathering in our times is as follows:

In the beginning, verses from the holy Qur’ān are recited. After that, the *munshidūn* (singers) sing poems in praise of the Prophet and his birth, usually known as *mada’ih/na’ts/ilahis*. Sometimes, the whole gathering sings with them and sometimes the singer recites alone while the listeners compliment him with various pious phrases. Then, if a scholar is present, he is asked to give a speech for the occasion. The most important element of the ceremony however, is the recitation of the *mawlid* i.e. the story of the Prophet’s birth, usually in poetic verses.

When the reciter mentions that, “then the Prophet was born,” the whole gathering stands up in respect and chants greetings and salutations to the Prophet. Usually, in small gatherings, the host and his servants will put scent on everyone and burn incense. After everyone sits down, a final prayer is made and food is served, after which the crowd disperses. The women – when allowed to attend – are usually seated separate from the men or more commonly, have their own private *mawlids*.

The specifics of the proceedings of a *mawlid* gathering may differ in different Muslim cultures but the basic components remain the same. Such gatherings are normally held throughout the year but the number and attention increases in the month of *Rabī‘ al-Awwal* and especially on the 12<sup>th</sup> night. The number of people attending can vary from forty to forty thousand also. The writer himself has attended such big *mawlid* gatherings. In some countries like Senegal and Pakistan, where Sufi influences are strong, the major *mawlid* gatherings are reputed to attract nearly a million people.

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<sup>119</sup> ‘Illīsh, *Al-Qawl al-Munjī ‘Alā Mawlid al-Barzanjī*, p.10.

## Earlier Roots of the *Mawlid*

Although official *mawlid* celebrations in the month of *Rabī' al-Awwal* only became known from the fourth century onwards, there is historical evidence that shows that the house in which the Prophet was born was a venerated site in Makkah from as early as the second century.

Early Makkan historian, al-Azraqī (d.223) mentions the house of the *mawlid* as among the blessed places in Makkah “where it is desirable to pray.” He also mentions that the house was among the most well-known sites amongst the people of Makkah and had been turned into a mosque by the pious mother of the Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd. He also reports that Mu‘āwiyah, the Umayyad Caliph and Companion of the Prophet, had turned the house in which the Prophet used to live and in which his children were born, into a mosque, to honor it.<sup>120</sup>

Early Qur’ānic scholar al-Naqqāsh (d.351) is quoted as mentioning the birthplace of the Prophet as a place where prayers are answered by noon on Mondays (the birthday of the Prophet).<sup>121</sup>

6<sup>th</sup> Century traveler Ibn-Jubayr (d.614) mentioned the public commemoration of the *mawlid* at the above mentioned house in Makkah. He writes:

“This blessed place is opened and all men enter it to derive blessing from it on every Monday of the month of *Rabī' al-Awwal*; for on that day and in that month was born the Prophet.”<sup>122</sup>

The emphasis on Monday as the day of the Prophet’s birth in these early accounts is noteworthy as the Shi’ites consider Friday to be his birthday. This shows a distinct Sunni veneration of the *mawlid* apart from the Shi’ites.

It must also be pointed out that the *event* of the Prophet’s birth itself was also given considerable importance among Islamic scholars from the earliest times.

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<sup>120</sup> Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah*, Vol.2, pp.198-199.

<sup>121</sup> Al-Fāsī *Shifā' al-Gharām fi Akbār Balad Allāh al-Haram*, Vol.1, p.199.

<sup>122</sup> Ibn-Jubayr, *Al-Riḥal*, pp. 114-115.

All the early works on the biography of the Prophet dedicate special chapters to the details of his birth and mention the miraculous happenings that are reported to have taken place on that night. These ‘*mawlid* narrations’ are reported from the *ṣahābah* and some, from the Prophet himself.

Ibn-Sa‘d (d.230), one of the earliest biographers of the Prophet, documents many such extraordinary happenings in his “Account of the Birth of the Apostle of Allah” in his celebrated history work, *al-Ṭabaqāt*. We cite a few examples (It must be noted that Ibn-Sa‘d has generally been considered a trustworthy narrator):

– (After mentioning six chains) Their narrations consolidated are: Verily Āminah bint Wahb (the mother of the Prophet) said:

‘I became pregnant with him – meaning the Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace – but I felt no discomfort till I delivered him. However, when he was separated from me; there emitted with him a light which brightened everything between the East and the West. Then he fell on the earth resting on his hands and took a handful of earth and raised his head to the heaven, and there emitted with him a light.’

– ‘Amr bin ‘Āsim al-Kilābī informed us: Hammām ibn Yaḥyā informed us on the authority Is’hāq ibn ‘Abd-Allāh: Verily the mother of the Prophet said:

‘When I delivered him, there emitted a light from my womb which illuminated the palaces of Syria; I delivered him clean as a lamb without impurities.’

– Mu‘ādh ibn Mu‘ādh al-‘Anbārī informed us; he said: Ibn-‘Awn related to us on the authority of Ibn al-Qibtiyyah relating to the birth of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, he said: his (i.e. the Prophet’s) mother said:

‘I noticed as if a meteor came out of me with which the earth was lighted.’

– ‘Abd-al-Wahhāb ibn ‘Aṭā al-‘Ijlī informed us on the authority of Thawr bin Yazīd, he on the authority of Abū-al-Ajḡā’, he on the authority of the Prophet, who said:

‘When my mother delivered me, she saw a glow of light through which she saw the palaces of Syria.’

– Al-Haytham Ibn Khārijah informed us: Yaḥyā bin Ḥamzah informed us, on the authority of al-Awzā‘ī, he on the authority of Ḥassān bin ‘Aṭiyyah:

‘When the Prophet was born, he fell on his palms and knees, gazing at the sky.’

– Yūnus ibn ‘Aṭā al-Makkī informed us: Al-Ḥākim ibn Abān al-‘Adanī informed us: ‘Ikrimah informed us on the authority of Ibn-’Abbās, he on the authority of his father, al-’Abbās bin ‘Abd-al-Muṭṭalib (the uncle of the Prophet); he said:

‘The Prophet was born circumcised and with his naval chord cut.’

– Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Aslamī informed us; he said: I have been informed that ‘Abd-al-Muṭṭalib (the grandfather of the Prophet) recited on that day (of the birth of the Prophet):

‘All praise be to Allah Who bestowed upon me this boy,

Pure from all impurities

In his cradle, he is the leader of all boys,

I entrust him to the care of Allah, the Lord of the Pillars (of the Ka‘bah)’<sup>123</sup>

The famous 3<sup>rd</sup> century historian, Ibn-Jarīr al-Ṭabarī narrates the following happenings on the night of the *mawlid*, in a special chapter in his *History of the World* on “*Zikr Mawlid Rasūl-Allāh*” (Mentioning the Birth of the Messenger of Allah):

– That when his mother Āminah became pregnant with him, she was approached by an unknown creature and told that: Surely you are pregnant with the master of this nation, so when you give birth to him, say, ‘I put him in the refuge of the One, from the jealousy of every jealous one,’ and name him Muḥammad.

<sup>123</sup> Ibn-S‘ad, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, Vol.1, pp. 110-113.

Al-Ṭabarī narrates this from the early biographer of the Prophet, Ibn-Is'ḥāq, and quotes him as saying, "People would talk about this."

– That his mother had a very easy and painless pregnancy and saw an immense light coming out of her, so that she could actually see the palaces of Syria, and that when he was born, his hands were on the earth and his head was raised to the heavens.

– 'Uthmān bin Abī-al-'Ās narrated from his mother that she 'attended the birth of the Prophet, and that she saw light everywhere and that the stars were appearing so close that she thought they will fall on her.'

– Makhzūm bin Hānī narrated from his hundred and fifty year's old father that 'When it was the night in which the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, was born, the court of Khosroe (emperor of Persia) was shaken, and fourteen of its pillars fell, and the (sacred) Fire of Persia was extinguished and it had not been extinguished for a thousand years, and the river of Sāwā flooded.'

– That the Prophet, while speaking about his birth to a gathering of the *ṣaḥābah*, mentioned that when his mother was pregnant with him, she saw in a dream that she had a light inside her womb which illuminated the East and the West. He then continued to narrate the story of his birth and childhood.

– That a group of the *ṣaḥābah* asked the Prophet to 'tell them about himself,' to which he replied: 'Yes, I am the prayer of my father Abraham, and the prediction of Jesus; my mother when she was pregnant with me, saw a light come out of her which illuminated for her the palaces of Busra in Syria; and I was fostered among the Banī-Sa'd.'<sup>124</sup>

The cautious historian Ibn-Kathīr (d.774), a student of the avowed enemy of 'innovations,' Ibn-Taymiyyah, also mentions many of these narrations and more in the "Bāb Mawlid Rasūl-Allāh" (Chapter on the birth of the Messenger of Allah) in his biography of the Prophet, particularly in a sub-chapter entitled "*The miracles that took place on the night of his birth.*"

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<sup>124</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Tarīkh al-Ṭabarī*, Vol.1, pp.570-580.

He also cites various narrations from early Muslims regarding the correct day, date, and time of the Prophet's birth, not coming to any conclusion except affirming the claim that he was born in the 'Year of the Elephant.'<sup>125</sup>

Regardless of whether the above-mentioned narrations are historically factual or not, they do however, clearly reflect the fact that the night of the *mawlid* had gained somewhat of a mysterious and miraculous status among early Muslims. Undoubtedly this air of holiness around the night contributed to its acceptance as a night of commemoration and celebration among later Muslims.

As these narrations were found in most of the generally accepted books of *ḥadīth* and *sirah* which were supposed to be read and studied by Muslims, the month of the *mawlid* became the most appropriate and perfect occasion for studying these narrations.

The otherwise Puritanical Ibn-Kathīr, echoes the feeling of most medieval Muslims when he writes in his *Dhikr Mawlid Rasūl-Allāh wa Ridā'atihi*, a work exclusively dedicated to the *mawlid*:

“The Night of the Prophet's birth – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – is a magnificent, noble, blessed and holy night, a night of bliss for the Believers, pure, radiant with lights and of immeasurable price.”<sup>126</sup>

Ibn-Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī mentions that Ibn-Kathīr wrote this book during the last days of his life and that it “was spread far and wide.”<sup>127</sup>

### **The Mawlid and Questions of Legitimacy**

As the phenomena of *mawlid* celebrations gained more and more popularity, the question of its legitimacy also became more and more pertinent. The celebration was technically speaking a *bid'ah*, an innovation; but one related to the sensitive issue of reverence for the Prophet. Public opinion, conditioned as it was by an emotional outpouring of love for the Prophet, was in support of the celebrations. The scholars also could only encourage the love and veneration for him.

<sup>125</sup> Ibn-Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, Vol.1, pp. 242-253.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. *Dhikr Mawlid Rasūl-Allāh wa Ridā'atihi*, p.2.

<sup>127</sup> Al-'Asqalānī, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, Vol.1, p.213.

Thus, it seemed as a perfect case of *bid'ah ḥasanah*, a good innovation. Consequently, most classical scholars termed the *mawlid* as such, and brought forward many justifications for their claim from the primary sources of the *sharī'ah*. The famous scholar of *ḥadīth* Abū-Shāmah (d.665) called it “among the best of that which was innovated in our times.”<sup>128</sup>

The renowned Mālikī scholar, Ibn-‘Abbād al-Rundī of Spain (d.792) – when asked about what happens during *mawlid* celebrations of lighting candles and other things as an expression of happiness for the Prophet’s birth – answered:

“It appears that it (i.e. the *mawlid*) is a festival from the festivals of the Muslims, and a season from their (festive) seasons. Thus, all that is entailed in expressing happiness for that blessed birth... is a permissible matter which cannot be censured.”<sup>129</sup>

Other major classical scholars who asserted the permissibility of the *mawlid* include Ibn-al-Jawzī of Iraq (d.597), Ibn-Daḥyah of Morocco (d.663), Ibn-Kathīr of Syria (d.774), Taqī-al-Dīn al-Subkī (d.756), Ibn-Abbad al-Rundī of Spain (d.792), Zayn-al-Dīn al-Irāqī (d.806), Majd-al-Dīn al-Fayrūz’ābādī (d.817), al-Shams Ibn-al-Jazarī (d.833), Nāsir-al-Dīn al-Dimashqī (d.842), al-Sakhāwī of Egypt (d.902), Ibn-al-Dayba‘ of Yemen (d.944), Ibn-Ḥajar al-Haytamī of Makkah (d.974), Ibn-Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d.795), ‘Alī al-Qārī (d.1014), al-Shawkanī of Yemen (d.1250), the *Shaykh-ul-Islām* of the Ottoman empire, Mullā Sulaymān al-Bursawī (d.800), Shah Walī-Allāh al-Dīhlawī of India (d.1176) and numerous others.<sup>130</sup>

However, the most prominent of the classical scholars who vindicated the celebration of the *mawlid* was the famous *hafiz* Jalāl-al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d.911), considered the *mujaddid* (renewer of Islamic sciences) of the ninth Islamic century.

Al-Suyūṭī wrote a detailed *fatwa* on the issue of the *mawlid*, called *Ḥusn al-Maqṣid fī Amal al-Mawlid* (The good objective in the practice of the *mawlid*). He arrived at the conclusion that the *mawlid* celebration was indeed an “innovation” but a praiseworthy one because of its having a basis from the *sunnah* and because of its merits. Al-Suyūṭī’s *fatwā* became the standard opinion for ensuing times. He writes:

<sup>128</sup> Abū-Shāmah, *Al-Bā‘ith ‘Alā Inkār al-Bida‘ wa al-Ḥawādith*, p.13.

<sup>129</sup> Al-Wansharīsī, *Al-M‘iyār al-Mughrib*, Vol.11, p.278.

<sup>130</sup> Check Haddad’s *Mawlid: Celebrating the Birth of the Holy Prophet*, pp.1-7, for detailed references.

“A question was posed concerning the practice of the *mawlid-al-nabi* in the month of *Rabī‘ al-Awwal*. What is its ruling according to the *sharī‘ah*? Is it praiseworthy or blameworthy? Will the one who practices it be rewarded?

The answer according to me, is that the basis of the *mawlid* which consists of the gathering of people and the recitation of some *Qur‘ān*, and the narration of that which has been recorded regarding the childhood of the Prophet and the extraordinary events at the time of his birth, which is then followed by something that is offered to eat and then the people leave, without adding anything; this is a praiseworthy innovation that affords the one who practices it reward, because it entails reverence for the status of the Prophet and the displaying of joy at his honorable birth.”<sup>131</sup> (emphasis mine)

He defended his position by quoting a similar *fatwa* by the celebrated *ḥadīth* master *al-ḥāfiz* Ibn-Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī. Al-Suyūṭī writes:

“The *Shaykh-al-Islām* and *ḥadīth* master of his age, Abū-al-Faḍl Aḥmad bin Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī was asked about the practice of *mawlid* and gave the following reply:

‘As for the origin of the practice of celebrating the *mawlid*, it is an innovation that has not been conveyed to us from any of the *salaf*; nevertheless, it includes praiseworthy features and blameworthy ones. Thus, if one includes in his celebration of the *mawlid* the good aspects only and avoids the bad ones, then it will be considered a good innovation.

And there appeared to me a basis for this [i.e. the *mawlid*] from an authentic source and that is what has been narrated in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* [Bukhārī and Muslim] that when the Prophet – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – came to Madinah, he found the Jews fasting on the tenth day of Muharram. When he enquired about this, they told him that it was the day in which Allah had saved Moses and drowned the Pharaoh, so we fast out of gratitude towards Allah. Then the Prophet – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – said: ‘We have more right over Moses than you [and also fasted].’

What can be derived from this is that gratitude can be shown to Allah for something that He has bestowed upon us, such as granting us a favor or taking away a calamity, on a particular day, and the remembrance of it can be repeated on that day every year.

<sup>131</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-Maqṣid fī ‘Amal al-Mawlid*, in his *Al-Ḥāwī li’l-Fatāwāi*, Vol.1, p.196.

Gratitude to Allah can be expressed through various forms of worship such as prostration, fasting, giving charity and recitation of the Qur’ān. And what favor is greater than the appearance of this Prophet, the prophet of mercy – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – on that day (of *mawlid*)?”<sup>132</sup>

Al-Suyūṭī also quotes further validations from other prominent scholars:

“Then I saw the Imam of the reciters (of the Qur’ān) *al-ḥāfiẓ* Shams-al-Dīn al-Jazarī say in his book entitled *’Urf al-Ta’rīf bi al-Mawlid al-Sharīf*:

‘Abū-Lahab was seen in a dream after his demise and was asked: What is your condition? He replied: I am in Hell, but every Monday my punishment is alleviated and I can suck a little bit of water from between my fingers – and he showed the amount with his two fingers – and that is because I set Thuwaybah [his slave girl] free when she gave me the good news of the birth of the Prophet – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – and also that she is breastfeeding him.<sup>133</sup>

So, if Abū-Lahab – an unbeliever in whose condemnation Qur’ānic verses were revealed – receives reward while he is in Hell because he showed some happiness on the night our Prophet – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – was born, so what will be the condition of a Muslim who worships Allah alone and expresses happiness for the birth of the Prophet – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – and shows his love for him in whichever way he can?!

I say by my life that his reward from the most generous Lord would definitely be to enter him in the eternal Paradise through His infinite bounty!

And *al-ḥāfiẓ* Shams-al-Dīn bin Nāsir-al-Dīn al-Dimashqī said in his book called *Mawrid al-Ṣādi fī Mawlid al-Hādī*:

‘It has been authentically reported that Abū-Lahab receives some alleviation of punishment on Mondays because of setting Thuwaybah free out of happiness for the birth of the Prophet.

<sup>132</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-Maqṣid fī ’Amal al-Mawlid*, in his *Al-Ḥāwī li’l-Fatāwā* Vol.1, p.196.

<sup>133</sup> The story is originally narrated by Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīh*: The Book of Marriage, the Chapter on the verse: “And your mothers who breastfed You.”

Then he (i.e. al-Dimashqī) said in poetry:

This is a disbeliever who was condemned by the Qur'ānic verse, 'May his hands  
perish in Hell forever'

Yet it is narrated that every Monday, his punishment is softened because of his  
happiness for the Prophet (i.e. his birth)

So what do you think about that person who was for all his life...  
Happy for the Prophet and died as a believer (in him)! ”

He then mentions that the famous Mālikī jurist, Abū-al-Tayyib al-Sabtī (d.695) would tell the school teachers to send the children home on the day of the *mawlid* saying that 'this is a day of happiness.'<sup>134</sup>

After quoting the opinions of these savants, al-Suyūfī also puts forth his own original reasoning for the permissibility of the *mawlid*:

“And there appeared to me a basis (for the *mawlid*) from another source (as well) and that is what al-Bayhaqī has narrated from Anas that the Prophet – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – performed the '*aqīqah* (a sacrifice done after childbirth) for himself after (receiving) prophethood, even though it was said that his grandfather 'Abd-al-Muṭṭalib performed the '*aqīqah* on behalf of him on the seventh day of his birth.

Now, since '*aqīqah* is not normally repeated; this action of the Prophet – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – is interpreted as being a means of showing gratitude towards Allah for sending him as a mercy unto the entire universe, and a legislation for his followers to do the same; in the same way as when he would send blessings (*ṣalawāt*) upon himself.

Thus, it is recommended for us to also show gratitude for the birth of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. This can be attained by the gathering of the brethren (in faith), the feeding of the poor and by other actions that draw us closer to Allah and express happiness.”<sup>135</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Al-Suyūfī, *Ḥusn al-Maqṣid fī 'Amal al-Mawlid*, in his *Al-Ḥāwī li'l-Fatāwā*. Vol.1, p.196.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

After stating the pro-*mawlid* opinions, al-Suyūṭī then also quotes in full, his fellow Egyptian Mālikī jurist Tāj-al-Dīn ‘Umar al-Lakhmī al-Fākihānī’s *fatwā* named *al-Mawrid fi al-Kalām ‘Alā al-Mawlid*, which is extremely critical of the *mawlid*.

Contemporary Puritans often cite al-Fākihānī’s *fatwā* as an example of early criticism of the *mawlid*, by a classical scholar. Al-Fākihānī argues that the *mawlid* is an unacceptable innovation because, according to his knowledge, it has no basis from the *sharī‘ah*, that it was not practiced by the *ṣaḥābah* nor by their successors thus making it a *bid‘ah*, that it was initiated by unscrupulous men, and that it usually includes many prohibited actions such as the usage of musical instruments like drums and flutes, free-mixing of men and women...etc.

Regarding al-Fakihani’s first claim, al-Suyūṭī answers that just because al-Fakihani is unaware of any basis for the *mawlid*, it does not necessarily mean that there is no basis for it. Al-Suyūṭī then mentions the above-mentioned proofs from the *sunnah* as valid analogical evidences from which the validity of the *mawlid* can be derived.

Regarding his second claim, al-Suyūṭī answers that not all *bid‘ahs* are to be rejected. He quotes al-Shāfi‘ī, al-Nawawī, Ibn-‘Abd-al-Salām and other major jurists to the effect that *bid‘ahs* are divided into acceptable and unacceptable ones.

Al-Suyūṭī also refutes the claim that the *mawlid* was introduced by unscrupulous men stating that the king who first popularized the *mawlid* celebration was a “just and learned king,” and that he was supported in it by “learned and pious scholars.”

Regarding the claim that *mawlid* celebrations often include forbidden activities, al-Suyūṭī states that their occurrence in the *mawlid* does make the *mawlid* itself forbidden.

For example, should they take place at the gathering for the Friday prayers, it would not mean that one rejects the Friday prayer itself, ignoring the valid basis for it. Indeed, many of these prohibited matters take place in the nights of *Ramaḍān* during the *tarāwīḥ* prayers, yet, the *tarāwīḥ* itself is not condemned, only the bad actions that may accompany it. Al-Suyūṭī argues that the same rule be applied to the *mawlid*.

Al-Fākihānī ends his *fatwā* by putting forward yet another argument against the *mawlid*, i.e. that the day and month of the Prophet's birth are the same as that of his death, thus there is enough reason for mourning on that date as there is for celebrating.

Al-Suyūfī promptly answers that the *sharī'ah* has prescribed a sacrifice after the birth of a child (*'aqīqah*), as an expression of gratitude and happiness for the new born baby; but did not prescribe any such sacrifice at death. The *sharī'ah* allows us to mourn for the dead for three days only. Thus, while there is a basis for perpetual thankfulness for God's gifts, there is no concept of perpetual mourning in Islam. Even excessive weeping and expressions of sadness are forbidden.

So, according to the principles of the *sharī'ah*, it would be reasonable to express happiness at the Prophet's birth – which “is the greatest benefaction which has ever befallen us,” but incorrect to perpetually mourn for his death.

On the issue of forbidden acts occurring within the *mawlid*, al-Suyūfī also quotes another famous Mālikī scholar, Abū-'Abd-Allāh ibn-al-Ḥājj (d.714) who, in his *magnus opus* on innovations, *al-Madkhal*, also criticizes the occurrence of forbidden activities in the *mawlid* but does not seem to give a conclusive judgment on the celebration itself.

While condemning the forbidden acts such as singing with musical instruments, Ibn-al-Hajj nevertheless recommends the increasing of worship and good actions in the month of *Rabī' al-Awwal* as an expression of gratitude to the Creator for “His blessing us with the birth of the Prophet in this month.”

However, he concludes his discussion by calling the celebration a *bid'ah*, as it was not practiced by the first generations of Islam, and “one should follow their example.”

This is both contradictory and strange. Contradictory since Ibn-al-Ḥājj himself in the beginning of his discussion of the *mawlid*, encourages the increase of good actions in the month of the Prophet's birth as an expression of appreciation. And it is strange because he himself provides us with an interesting explanation as to *why* the Prophet did not officially celebrate his *mawlid*. We quote him:

“The Prophet did not order the believers to do anything extra in this month, *out of his mercy and compassion* for the *umma* as he did not want to burden them; but pointed to the honor of this month by his saying about his fasting on Mondays: ‘That is the day I was born in.’”<sup>136</sup> (emphasis mine)

In fact, al-Suyūfī quotes an interesting passage from Ibn-al-Hājīj’s book in which he addresses the question as to why Monday and the month of *Rabīʿ al-Awwal* were chosen to be the day and month of the Prophet’s birth and why it did not occur in *Ramadan* or any other holy month. Ibn-al-Hajj states that:

“Firstly: It is reported in the *ḥadīth* that Allah – praised and exalted is Him – created vegetation on Monday. Therein lies a great sign, namely that the creation of food, fruit and the good things by which mankind survives and the souls are developed, took place on that day.

Secondly: The word *rabīʿ* (lit. the spring) has a good connotation in connection with its etymological derivation.

Thirdly: The *rabīʿ* (i.e. spring) is the most moderate and best of seasons, and in the same manner, the Prophet’s Law is in the most just and lenient of Laws.

Fourthly: God wanted to honor the time in which he (the Prophet) was born, through him. If he had been born at one of the aforementioned (holy) times, then one could have thought that he was venerated because of them.”<sup>137</sup>

Some contemporary Puritan writers have claimed that al-Suyūfī and other medieval scholars tried to vindicate the *mawlid*, “to please the public...and due to their fear of them and of the ruler.”<sup>138</sup>

Besides being an affront to the integrity and sincerity of major classical scholars such as al-Suyūfī and others, this claim is belied by the fact that the latter condemned many other *popular bid’ahs* in their works, without fearing any repercussions and reactions from the authorities or from the public. In fact, many of the scholars who supported the *mawlid* are known to have publicly rebuked and criticized their rulers.

<sup>136</sup> Ibn-al-Hājīj, *Al-Madkhal*, Vol. 2, pp. 2-3.

<sup>137</sup> Al-Suyūfī, *Ḥusn al-Maqṣid fī ‘Amal al-Mawlid*, in his *Al-Ḥāwī li’l-Fatāwā*, Vol. 1, p.197.

<sup>138</sup> Al-Jazā’irī, *Al-Inṣāf fīmā Qīla fī al-Mawlid min al-Ghuluww wa al-Ijhāf*, p.29.

Al-Suyūṭī in particular, condemns many widely popular practices in his brilliant work against innovations, *Al-Amr bi'l-Ittibā' wa al-Nahi an al-Ibtidā'* (The command to obey and the prohibition of innovating).

Yet, nowhere does he mention the *mawlid*, not even in the chapter dedicated to “innovative festivals and celebrations,” where he condemns quite a few popular practices, concluding by saying:

“And let not a man look (with admiration) at the Abundance of the ignorant ones, the learned ones and the heedless ones, who are engaged in the imitation of the disbelievers (in their festivals).”<sup>139</sup>

His approach in the book does not seem to be of one who is a crowd-pleaser. One of the chapters in his book is entitled, “Chapter on what the people consider to be an act of worship, and it is the opposite of that.”

One finds no reason why he would not mention the *mawlid* except for the fact that he was genuinely convinced of it's not being a blameworthy innovation. The same applies to most other classical authors who wrote against innovations, such as al-Turtushi, Abū-Shamah, Ahmad Zarruq and others.

Also among the early critics of the *mawlid* was the controversial jurist Ibn-Taymiyyah (d.728), considered the intellectual ancestor of Puritanism. The latter strongly rejected the concept of a ‘good innovation’ as well as the “over-veneration of the Prophet and saints.”

The *mawlid*, obviously, did not come to his liking. Thus, in a concise *fatwā*, he condemns the introduction of ‘new festivals in Islam’ such as that celebrated “during one of the nights of the month *Rabī' al-Awwal*, alleged to be the night of the Prophet’s birth.”<sup>140</sup>

He devotes a few pages to it and other “innovated festivals” in his famous *Iqtida* as well. Yet, despite his iconoclastic views – which cost him his liberty – he seems to have taken a somewhat sympathetic stance towards the *mawlid*. We see him writing:

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<sup>139</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Amr bi'l-Ittibā' wa al-Nahi an al-Ibtidā'*, p.72.

<sup>140</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Majmū' Fatāwā Ibn-Taymiyyah*, Vol.1, p.312.

“And also what some people innovate, either because of wanting to imitate the Christians in their celebration of the birth of Jesus, or out of love for the Prophet and out of reverence for him, and Allah may reward them for this love and effort, not on the fact that it is an innovation...Thus, honoring the *mawlid* and making it an occasion of celebration, some people may do that, and *they may get great reward for that, because of their good intention, and their honoring of the Prophet...* (for) as I mentioned to you, certain matters which may be disliked for a guided believer, would be considered good for some other people.”<sup>141</sup> (emphasis mine)

Despite being vehement defenders of Ibn-Taymiyyah and his views, hard-line Puritans have heavily criticized the above-mentioned statement of his. Ḥāmid al-Fiqqī, editor of Ibn-Taymiyyah’s *Iqtidā’* adds a two page footnote explaining how mistaken Ibn-Taymiyyah really is, exclaiming: “How can they possibly obtain a reward for this (i.e. *mawlid*)???”

To conclude, one can safely say that with the exception of a few strict jurists, most classical scholars of Islam have supported the *mawlid* celebration, either explicitly, or implicitly by not condemning it.

### **Analyzing the Puritan Stance**

The contemporary Salafi Puritan movement vehemently condemns the *mawlid* phenomena as a *bid’ah*, and ‘all *bid’ahs* are to be rejected.’ The Puritan stance towards the *mawlid* can be exemplified in the following anti-*mawlid* arguments taken from a booklet widely distributed by the Puritan movement:

“ 1) The observance of the Prophet’s birthday has no basis in the *sunnah* and therefore can only be classified as an innovation (*bid’ah*).

2) All innovation in religion were described by the Prophet as misguidance and declared rejected.

3) An act acceptable to Allah can only be one prescribed by Him and must be done correctly according to the Prophet’s *sunnah*.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā’ al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*, pp. 294-297.

4) Allah has given all necessary instruction to mankind through the Prophet and has not omitted anything from His religion.

5) Legitimate rulings by Islamic scholars have their roots in the general concept of public benefit taken from the Qur'ān and *sunnah*, and are intended as a means to what is already lawful.

6) *Bid'ah* is not derived from those sources and is considered an end in itself, being at minimum void of Allah's rewards if not a definite cause of spiritual harm."<sup>142</sup>

A careful reading of what I have written earlier in this work will clearly reveal that except for the fourth and the fifth ones, the rest of the above-mentioned points cannot be conclusively substantiated from the Qur'ān or the *sunnah* and are contrary to the jurisprudential understandings of the *ṣaḥābah* and traditional Islamic scholarship.

Firstly, the claim that the observance of *mawlid* has no basis at all from the *sunnah* is not true as scholars of repute such as Ibn-Ḥajar, al-Suyūṭī and others have pointed out and established basis for it from the *sunnah*, and the demonstration of such scholars cannot be simply dismissed. Intellectual honesty would require the Puritan movement to disclose these arguments and take them into account, yet this is not often the case.

Also, the claim that the Prophet condemned all innovation in religion as 'misguidance' is rejected by the many cases in which the Prophet openly *approved* of innovation in the religion, as we illustrated in detail. We also demonstrated how the immediate students of the Prophet, the *ṣaḥābah*, introduced various innovations in the religion. In both cases, the criteria for the acceptance of those innovated actions were their having a root basis in Islamic teachings as well as their benefit to the community.

Thus, the claim that, "An act acceptable to Allah can only be one prescribed by Him" is incorrect. If this were true, then all voluntary acts of worship would be null and void. The evidences we have produced show that any act that serves the purpose of 'serving Allah' and is not proscribed by the *sunnah*, is 'acceptable to Allah,' whether or not it was specifically prescribed in the scriptures or not.

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<sup>142</sup> Umm Muhammad, *The Observance of al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*, p.21.

It is the goal of the act, and not the act itself, that has to be prescribed and ‘desired by Allah.’ This is how traditional scholarship has understood it. Innovation is to be judged by its purpose and not by its form.

In the fifth point, the Puritan writer is forced to admit to this inevitable conclusion, but calls what would normally be known as ‘acceptable innovations,’ as “Legitimate rulings by Islamic Scholars.” Yet, words cannot hide the meanings. Contradictions such as this are abound in Puritan apologetics regarding *bid‘ah*.

Indeed, supporters of the *mawlid* have considered it to fall under “Legitimate rulings by Islamic Scholars.” They put forth the following evidences from the Qur’ān and *sunnah* as a convincing basis for commemorating the birthday of the Prophet:

1. Celebrating ‘Allah’s Mercy’ is commanded by the order of the Qur’ān:

“Say, In the grace of Allah and in His mercy, for that they should rejoice.”<sup>143</sup>

Celebrating the *mawlid* can be considered as a fulfillment of this command of God, as it an expression of happiness and joy for the coming of the Prophet, who is considered the greatest mercy and grace of Allah, as stated in the Qur’ānic verse:

“And We have not sent thee (O Muḥammad) except as a mercy for all creation.”<sup>144</sup>

2. The Qur’ān mentions in detail, the birth stories of the prophets Isaac, Moses, John and Jesus, as well as Mary’s. Thus, to give importance to the birth story of the Prophet Muḥammad would be a continuation of this Qur’ānic pattern in narrating the lives of the Prophets. Therefore, conceptually speaking, commemorating the *mawlid* cannot be termed an innovation, for it serves this valid purpose.

3. The Qur’ān States:

“And remind them of the days of Allah”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Holy Qur’ān, 10:58.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 21:107.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. 14:5.

Al-Nasā'ī reports that the Prophet said in explanation of this verse: "The days of Allah are Allah's Blessings and Signs."<sup>146</sup>

As the Prophet's birth was a great blessing and sign of Allah; to remember it could be considered as a fulfilment of Allah's commandment in this verse.

4. The Prophet himself used to honor the actual day of his birth (i.e. Monday) by fasting. When asked about this fasting on Mondays, he replied:

"On that day I was born."<sup>147</sup>

A prominent contemporary supporter of the *mawlid*, Shaykh Muḥammad ibn 'Alawī al-Mālikī, comments on this:

"This (fasting on Mondays) has the meaning of celebration. The manner of doing so is different but nevertheless, the thought is still there. (Thus, it makes no difference) Whether it is by fasting, by feeding people, by gathering for *dhikr* or sending *salawat* on the Prophet, or listening to (the description of) his noble qualities, may Allah bless him and grant him peace."<sup>148</sup>

5. The famous story of Abū-Lahab, the uncle of the Prophet, and his being rewarded by Allah for expressing happiness at the birth of the Prophet, despite being a disbeliever. The story follows that when Abū-Lahab's slave girl Thuwaybah informed him of the birth of the Prophet – the first-born of his late brother – he immediately freed her as an expression of happiness.

Many years later when Abū-Lahab died – as an enemy of the Prophet – his brother al-'Abbās ibn 'Abd-al-Muṭṭalib, who was a believer, saw him in a dream and enquired about his condition. Abū-Lahab replied:

"I have not encountered any good after I left you, except that I am given something to drink because of freeing Thuwaybah, and every Monday, my punishment is decreased because of that."

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<sup>146</sup> Al-'Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī*, Sūrat Ibrāhīm.

<sup>147</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Chapter on Fasting.

<sup>148</sup> Al-Mālikī, *Ḥawl al-Iḥtifāl bi-Zikrā al-Mawlid*, p.41.

The story is narrated by Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*,<sup>149</sup> and is quite explicit in its implication of great recompense from Allah for the one who celebrates the birth of the Prophet, even if it is a non-Muslim. It is regarded as the strongest basis for the *mawlid*.

6. It is also narrated that on the occasion of the Prophet's return from the battle of Tabūk, his uncle al-Abbas recited a poem extolling his birth, and was praised by him for it. In it he said:

*Wa anta lamma wulidta ashraqat il-arḍu*  
*Wa dā'at bi-nūrik al-'ufuqu*

And when you were born, the world was illuminated...  
and the horizons were enlightened by your radiance<sup>150</sup>

This may serve as a basis for commemorating his birth, as al-'Abbās commemorated it in his poem; for as we have mentioned from the traditional understandings of *bid'ah*, it is not the form of the action but the validity of its purpose which is considered the criteria for its being accepted or rejected.

7. The Prophet himself is known to have described his birth at many occasions, thus making it a *sunnah* to mention his birth. The day and month of his birth would obviously serve as the best occasions to revive this *sunnah*, thus there should be no harm in specifying them for the commemoration. The Prophet described his birth as thus:

“I am the supplication of my father Abraham, and the glad tidings of my brother Jesus. The night I was delivered, my mother saw a light that lit the castles of Damascus so that she could see them.”<sup>151</sup>

8. It is narrated that when the Prophet came to Madinah and saw the Jews fasting on the day of *‘Āshūrah (Yom Kippur)*, he enquired about it, and it was said to him:

“We fast because Allah saved our Prophet (Moses) and drowned our enemy (on that day). Thus we fast to thank Allah for this blessing.”

<sup>149</sup> The Book of Marriage, in the Chapter of the verse: “And your mothers who breastfed You”.

<sup>150</sup> Al-Suyūfī, *Husn al-Maqṣid*, p.5, in his *Al-Ḥāwī li'l-Fatāwā*, Vol.1, p.197.

<sup>151</sup> *Musnad Aḥmad*, Vol.4, p.184.

So the Prophet said: “We are nearer to Moses than you Jews.” Then he also fasted on that day and ordered that it should be a day of fasting for all Muslims.<sup>152</sup>

The implication of giving importance to the dates of great religious events and expressing gratitude on those days through worship is very obvious in the *ḥadīth*. Using this incident as a basis for commemorating the *mawlid*, Shaykh al-Mālikī writes:

“The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, used to consider and notice the connection of time to great religious events that have passed. When that time would come, it would be an occasion to remember that event and honor its day, for the sake of the event (and not the day itself), as the day is only the period in which that event took place. This principle of reviving the memory of events in their respective days was initiated by the Prophet himself, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.”<sup>153</sup>

9. It is narrated that while counting the virtues of Friday, the Prophet said:

“And in it Adam was created.”<sup>154</sup>

In this saying, the Prophet gives importance to the day in which the prophet Adam was created, and specifically mentions that event among the significances of the Friday, the most auspicious day in Islam. From this, it has been deduced that if the day of a prophet’s birth was of no importance in Islam, then he would not have mentioned it among the virtues of the Friday.

Proponents of the *mawlid* state that since the status of the final Prophet is higher than that of Adam, then the day of his birth must most obviously be significant as well.

10. Bukhārī narrates that when the first Caliph and senior-most Companion of the Prophet, Abū-Bakr al-Ṣiddīq was in his deathbed, he asked his daughter ‘Ā’ishah, “On which day did the Prophet pass away?” When she answered, “Monday,” he asked her, “What day is it today?” When she replied, “Monday,” he wished that he should pass away on the same day.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Chapter on Fasting.

<sup>153</sup> Al-Mālikī, *Ḥawl al-Iḥtifāl bi-Zikrā al-Mawlid*, p.42.

<sup>154</sup> *Al-Muwaṭṭā’*, Vol, 1, p.108, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, hadith no.491.

<sup>155</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Chapter on Funerals.

*Ḥadīth* commentators mention that Abū-Bakr wished to die on a Monday to get the ‘blessing’ of dying on the same day as the Prophet. A contemporary Moroccan scholar from the pro-*mawlid* school, al-‘Amrawī, writes:

“Will they (i.e. the denouncers of the *mawlid*) condemn Abū-Bakr for giving importance to that day? As they condemn the people who commemorate the *mawlid* for giving importance to it?”<sup>156</sup>

The analogy is clear. Abū-Bakr gave importance to the Monday because of its connection to the Prophet’s death, although the Prophet himself never mentioned any significance to it. Thus, Abū-Bakr set a precedent for giving importance to days which are connected to important events from the Prophet’s life.

It should also be noted here that according to most jurists, the act of a *ṣahābī* is a major source of legislation. Abū-Bakr’s action would carry even more weight as his position is considered second to the Prophet himself.

11. Muslim narrates from Mu‘āwiyah that one day the Prophet saw a group of his *ṣahābah* sitting in a circle, so he asked them, “What has made you sit?” They replied, “We sat to remember Allah, and thank Him for His blessing on us by guiding us to Islam.” He said, “(By) Allah, nothing makes you sit but that?” They said, “By Allah, nothing makes us sit but that.” The Prophet said, “By Allah, I did not ask you to take an oath for not trusting you, but that Gabriel came to me and told me that Allah is proud of you in the presence of the Angels.”<sup>157</sup>

This *ḥadīth* is clear approval from the Prophet, in fact from ‘Allah Himself,’ for the *ṣahābah*’s gathering to praise Allah and thank Him. It is clear from the Prophet’s question that the Prophet had not asked them to gather for that purpose. It was something they did on their own. Yet, the Prophet approved of it.

For proponents of the *mawlid*, the *mawlid* is nothing but a gathering to praise Allah and thank Him for the guidance that came through the birth of the Prophet. Thus it is in fact a *sunnah* as the *ṣahābah* had done the same with the same purpose, and with the approval of the Prophet.

<sup>156</sup> Al-‘Amrawī, *Al-Tahzīr min al-Ightirār*, p.80.

<sup>157</sup> *Ṣaḥīh Muslim*, Vol, 8, p.72 (*ḥadīth* 1701).

That later generations continued with this practice of the *ṣaḥābah* is attested to by the beginning part of same *ḥadīth* itself. The *ḥadīth* as narrated by Abū-Sa‘īd goes:

“(the Caliph) Mu‘āwiyah saw a group of people sitting in a circle in the mosque, so he asked, ‘What makes you sit?’ They said, ‘We sit to remember Allah.’ He said, ‘(By) Allah, nothing makes you sit but that?’ They said, ‘By Allah, nothing makes us sit but that.’ Mu‘awiyah said, ‘By Allah, I did not ask you to take an oath for not trusting you, but that... (then he mentioned the above-mentioned *ḥadīth* from the Prophet).”<sup>158</sup>

This shows that the early generations of Islam *had* the practice of gathering in the mosques for voluntary spiritual gatherings. The only difference in the case of the *mawlid* would be the specification of time, which is the night or month of the Prophet’s birth.

Proponents of the *mawlid* claim that this does not make a difference on the ruling on such gatherings, for they remain permissible throughout the year. If there is more emphasis on and interest in them during the *mawlid* season then that is a natural phenomenon, which is also supported by the *ḥadīth* which show that the Prophet gave importance to historical dates and events, including his birth, as we illustrated.

Furthermore, no practitioner of the *mawlid* considers it an ‘obligation’ to hold such gatherings in the month of the *mawlid* only, which would really be a *bid‘ah*. In fact, despite being entrenched in Muslim culture for a millennium at least, the commemoration of the *mawlid* has nevertheless, *not* been accorded the status of an obligatory festival in Islam by any veritable scholar, nor by the masses in most cases.

12. The *mawlid* usually revives the *sunnah* of reciting poems in praise of the Prophet, therefore it should not be termed an innovation. The great *ḥadīth* master and historian Ibn-Sayyid-al-Nās (d.732) compiled a 400 page anthology of over 180 male and female poets from the *ṣaḥābah* who authored poems in praise of the Prophet.

In his book, entitled *Minah al-Mad’h* (The Gifts of Praise), he lists each Companion alphabetically, identifying them by name and tribe and quoting a few representative lines of poetry from each.

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<sup>158</sup> *Ṣaḥīh Muslim*, Vol, 8, p.72 (*ḥadīth* 1701).

In addition, supporters of the *mawlid* claim that the *mawlid* usually consists of the recital of the Qur’ān, rendition of salutations on the Prophet, feeding of the poor, listening to lectures on the life of the Prophet and expression of love for him; all of which are matters explicitly sanctioned and encouraged by the Qur’ān and the *sunnah*. If these actions are encouraged throughout the year, why would they become prohibited on the ‘auspicious’ occasion of the *mawlid*?

Shaykh Muḥammad al-‘Alawī al-Mālikī expresses this sentiment:

“What we mean by celebrating *mawlid* is to gather to listen to the history of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, to send benedictions and salutations upon him, to listen to poems recited in his praise, to feed the hungry, to honor the poor and needy and to bring happiness to the hearts of the lovers of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.”<sup>159</sup>

As the *mawlid* celebration is a great facilitator of and serves as an annual catalyst for these ‘desired’ phenomena, it can only be classified as a good innovation. The Puritan claim that, “the *bid‘ah* lies in the *specification* of the *mawlid* day with the abovementioned good actions,” does not stand; as none of those who practice *mawlid* limit the observance of those good actions to the day and month of the *mawlid* only nor do they claim that it is obligatory or *sunnah* to do so. In fact, ‘*mawlid*’ gatherings are held throughout the year. The famous orientalist Von Grunebaum documented:

“The *mawlid* poems, of which there are a great many in both Arabic and Turkish, have attained to such popularity that they have come to be recited on other festive occasions as well. For instance, it has become pious practice in Mecca to have a *mawlid* recited by professional readers on the seventh day after the death of a near relative. In Palestine, *mawlid*s are often recited in fulfillment of a religious vow.”<sup>160</sup>

Proponents of the *mawlid* claim that the actual date and month of the birth only serve to create a much-needed enthusiasm and fervor amongst the masses for the above-mentioned good actions, due to the obvious reason of emotional attachment to dates. Al-Mālikī states this essential point quite unequivocally:

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<sup>159</sup> Al-Mālikī, *Ḥawl al-Iḥtifāl bi-Zikrā al-Mawlid*, p.43.

<sup>160</sup> Von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals*, p.77.

“Gathering to remember Allah the Almighty and to send salutations and benedictions upon His messenger are among the good actions which we should show concern for *whenever we get the chance to. However, (the enthusiasm for) this is more so in the month of his birth, because the call (for such a gathering) has greater appeal in this month*, due to people’s feeling of the connection of time to time, thus by the present (occasion) they remember the past (event), and they imagine what (great past events) they did not witness... *We do not say that celebrating the birth of the Prophet the way we do it, is something the sharī‘ah has specifically legislated* such as the Prayers or the Fast...etc. However, (we also state) that there is nothing in the *sharī‘ah* that prevents us from celebrating (the *mawlid*).<sup>161</sup> (emphasis mine)

Besides the charge of *bid‘ah*, Puritan scholars also condemn the *mawlid* on the basis of it often including forbidden activities. However, we have already mentioned al-Suyūfī’s answer to this reasoning. Proponents of the *mawlid* believe that the benefits in it are far more than the harms and evils, which *they* also condemn. Al-Mālikī writes:

“These (unacceptable) things happen in some countries, and are the actions of those types of people who are ignorant, irresponsible and shameless. Then again, such people cannot be used as a criterion or a yardstick where the truth (about *mawlid*) is concerned, for no recognition is given to them (or their indecent behavior).”<sup>162</sup>

There are also certain phenomena that commonly take place in *mawlid* gathering which are condemned by the Puritans but accepted by mainstream scholarship, such as *tawassul*, i.e. calling on the Prophet to intercede on behalf of sinners or particular forms of *dhikrs* practiced by the Sufis...etc.

However, these phenomena, open for discussion as they are, are not an essential part and parcel of the *mawlid* and are not directly related to the concept of commemorating the birth of the Prophet, and our discussion here revolves around this specific issue, for the Puritan camp condemns the very concept itself. Salafī Puritans consider the very idea of commemorating the *mawlid* or any other Islamic historical event as an innovation, regardless of how the commemoration is done, as is clearly stated their books.

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<sup>161</sup> Al-Mālikī, *Ḥawl al-Iḥtifāl bi-Zikrā al-Mawlid*, p.33.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* p.68.

## THE CONCLUSION

Modern-day Puritans claim that they are ‘Salafis,’ i.e. they strictly adhere to and follow the ‘Way of the *salaf*,’ i.e. the first generations of Islam, which basically includes the *ṣaḥābah*, *tābi ‘īn* and other luminaries of the first three centuries of Islam.

However, in this study, we have proven this premise of theirs to be false and unsubstantiated from early Islamic history, specifically in the context of the usage and application of the concept of *bid‘ah*. We demonstrated numerous incidents from the ‘age of the *salaf*’ that disprove and belie the Puritan understanding of *bid‘ah*. We discovered that the *salaf* were not as averse to *bid‘ah* as present-day ‘Salafis’ ostensibly claim to be.

We demonstrated that in the ‘real’ *salafī* terminology, the word *bid‘ah* was used both negatively and positively and was primarily reserved to describe and condemn certain questionable intrusions in the Islamic faith, like the ‘innovations’ of the Shi‘ites, Mu‘tazilites, Kharijites...etc. These creedal innovations were considered contradictory to the ‘clear’ teachings and principles of the Qur‘ān and *sunnah* as understood by the majority of the *salaf*. On the practical plane however, innovation was often welcomed.

The *ḥadīth*, “Every innovation is misguidance,” was understood as referring to harmful innovations that were devoid of any *sharī‘ah* desired benefit. Practices that were deemed as beneficial to the preservation and growth of Islam were easily incorporated in the framework of Islamic life by most if not all early Muslims. The reluctance of the some to accept them would also usually fade away upon realizing the benefit in these ‘good’ innovations. Many such innovations became standard Islamic practice.

Based upon this phenomenon and upon their insightful understanding of the principles of jurisprudence – as we now realize – classical Islamic scholarship categorized innovations (*bid‘ahs*) according to their benefit, harm, or neutrality into the five categories of rulings: the obligatory (*fard*), recommended (*mustaḥabb*), prohibited (*ḥarām*), undesirable (*makrūh*), and permissible (*mubāḥ*).

They gave various examples of each type from their own times and from the age of the *salaf*, and justified these classifications from the universal and immutable principles of the *sharī‘ah*, which are the basis for the rulings of the Divine Law.

This classification of innovation, which was firmly based in Islamic jurisprudence and legal principles as well as substantiated by the practice of the *salaf*, was accepted as normative by most of the great jurists and *ḥadīth* masters of Islam, starting from likes of Imam al-Shāfi‘ī to Imams, al-Nawawī, Ibn-Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, Ibn-‘Abd-al-Salām, al-Qarāfi and Qāḍī Ibn-al-‘Arabī. The vast majority of Islamic scholars from all the major legal schools of thought accepted this common methodology and applied it over the centuries to various novel situations and contingencies that arose.

They saw this as being consistent with the belief that the *sharī‘ah* of Islam is valid for all ages, places and nations, with all the variety signified by that. The *sharī‘ah* had promulgated all the necessary general guidelines and was characterized by universal criterias and broad methodological principles, which emphasized the concepts of analogy and parallelism to make it relevant and applicable in all possible circumstances.

This approach to novelty was not limited to ‘worldly matters’ only as the Puritans have misconstrued. Innovations in religious practices and acts of worship were also judged according to the same methodology. We have given numerous examples of that. The *ḥadīth* that, “All innovation is misguidance,” was never understood literally and without any further qualification and conditions. Indeed, other authentic *ḥadīth* such as the ‘*ḥadīth* of the good *bid‘ah*’ (“Whoever establishes in Islam a good practice will have its reward”) and Caliph ‘Umar’s statement (“What an excellent *bid‘ah* is this”) were seen as completing and explaining the former.

Considering every new act that came into being after the era of the Prophet as an ‘innovation of misguidance’ without bearing in mind whether it entails benefit or harm, would mean nullifying all the unanimously accepted and indispensable developments of the *sharī‘ah* and its sciences. It would basically be an ascription of infertility and inability of development to the *sharī‘ah*. The *salaf* certainly didn’t seem to believe it to be so.

For example, we saw that caliph ‘Umar’s major innovations regarding the *tarāwīḥ* prayers, an important religious practice, were unanimously accepted and became standard practice in Sunni Islam, despite being acknowledged as innovations by ‘Umar himself and other *ṣaḥābah*. The famous *ṣaḥābī* Abū-Umāmah is reported to have said regarding it:

“Allah has prescribed for you the fasting in *Ramaḍān*, and did not prescribe for you staying up in it’s nights (i.e. with the *tarāwīḥ* prayer). Rather, it is *something that you have innovated (ibtada‘tumūh)*; so continue with it and do not abandon it. For, people from the Children of Israel had innovated an innovation (*bid‘ah*) seeking the pleasure of Allah, and then Allah punished them for abandoning it.’ Then he (Abū-Umāmah) recited (the Qur’ānic verse 57:26):

“And We put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him (i.e. Jesus). And they innovated monasticism – (though) We did not prescribe it for them – seeking the pleasure of Allah, but even so they did not observe it as it should have been observed.”<sup>163</sup>

We have another example in the famous Imām Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal (d.12<sup>th</sup> of *Rabī‘ al-Awwal*, 241), who was considered to be a ‘staunch follower of the *sunnah*’ and a ‘proponent of the *salafī* way.’ This Imam Aḥmad was asked about a group of people who used to gather to listen to a reciter recite the Qur’ān in a sad tone, and then cry; extinguishing the light sometimes.

Aḥmad replied: “If the reciter recites according to the Recitation of Abī-Mūsā, then there is no problem with it.” And in another narration: “And what is better for the people than to gather to pray and to remember Allah’s favor on them, as the Anṣār (Muslims of Madinah) did?!”

Puritan ideologue Ibn-Taymiyyah comments:

“This is referring to what Imam Ahmad narrated...from Ibn-Sirin that before the arrival of the Prophet – may Allah bless him and grant him peace – in Madinah, the Anṣār said, ‘If we can have a day in which we can gather and remember this matter (i.e. Islam) that Allah has favored us with?’ They said, ‘Saturday.’ (Then) They said, ‘We cannot join the Jews in their day.’ They said, ‘Sunday.’ (Then) They said, ‘We cannot join the Christians in their day.’ They said, ‘The day of the Arabs,’ and they used to call Friday, the ‘Day of the Arabs.’ So they gathered in the house of As‘ad bin Zurārah, and slaughtered a lamb (for the occasion).”<sup>164</sup>

<sup>163</sup> Al-Suyūfī, *al-Ḥāwī li’l-Fatāwā*, Vol.1, p.350.

<sup>164</sup> Ibn-Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā’ al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm*, p.305.

Regarding the traditional Muslim practice of celebrating the Prophet's birthday, the *mawlid*, there is no doubt that it is an innovation, in the historical sense if not in the legal sense (based on the differences regarding what constitutes an innovation), as it is a practice that became prevalent after the third century only and was not practiced in the era of the Prophet in its present form.

However, it is either a baseless innovation which clashes with the precepts and goals of the *sharī'ah*, in which case it would be out-rightly rejected, or it is the opposite, i.e. a beneficial practice, in which case there would be room for its acceptance.

The scholars who vindicated the *mawlid* (and who represent the mainstream approach to *bid'ah*), have produced a number of substantial evidences from the Qur'ān and *sunnah* as a basis for honoring and commemorating the Prophet's birth, as we discussed earlier on. Furthermore, they have claimed that rather than clashing with the *sharī'ah*, the *mawlid*, as an important social/spiritual event, serves many interests of the *sharī'ah* such as reminding people of the Prophet's life, refreshing his memory, reviving his love in the hearts of the believers, feeding the poor and the deprived...etc.

The non-practice of the *mawlid* by the Prophet, without being accompanied by a text stipulating its practice as being blameworthy, *cannot* be regarded as a proof of its prohibition. At best, it only implies that not to commemorate the *mawlid* is permissible.

In fact, a careful scrutiny of the issue will reveal that that the controversy regarding *mawlid* is actually related to the manner and method of celebrating, and *not* really the idea of remembering the Prophet's birth, which even the Puritans do not deny in totality, as it is part of the Prophet's *sīrah* which should be studied by all Muslims.

Thus, there remains no viable reason for its condemnation from a juristic point of view. The Ottoman Mufti of Madinah, Ja'far al-Barzanjī (d.1899) summed it up well:

“Know that it (i.e. the *mawlid*) is an innovation as its practice has not been narrated from any of the pious forebears from the first three honourable centuries, whose integrity was attested to by the Prophet. However, it is a good innovation because it consists of doing good to the poor, an increase in the recitation of the Qur'ān, *dhikr*, *ṣalāt 'alā al-nabī*, and an expression of happiness and joy for the Prophet.

That is why, when it (i.e. the practice of the *mawlid*) appeared after the first three centuries, the people of Islam continued to celebrate it in the month of his birth in all the lands.”<sup>165</sup>

Opponents of the *mawlid* are up against a practice that has constituted a major popular expression of love and veneration for the Prophet for more than a millennium of Islamic history. Puritan thought, rigid as it is, might not give much or any importance to emotional attachment or “excessive” veneration of the Prophet; however, the faith of ordinary Muslims all over the world is strongly based on a passionate emotional attachment to the Prophet. The traditionalist scholar al-Mālikī expresses this popular sentiment when he writes:

“I celebrate (the *mawlid*) because I am happy and delighted for my Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and I am happy and delighted with him because I love him, and I love him because I am a true believer.”<sup>166</sup>

Even if one adopts al-Shāṭibī’s strict understanding of *bid’ah*, supposedly espoused by the Puritans, the *mawlid* cannot be conclusively condemned as an innovation. Contemporary Syrian jurist, Dr. Sa‘īd al-Būṭī states this when he writes:

“There is no problem with the gathering of people to hear the story of the *mawlid*, with what goes with it from poems and songs...not in it’s being a good *bid’ah*, as some think, but because it does not fall under the definition of *bid’ah*, which has been defined by the scholars [i.e. al-Shāṭibī] as, ‘An innovated practice in religion, that resembles the way of the *sharī’ah*, and which is intended to be followed in order to strive in the utmost in the worship of Allah.’ Thus, according to this definition, a practice is not termed a *bid’ah* except if its practitioner considers it an essential part of the Religion...which is generally not the case with the *mawlid*.”<sup>167</sup>

We may conclude by stating that according to *both* approaches towards *bid’ah*, the contemporary hard-line Puritan/Salafi position vis-à-vis *mawlid* is in serious need of revision and amendment, and is certainly different from the way of the *salaf* themselves.

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<sup>165</sup> Al-Barzanjī, *Shar’h al-Mawlid al-Nabawī*, p.17

<sup>166</sup> Al-Mālikī, *Ḥawl al-Iḥtifāl bi-Zikrā al-Mawlid*, p.32.

<sup>167</sup> Al-Ḥalabī, *Anāshīd al-Ṣafā* (introduction by Dr. Muhammad Sa‘īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī), p.6.

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## **GLOSSARY OF ARABIC TERMS USED**

*Adhān*: The prescribed Call for Prayer.

*Aḥkām*: The rulings of the *sharī'ah*.

*Anṣār*: The Muslims of Madinah who supported the blessed Prophet.

*'Aqīdah*: The Islamic creed.

*'Aqīqah*: The Islamic practice of sacrificing a sheep at the birth of a child.

*'Ashūrah*: The auspicious 10<sup>th</sup> day of the Islamic month of Muharram.

*Bid'ah*: Innovation; any practice that did not exist in the time of the Prophet.

*Dalālah*: Misguidance.

*Dhikr*: To remember/praise Allah; usually by the recitation of prayers and supplications.

*Dirham*: Silver coins, the traditional currency of Muslims before paper money.

*Du'ā*: Supplication to Allah.

*Īd*: The two official festivals of Islam. The first one is *Eid al-Fitr*, celebrated at the culmination of Ramaḍān, the month of fasting. The second one is *'Īd al-Adhā*, celebrated to remember Abraham's sacrifice of his son Ishmael, for Allah.

*Fatwā*: Islamic legal verdict issued by a qualified jurist of Islam.

*Fiqh*: Islamic Jurisprudence.

*Ḥadīth*: Sayings of and narrations about the Prophet.

*Ḥāfiz*: Memorizer of Qur'ān, or an expert in the science of *ḥadīth*. (plural=*Huffaz*)

*Ḥajj*: The obligatory pilgrimage to the Holy Sanctuary in Makkah; the 5<sup>th</sup> pillar of Islam.

*Ḥalāl*: Permitted.

*Ḥarām*: Prohibited.

*Hijrah*: The historic migration of the Prophet Muḥammad from Makkah to Madinah.

*‘Ibādah*: Worship or worship ritual (plural=*Ibadat*).

*Ijtihād*: Scholarly exertion/thinking, especially in deriving rulings from the Qur’ān, the *sunnah* and other sources and principles of the *sharī‘ah*. Scholars who are capable of practicing *ijtihad* are called *Mujtahids*.

*Imām*: One who leads the prayer. Also refers to a famous authoritative scholar of Islam.

*Isrā’ wa M‘irāj*: The miraculous night journey of the Prophet from Makkah to Jerusalem and subsequently to the heavenly and divine realms.

*Istiḥsān*: Endorsement of something by the scholars.

*Jihād*: To strive in the way of Allah. Usually refers to war against the enemies of Islam.

*Mandūb*: Recommended.

*Makrūh*: Disliked.

*Maṣlahah*: Benefit.

*Mawlid al-Nabī*: The Birthday of the Prophet or its celebration. It’s also called ‘*Milad*,’ ‘*Maulood*,’ ‘*Mevlud*,’ and ‘*Mawlidi*’ in different Muslim languages.

*Mubāḥ*: Permitted matter.

*Muḥarramah*: Prohibited matter.

*Qiyām*: The practice of standing up in honor of the Prophet during *mawlid* gatherings.

*Qiyām al-Layl*: Late night prayers in the holy month of Ramadan.

*Rak'ah*: Cycle of Prayer.

*Ṣaḥābah*: The venerable companions of the Prophet (Sing. =*Sahabi*).

*Ṣalawāt*: Requesting Allah to send His blessings on the Prophet.

*Salaf*: The early generations of Muslims, from the venerable *ṣaḥābah* and those who followed them and their 'way,' till about the third century.

*Salām*: Greetings of peace.

*Sharī'ah*: Islamic Law.

*Sīrah*: The history of the blessed Prophet.

*Sunnah*: Practice/Tradition. It generally refers to the practice or way of the Prophet but may also refer to any beneficial practice of the Muslims.

*Tafsīr*: The science of the interpretation and exegesis of the Holy Qur'ān.

*Tarāwīḥ*: The voluntary nights prayers performed during the holy month of Ramaḍān.

*Tark*: The *not* doing of something, or its omission. In the context of the *sharī'ah*, it refers to something the Prophet or his *ṣaḥābah* did not do, without there being a *ḥadīth* or narration which would indicate its being a prohibited or disliked matter.

*'Ulamā*: The learned scholars of Islam. (Plural of 'Ālim, i.e. scholar).

*Ummah*: The universal community of Muslims.

*Usūl al-Fiqh*: The science of the principles and rationales of Islamic law.

*Wājib*: Compulsory.