237360 - Is every innovation (bid‘ah) worse and more serious than every major sin?

the question

Is every innovation (bid‘ah) worse and more serious than every major sin, or does it depend and is not general in application? Because there are people who take advantage of this general rule to justify allowing ordinary people to mix with evildoers, and they say that this is better for them than mixing with innovators, and they quote as evidence reports from the early generations.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) told us that: “Every innovation is going astray, and every going astray will be in the Fire.” Narrated by Muslim (867) and an-Nasaa’i (1578)

The scholars have explained that even though every innovation is misguidance, it is also a kind of sin, and sins vary in degree, depending on the extent to which they are contrary to Islamic teaching.

Ash-Shaatibi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

It was narrated that innovation is prohibited in general terms, and it is described as misguidance, as in the hadith: “Beware of newly-invented matters, for every newly-invented matter is an innovation, every innovation is a going astray, and every going astray will be in the Fire.” This is general in meaning and applies to every innovation.

But this gives rise to the question: is every innovation to be judged in the same manner, or not?

We say: it is established in the principles of Islam (usool) that shar'i rulings fall into five categories. If we take away three of them [namely: waajib (obligatory), mandoob (encouraged) and mubaah (permissible)], what is left is the ruling of makrooh (disliked) and the ruling of haraam (prohibited). Therefore we should think of innovation as falling into two categories: some are prohibited innovations and some are disliked innovations.

That is because innovation comes under the heading of disallowed things, and disallowed things are either makrooh (disliked) or haraam (prohibited). Therefore innovation is likewise. This is from one perspective.

From another perspective, if you think of the content of the innovation, you will find that innovations are of various categories:

some of them constitute blatant disbelief…

Some of them constitute sins, but do not come under the heading of disbelief, or there is a difference of opinion as to whether they constitute disbelief or not, such as the innovations of the Khawaarij, Qadaris and Murji'ah, and similar misguided groups.

Some of them constitute sins, but there is scholarly consensus that they do not constitute disbelief, such as the innovations of celibacy, fasting whilst standing in the sun, and castration for the purpose of stopping sexual desire.

Some of them are disliked, as Maalik said about following Ramadan immediately with six days of Shawwaal, or reading Qur'an out loud in turn, or gathering to offer supplication (du'aa') on the afternoon of the day of 'Arafah, and so on…

End quote from al-I'tisaam (2/353-355)

He (may Allah have mercy on him) also said:

As it is proven that the innovator is a sinner, then we should note that sins are not all of the same level of seriousness. Rather sin varies in degree, and the reason for it varying depends on many

factors, according to the fiqhi point of view.

It may vary according to whether the one who does it thinks that he is qualified to engage in ijtihaad, or he is following someone else in his innovation;

or according to whether the innovation has to do with the necessities (as defined by Islamic teaching) or needs or good but non-essential matters; and in each of these categories there are subcategories;

or according to whether the innovator is concealing it or doing it openly;

or according to whether he is promoting it or not;

or according to whether, in addition to promoting it, he is also rebelling against authority or not;

or according to whether the innovation is introducing an entirely new act of worship or adding something to an already established act of worship (and doing it in a manner other than that which is prescribed);

or according to whether it is clear or ambiguous;

or according to whether it constitutes disbelief or not;

or according to whether he is persisting in it or not…

And there are other factors to determine whether the level of sin incurred by innovation is great or small.

End quote from al-I'tisaam (1/286).

To sum up, all innovations are misguidance and the innovator is given a warning of Hell; small innovations may lead to greater innovations. This is in general terms.

The one who has knowledge of Islamic teachings and an awareness of different sects will have no doubt that the innovation of the extreme Raafidis or extreme Jahamis, and their ilk, is worse than

the sins committed by the sinners, such as drinking alcohol and the like.

By the same token, anyone who is possessed of reason and religious commitment will know that major sins, such as adultery, theft and the like, are worse than many innovations that are connected to practices, such as celebrating the Mawlid, communal dhikr, and the like. It is extremely foolish and unintelligent for anyone to believe that minor innovations such as these are worse before Allah and are more serious by Islamic standards than the sins and shameful deeds that we have mentioned above.

Secondly:

Shunning the innovator is one way of forbidding what is wrong, so one should pay attention to the guidelines on shunning, because the aim behind this approach is to reform society, which means that it should be done in a manner that will achieve this result. If it will lead to more trouble, or it will not lead to the desired reform – rather it will lead to more evil – then it is not prescribed in that case.

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

The aim of shunning may be to keep away from the evil of innovation which constitutes wrongdoing, sin and mischief. Or the aim may be to engage in jihad and forbid what is wrong, and to punish the wrongdoers so that they will be deterred, and so as to support the faith of people who do righteous deeds. Punishing the wrongdoer protects others from his wrongdoing and gives them shelter so that they may do that which is the opposite of his wrongdoing, such as believing, following the Sunnah and so on.

But if shunning will not deter anyone, or make anyone give up innovation – rather it may lead to cancelling out a lot of good deeds that are enjoined – then in this case shunning is not enjoined.

As Ahmad said of the people of Khurasan of his time: They cannot resist the Jahamis, so if they are unable to show enmity towards them, then doing this good deed is waived in their case, whereas treating them with kindness may lead to warding off harm from the weak believers, and may also

soften the hearts of strong evildoers. Similarly, when the Qadaris became prevalent in Basra, if the scholars stopped narrating hadith from them, then knowledge, and the hadiths and reports that were preserved with them would disappear. If it is not possible to carry out one's duties of learning, engaging in jihad and so on except with the help of people who follow some innovations, the harm of which is less than the harm of giving up that duty, then achieving the obligatory interest that may result from carrying out one's duty with some negative consequences that are outweighed thereby is better than the opposite. Hence this matter is not straightforward, and it is subject to further discussion.

Many of the answers of Imam Ahmad and others were given in response to questions asked by questioners of whom the one asked was aware, or came in the form of statements that were issued to particular individuals whose situations were known. Therefore they may be regarded as issues that were connected to particular individuals with whom the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) dealt. Such rulings are only to be applied in similar cases (and are not general in application).

But some people regard that (namely shunning the follower of innovation) as being general in application, so they use the concept of shunning and denouncing in a manner that is not enjoined, and that is not required of them and is not recommended. And perhaps on that basis they may end up neglecting something that is obligatory and recommended, whilst doing something that is prohibited. And there are others who turn away completely from the concept of shunning, so they do not shun what they are obliged to shun of bad innovations; rather they shun it by way of ignoring it, not by way of keeping away from something because they disapprove of it; or they may even fall into it themselves. Or they may shun it by way of keeping away from it because they disapprove of it, but they do not forbid others to do it, and they do not try to rebuke others by shunning them and the like, in the case of those who deserve such a rebuke. Thus they fail to forbid an evil that they are obliged – either by way of it being obligatory or recommended – to forbid. Thus they are either doing something that is forbidden or failing to forbid it to others, and that is doing what they were forbidden and failing to do what is enjoined. But the religion of Allah is a middle path between extremes and neglect. And Allah, may He be glorified, knows best.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (28/212-213)

If the innovator is committing his innovation openly and trying to spread it, and he is eloquent in speech and able to convince people, or he is in an environment where Ahl as-Sunnah are prevalent, so that he may be affected and deterred by shunning, then undoubtedly in that case shunning is prescribed.

But if this innovator is keeping a low profile, or he is an ordinary person, or he is living in an environment where there are many innovators and evildoers, and if he is shunned by the righteous, he will turn to the innovators and evildoers, and thus will increase in transgression, then in this case it is better not to shun him, because there is no harm in mixing with him, whereas there is obvious harm in shunning him.

Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

This shunning may vary according to the situation of those who would shun a person, whether they are strong or weak, few or many, because the point of shunning is to rebuke and discipline the one who is shunned, and to deter others from following in his footsteps.

If that purpose is clear and obvious, in such a way that shunning will lead to the reduction and diminishing of evil, then it is prescribed. But if neither the target nor anyone else will be deterred by shunning – rather mischief will increase and those who would shun him are weak, in such a way that the negative consequences outweigh any interests that may be served – then shunning is not prescribed. Rather trying to soften the hearts of some people (by mixing with them and showing kindness to them) is more beneficial than shunning, whereas in the case of other people, shunning may be more beneficial than trying to soften their hearts. Therefore the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) would show kindness to some people in order to soften their hearts, and he would shun others.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (28/206)

Fourthly:

Mixing with evildoers and sinners on the grounds that they are less evil than innovators is an incorrect attitude, for the following reasons:

1.

One of the most well-known proofs for it being prescribed to shun innovators is the fact that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) shunned some sinners, to the extent that the Prophet's shunning of Ka'b ibn Maalik for having stayed behind from the campaign to Tabook was regarded as the basis for the prescription of shunning.

Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Some of the scholars regarded this hadith of Ka'b as the basis for the prescription of shunning innovators and those who introduce new things into the religion.

End quote from al-Istidhkaar (16/14 9).

To sum up: shunning sinners is prescribed, as is shunning innovators; in fact it is the original ruling, because it is shunning in response to sin, and the innovator comes under the general heading of sinner.

In his Saheeh, al-Bukhaari included a chapter entitled: Chapter on what is permissible of shunning one who commits sin. Ka'b said, when he stayed behind and did not join the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) [on the campaign to Tabook]: The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) forbade the Muslims to talk to us – and he mentioned fifty days.

And he included a chapter entitled: Chapter on one who does not greet someone who has admitted a sin, and does not return his greeting, until it is clear that he has repented, or until it is clear that the sinner has repented. 'Abdullah ibn 'Amr said: Do not greet those who drink alcohol.

2.

Mixing with evildoers and keeping company with them on the grounds that their evil is less than that of innovators does not make sense from an Islamic point of view, because Islam enjoins the

Muslim to be keen to keep company with righteous people rather than others.

It was narrated from Abu Moosa (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “The likeness of a good companion and a bad companion is that of one who carries musk and one who works the bellows. With the carrier of musk, either he will give you some or you will buy some from him, or you will notice a good smell from him; as for the one who works the bellows, either he will burn your clothes or you will notice a bad smell from him.”

Narrated by al-Bukhaari (5534) and Muslim (2628)

It was narrated from Abu Sa‘eed that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Do not keep company with anyone but a believer and do not let anyone eat your food but one who is pious.”

Narrated by Abu Dawood (4832) and at-Tirmidhi (2395)

3.

With regard to the view of some of the scholars who said that it is permissible to mix with sinners, because their evil is less than the evil of innovators, what is meant by sinners here is those whose sin does not affect the one who sits with them. But if sitting and mixing with an evildoer will harm him in either religious or worldly terms, then that evildoer is to be shunned like the innovator, and there is no difference between them. In fact in many cases shunning the immoral evildoers is more appropriate and more emphasised than shunning those who follow innovation in some of their practices, or who do things concerning which the scholars differ as to whether it constitutes innovation or not.

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar said: The scholars are unanimously agreed that it is not permissible to shun anyone for more than three days, except in a case where there is the fear that speaking to that person may be detrimental in religious or worldly terms, or may cause harm to him or to his worldly interests. If that is the case, then it is permissible (to shun him for more than three days),

and perhaps shunning someone and keeping a distance from him in a dignified manner is better than mixing with him in a way that may cause harm.

End quote from Fath al-Baari (10/496)

And Allah knows best.