68827 - Ruling on the mihraabs that are in mosques

the question

What is the ruling on building a mihraab in the qiblah of the mosque?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

The mihraab, or niche in which the imam prays in the mosque, did not exist at the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) or in the first century of Islam. It appeared in the second century and the Muslims continued to build them in their mosques because they served a purpose, such as showing the person who enters the mosque where the direction of the qiblah is.

The scholars of the Standing Committee were asked:

Did mihraabs in mosques exist at the time of the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him)?

They replied:

The Muslims continued to put mihraabs in their mosques during the best centuries and afterwards, because that serves a purpose for the Muslims in general, such as showing where the qiblah is and showing that this place is a mosque. End quote.

Fataawa al-Lajnah al-Daa'imah li'l-Buhooth al-'Ilmiyyah wa'l-Ifta' (6/252, 253)

Some scholars are of the view that building a mihraab is a bid'ah (innovation) and they forbade it. They quoted as evidence the report narrated by al-Tabaraani and by al-Bayhaqi in his Sunan from 'Abd-Allaah ibn 'Amr (may Allaah be pleased with him), that the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: "Avoid these madhaabih (lit. altars)" meaning mihraabs.

This was classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Jaami (120).

But this argument may be answered by noting that the mihraabs mentioned in this hadeeth are not the mihraabs that are to be found in mosques, rather what is meant here is the seat at the head of a gathering. This prohibition of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) applies to sitting at the head of a gathering, because of the fear that this may lead to showing off or some kind of self-admiration.

Al-Haythami said in Majma' al-Zawaa'id: I say: "Mihraabs" here refers to the seat at the gathering. Ibn al-Atheer said in al-Nihaayah:

Mihraab means a high, elevated place, which is the seat at the head of a gathering. Hence the word is used for the mihraab in the mosque because it is the focal point and the noblest place in the mosque. End quote.

Al-Mannaawi said in Fayd al-Qadeer:

i.e., avoid seeking the seat at the head of a gathering, i.e., competing for that. The author (i.e., al-Suyooti) applied this prohibition to building mihraabs in mosques and standing in them, and he said: The people did not realize that having mihraabs in mosques is an innovation (bid'ah) and they thought that they existed at the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), but they did not exist at his time or at the time of any of his successors, rather that was introduced in the second century even though it is established that it is not allowed.

Then al-Mannaawi said: His ruling is based on what he understood from the wording of the hadeeth, that what was meant by mihraab was nothing other than that which is known as such in the mosques nowadays, but this is not correct because the famous imam who is known as Ibn al-Atheer stated that what was meant by mihraabs in the hadeeth was the seat at the head of a gathering … and many scholars followed him in this view and no one stated any other view, such al-Hafiz al-Haytami and others. End quote.

Ibn Abi Shaybah narrated in al-Musannaf that Moosa al-Juhani said: The Messenger of Allaah

(peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “My ummah will continue to be fine so long as they do not put altars (madhaabih) in their mosques like the altars of the Christians.”

Even if this hadeeth is saheeh, what is meant here is a prohibition on adopting altars like those of the Christians. But if they are not like the altars of the Christians, then they are not forbidden.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al-‘Uthaymeen (may Allaah have mercy on him) was asked about the ruling on having mihraabs in mosques: What is the answer to the reports which forbid altars like the altars of the Christians? He replied: The scholars (may Allaah have mercy on them) differed as to whether having a mihraab is Sunnah, mustahabb or permissible. What I think is that having a mihraab is permissible, and this is the well known view of our madhhab. If it is said that it is mustahabb because of the many benefits involved, such as showing the direction of the qiblah to those who do not know, this is fair enough.

With regard to the report narrated from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) which forbids altars like the altars of the Christians, i.e., mihraabs, this prohibition has to do with adopting mihraabs like those of the Christians, but if what is adopted is mihraabs of the distinctive Muslim type, then that is not forbidden. End quote.

Majmoo’ Fataawa al-Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen, 12/ question no. 326.

He was also asked:

Some scholars regard the mihraabs in mosques as a bid’ah and imitation of the kuffaar. Is this opinion correct?

He replied:

I think that this opinion is not correct, because those who adopt mihraabs do so only in order to show the direction of the qiblah.

What was narrated from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) about not adopting altars like the altars of the Christians means not adopting mihraabs like those of the

Christians. If they are distinct from them then they are no longer like them. End quote.

Majmoo’ Fataawa al-Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen, 12/ question no. 327.

And Allaah knows best.