128530 - Response to those who regard some innovated matters as good, such as celebrating the Prophet’s birthday (Mawlid)

the question

I hope that you can look at the following, which appears as a discussion between those who say that celebrating the Prophet’s birthday is an innovation (bid‘ah) and those who say that it is not an innovation. Those who say that it is an innovation quote as evidence for that the fact that this was not done at the time of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) or at the time of the Sahaabah or any of the Taabi ‘een. The other side respond by saying: if anyone tells you that everything we do must have been done at the time of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) or at the time of the Sahaabah or Taabi‘een, we have, for example, something called ‘ilm ar-rijaal or al-jarh wa’t-ta‘deel (i.e., the study of hadeeth narrators and assessment of their ability to transmit reliably) and so on, and no one objects to that because the basis for any objection to any innovation being valid is that it should go against some Islamic principle. But with regard to celebrating the Mawlid (Prophet’s birthday), what is the principle that it goes against? And there are many arguments concerning this matter. They also quote as evidence the fact that Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) approved of celebrating the birthday of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). What is the correct ruling concerning this matter, with supporting evidence?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

It should be noted first of all that the scholars differ concerning the exact date of the birth of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), and there are several opinions. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (may Allah have mercy on him) thinks that he (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was

born on the second of Rabee‘ al-Awwal; Ibn Hazm (may Allah have mercy on him) thinks it most likely that he was born on the eighth. It was also said that he was born on the tenth, as was the view of Abu Ja‘far al-Baaqir. And it was said that he was born on the twelfth, as is the view of Ibn Ishaaq. It was also said that he was born in the month of Ramadan, as was narrated by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr from az-Zubayr ibn Bakkar.

See: as-Seerah an-Nabawiyyah by Ibn Katheer, p. 199,200

This difference of opinion among the scholars is sufficient for us to realise that those who loved the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) among the early generations of this ummah were not certain about the date of his birth, let alone celebrating it. Several centuries passed during which the Muslims did not celebrate his birthday, until it was introduced by the Faatimids.

Shaykh ‘Ali al-Mahfooz (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The first ones to introduce (celebration of the Mawlid) in Cairo were the Faatimid caliphs in the fourth century AH. They introduced the celebration of six birthdays: the Prophet’s birthday, the birthday of Imam ‘Ali (may Allah be pleased with him), the birthday of Faatimah az-Zahra’ (may Allah be pleased with her), the birthdays of al-Hasan and al-Husayn (may Allah be pleased with them), and the birthday of the current caliph. These celebrations continued to be observed until they were abolished by al-Afdal, the commander of the army. Then they were restored during the caliphate of al-Aamir bi-Ahkaam Allah in 524 AH, after the people had almost forgotten about them. The first one to introduce celebration of the Prophet’s birthday in the city of Irbil was al-Malik al-Muzaffar Abu Sa‘eed in the seventh century. And the people beganto go too far in celebration of the Prophet’s birthday and introduced everything they themselves desired and everything prompted by the devils among mankind and the jinn."(Al-Ibdaa‘ fi Madaar al-Ibtidaa‘, p. 251)

Secondly:

With regard to what is mentioned in the question about what is said by those who celebrate the Prophet’s birthday: if anyone tells you that everything we do must have been done at the time of

the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) or at the time of the Sahaabah or Taabi‘een, this indicates that they have no knowledge of what is meant by innovation (bid‘ah) and what the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) warned us against in many hadeeths. The innovation that we were warned against is that which is done as an act of worship to bring one closer to Allah, may He be exalted, (that was not done by the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) or prescribed in Islam). This is the guideline concerning the definition of innovation.

It is not permissible to seek to draw closer to Allah by doing an act of worship that was not prescribed for us by the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). This is what we understand from the Prophet''s prohibition on innovation. Innovation or bid‘ah means seeking to draw closer to Allah, may He be exalted, by means of that which He has not prescribed. Hence Hudhayfah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “Any act of worship that was not done by the Companions of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), do not seek to worship Allah thereby.”

Concerning such matters, Imam Maalik (may Allah have mercy on him) said: “That which was not part of the religion at that time cannot be part of the religion today.” In other words, that which was not part of the religion at the time of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and he did not seek to draw close to Allah by means of it, cannot be part of the religion after that.

Moreover, this example that is mentioned by the questioner, which is the science of al-jarh wa’t-ta‘deel (evaluation of hadeeth narrators), and his argument that it is an innovation that is not blameworthy, is an opinion upheld by those who divide innovation into good innovation and bad innovation; then they go further than that and divide innovations into the five classifications of rulings (obligatory (waajib), recommended (mustahabb), permissible (mubaah), prohibited (haram) and disliked (makrooh)). This classification was mentioned by al-‘Izz ibn ‘Abd as-Salam (may Allah have mercy on him); he was followed in that by his student al-Qarraafi. Ash-Shaatibi responded to al-Qarraafi’s approval of this classification by stating:

This classification is something that has been made up and there is no evidence for it in

sharee‘ah. Rather it is self-contradictory, because part of the definition of innovation is that there is no evidence for it in sharee‘ah, whether in the texts of sharee‘ah or in the basic principles. If there was something in sharee‘ah to indicate that something is obligatory or recommended or permissible, then in that case it would not be an innovation and the action would be included under the general heading of actions that are enjoined or are optional. So referring to these things as bid‘ah then stating that the evidence may indicate whether they are obligatory or recommended or permissible means that one is contradicting oneself.

With regard to describing some innovations as disliked (makrooh) and prohibited (haram), this is correct, on the grounds that they are innovations, and not for any other reason. If there is evidence to indicate that something is not allowed or is disliked, that does not prove that it is an innovation, because there is the possibility that it may be a sin, such as murder, stealing, drinking alcohol, and so on. There is no innovation in which it can be imagined that this classification applies at all, except in the case of what is disliked and prohibited, according to this argument.

What was narrated by al-Qarraafi from his companions about consensus on denunciation of innovations is correct, but his classification thereof is not correct. It is very strange that he narrated that there was consensus at the time when he was producing a counter-argument on this issue, which would imply that there was no consensus. It is as if he was only following his shaykh – i.e., Ibn ‘Abd as-Salam – with regard to this classification, without examining it.

Then he mentioned the reason that al-‘Izz ibn ‘Abd as-Salam (may Allah have mercy on him) gave for this classification and that he called the concept of al-masaalih al-mursalah (consideration of public interest) an innovation, then he said:

As for al-Qarraafi, he has no excuse for transmitting that classification in a way other than his shaykh intended and other than the people intended, because he differed from everyone else with regard to that classification, so he went against consensus. End quote.

Al-I‘tisaam, p. 152, 153. We advise you to refer to the book, because the author responded at length and did a good job, may Allah have mercy on him.

Al-‘Izz ibn ‘Abd as-Salam (may Allah have mercy on him) gave a likeness of obligatory innovation according to his classification and said:

There are several examples of obligatory innovations:

1.Studying ‘ilm an-nahw (Arabic grammar) by means of which the words of Allah and of His Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) may be understood. That is obligatory because learning sharee‘ah is obligatory, and it cannot be learned without knowledge of that (Arabic grammar). That without which an obligatory duty cannot be done is also obligatory.

2.Learning the meaning of obscure vocabulary in the Quran and Sunnah.

3.Developing usool al-fiqh (principles of Islamic jurisprudence)

4.Discussing al-jarh wa’t-ta‘deel (evaluation of hadeeth narrators) in order to distinguish the sound from the unsound. The basic principles of sharee‘ah indicate that preserving sharee‘ah (the teachings of Islam) is a communal obligation with regard to that which is more needed by the individual, and preserving sharee‘ah cannot be achieved except by means of what we have mentioned."(Qawaa ‘id al-Ahkaam fi Masaalih al-Anaam, 2/173)

Ash-Shaatibi also refuted him by saying:

With regard to what ‘Izz ad-Deen said: the response to it is similar to what was stated above. With regard to the examples of that which is obligatory on the basis that what is obligatory cannot be attained except by means of that – as he says – it is not essential that it should have been done by the salaf (early generations) or that there should be a specific principle in sharee‘ah, because it comes under the heading of al-masaalih al-mursalah (consideration of public interest), not innovation."(Al-I‘tisaam, p. 157, 158)

To sum up this response: these fields of knowledge cannot be described as a blameworthy shar‘i innovation, because they are supported by the general texts and the general principles of sharee‘ah, which enjoin preservation of the religion and of the Sunnah, and sound transmission of the shar‘i sciences and texts of sharee‘ah (the Quran and Sunnah).

It may be said that regarding these sciences as an innovation is in the linguistic sense, not in the shar‘i sense. Innovations in the shar‘i sense are all blameworthy; as for innovations in the linguistic sense, some of them are praiseworthy and some of them are blameworthy.

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqallaani (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Innovation in the shar‘i sense is blameworthy, unlike innovation in the linguistic sense. Anything that is newly introduced without precedent may be called an innovation, whether it is praiseworthy or blameworthy."(Fath al-Baari, 13/253)

He also said:

With regard to innovations (bida‘, pl. of bid‘ah), this word refers to everything for which there is no precedent. In linguistic terms it includes both praiseworthy and blameworthy matters, but among the scholars of Islam it usually refers to that which is blameworthy. If the word is applied to something that is praiseworthy, then it is to be understood according to its linguistic meaning."(Fath al-Baari, 13/340)

In his commentary on hadeeth no. 7277, in his book al-I‘tisaam bi’l-Kitab wa’-Sunnah, Chapter 2, from Saheeh al-Bukhari, Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan al-Barrak (may Allah preserve him) said:

This classification if innovations is correct from the linguistic point of view. But from the shar‘i point of view, all innovations are misguidance, as the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “The worst of matters are those which are newly introduced, and every innovation is a going astray.” In the light of this general meaning, it is not acceptable to say that among innovations there are those that are obligatory or recommended or permissible. Rather innovations in religion are either prohibited or disliked. Among those which are disliked but may be described as a permissible innovation is singling out Fajr and ‘Asr prayers for shaking hands after the prayer. End quote.

What should be understood and adhered to is that we should pay attention to the availability of means and absence of impediments to doing something at the time of the Prophet (blessings and

peace of Allah be upon him) and his noble Companions. The birthday of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was known to his Companions and their love for him was great; they could have taken the day of his birth as a festival to be celebrated and there was nothing to prevent them from doing that. But because the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and his Companions did nothing of the sort, it is known that this is not prescribed; if it were prescribed, they would have been the first of people to do that.

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

With regard to what some people have introduced, either in imitation of the Christian celebration of the birth of ‘Eesa (Jesus – peace be upon him) or out of love for the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and to show respect for him – may Allah reward them for this love and effort, but not for this innovation – of taking the birthday of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) as a festival, despite the difference of scholarly opinions concerning the date of his birth, this is something that the early generations did not do, despite the fact that the same reason for doing it (i.e., love for the Prophet (blessing and peace of Allah be upon him) was present and there no impediment to doing so. If this was something that was purely good or mostly good, the early generations (may Allah be pleased with them) would have been more likely to do it than others, because they had greater love for the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and greater respect for him than us, and they were more eager to do good. Rather the best way to show love and respect for him is by following him and obeying him, heeding his commands, reviving his Sunnah both inwardly and outwardly, propagating the message with which he was sent and striving hard to do that, in one’s heart and by one’s actions and words. This is the way of the earliest generations, the Muhaajireen and Ansaar and those who followed them in truth."(Iqtida’ as-Siraat, p. 294, 295)

These wise words highlight the fact that love of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) should be expressed by following his Sunnah, by teaching it and propagating it among the people, and by defending it. This is the way of the Sahaabah (may Allah be pleased with them).

As for the later generations, they deceived themselves and were deceived by the Shaytaan with

these celebrations. They thought that by doing that they were expressing their love for the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). As for reviving his Sunnah, following it, calling people to it, teaching it to people and defending it, they are far away from that.

Thirdly:

With regard to what this person attributed to Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him), saying that he permitted celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, let him tell us where Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) said that, because we have not come across any such words from Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him). We think that Ibn Katheer is above supporting or promoting this innovation.

And Allah knows best.