5219 - Ruling on taking part in some annual celebrations

the question

What is the Islamic ruling on taking part in some annual celebrations and occasions, such at the International Day of the Family, the International Day for Disabled People, the International Year of Older Persons. Also what is the ruling on taking part in some religious celebrations such as al-Israa' wa'l-Mi'raaj (the anniversary of the Prophet's Night Journey and ascent into the heavens), al-Mawlid al-Nabawi (Prophet's Birthday) and al-Hijrah (anniversary of the Prophet's migration), by preparing leaflets or holding lectures and Islamic conferences for the purposes of reminding and exhorting the people (about their religion)?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

It seems to me that these days which are repeated every year and the gatherings held to mark them are innovated festivals and ways for which Allah did not reveal any authority. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "Beware of newly-invented matters, for every newly-invented matter is an innovation (bid'ah) and every innovation is a going-astray."

(Narrated by Ahmad, Abu Dawood, al-Tirmidhi and others).

He also said: "Every people has its festival ('Eid) and this is our festival."

(Agreed upon)

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) spoke at length in his book Iqtidaa' al-Siraat al-Mustaqeem li Mukhaalifat Ashaab al-Jaheem (The Requirements of the Straight Path in Differing from the People of Hell), condemning the innovated occasions and festivals that have no basis in the pure Sharee'ah and the ways in which they corrupt people's religious commitment.

Most if not all of the people have no understanding of the damage caused by this kind of bid'ah, especially when it has to do with acts of worship, but those who are blessed with insight and understanding realize something of the damage that it can do.

What people have to do is to follow the Qur'aan and Sunnah, even when they do not entirely understand the issues of benefit and harm that are involved.

Whoever innovates something on a certain day, such as observing a fast, performing a prayer, preparing certain foods, putting up decorations, spending on his family and so on, will be affected by this and it will create some kind of belief in his heart, because he must believe that this day is better than other days, since if he and those who follow him did not have this belief in their hearts, they would not make the effort to do these things.

"Celebration" or "festival" involves three things: place, time and gathering, in any of which things may be innovated.

With regard to time, there are three kinds of innovation, which may overlap with issues of place and actions.

The first kind is a day which is not venerated at all in Sharee'ah, which was not mentioned by the Salaf and nothing happened on that day to indicate that it should be held in any kind of esteem.

The second kind is a day on which some event happened that also happened on other days, but that does not mean that it should be regarded as a special occasion, and the Salaf did not venerate this day.

Whoever does such a thing is imitating the Christians, who took the days of events in the life of Jesus (peace be upon him) as festivals, and the Jews. But festivals are part of Sharee'ah, and whatever has been prescribed by Allah should be followed, but whatever has been innovated in the religion is not a part of Islam.

Similarly, the innovation followed by some people (in celebrating the Prophet's birthday), whether it is done in imitation of the Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus, peace be upon him, or it is

done out of love and respect for the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), is not something which was done by the Salaf, even though the reason for doing it was there and there was nothing to stop them doing it if it was good…

The third kind is days which are venerated by Sharee'ah, such as the day of 'Aashooraa', the day of 'Arafaah and the two Eid days, etc., but the people who follow their own desires innovate things that they think are good but which in fact are wrong and are not allowed – such as when the Raafidis go without water and express grief on the day of 'Aashooraa' etc. These are innovated matters which were not prescribed by Allah or by His Messenger (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) or by any of the Salaf or the members of the household of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).

As regards holding regular gatherings, whether weekly, monthly or annually, apart from the gatherings that are prescribed in Sharee'ah, this implies that one is making them as important as the gatherings for the five daily prayers, Jumu'ah, Eid and Hajj, and this is a newly-invented innovation.

The principle in question here is: the Islamic acts of worship which are repeated at certain intervals and are thus special occasions, have been prescribed by Allah and are sufficient for mankind. If any other gatherings are invented in addition to these gatherings, it means that they are being given a status equal to that of the occasions prescribed by Allah, which leads to the adverse effects referred to above. This is in contrast to what a person or a small specialized group may undertake on their own sometimes.

On the basis of the above: it is not permissible for the Muslim to take part in these events which are celebrated regularly every year, because of their resemblence to the prescribed Islamic festivals, as explained above. But if it is a "one-off" event that is not repeated, and the Muslim can use the occasion to convey the truth to people, then there is nothing wrong with that, in sha Allah.

And Allah knows best.