

A CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY PURITAN **DISCOURSE ON MAWLID AND BID'AH**

**(Summary of a Paper submitted for a Masters Degree at the University
of Cape Town by Shaykh Fakrudeen Uwaysi)**

An Introduction

Modern-day Muslim 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 *sahabah*, *tabi'in* and other luminaries of the first three centuries of Islam.

However, in this study, I have attempted to prove this premise of theirs to be misleading and unsubstantiated from early Islamic history, specifically in the context of the usage and application of the concept of *bid'ah*. Glancing through the numerous incidents demonstrated from the 'age of the *salaf*', that disprove and belie the Puritan understanding of *bid'ah*, one discovers that the *salaf* were not as averse to *bid'ah* as present-day 'Salafis' ostensibly claim to be.

For example, caliph Umar's major innovations regarding the *tarawih* 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 *sahabah*.

Here it should be noted that although the tendency for Puritanism has always been present in the history of Islam, and can even be considered as somewhat inherent to the faith, the present day 'Salafi' Puritan movement owes its origins to the Wahhabiyyah sect that was initiated about two hundred years ago in the Najd province of the Arabian Peninsula by the radical reformer Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab (d.1206¹). He called his sect, the 'Salafiyyah,' i.e. followers of the *salaf* (the first Muslims).

¹ 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.

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’an and *sunnah*.

Ibn-Abd-al-Wahhab himself was actually influenced by the Puritanical thought of the controversial 7th 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-Wahhab 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-Wahhab) 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-Wahhab (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.”²

Wahhabism remained an obscure sect limited to the central Arabian Desert – with Ottoman and Azharite scholars officially excommunicating it – until it established itself as the dominant form of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula during the first half of the 20th century. Consequently, through this new privilege of becoming the official Islam of the holy lands, 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” organizations...etc are staunch adherents of Salafi Puritanism. Most moderate/liberal Muslim reformists are also Puritan influenced.

My 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.

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

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 my 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 *hadith* 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 *hadith* 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 establish the traditional classification of innovation into "good/acceptable" and "bad/unacceptable" as firmly based on sound Islamic legal principles as well as substantiated by the practice of the *salaf*. This classification was accepted as normative by most of the great jurists and *hadith* masters of Islam, starting from likes of Imam al-Shafi'i to Imams, al-Nawawi, Ibn-Hajar al-Asqalani, Ibn-Abd-al-Salam, al-Qarafi and al-Qadi Ibn-al-Arabi. 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 the various novel situations and contingencies that arose.

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

I argue that 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 *shari‘ah* and its sciences. It would basically be an ascription of infertility and inability of development to the *shari‘ah*. The *salaf* certainly didn’t seem to believe it to be so.

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-Shatibi 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 *fatwa* of al-Suyuti and his refutations of al-Fakihani and Ibn-al-Hajj’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’an 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 hasanah*, 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 hasanah* – 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 hasanah*' (good innovation) or '*sunnah hasanah*' (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 *hadith* 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'anic 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.

Nevertheless, 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.

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 *sahabah* 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 hasanah*.'

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'an 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-Shatibi and Ibn-Taymiyyah.

I use the words, 'traditional,' 'classical,' 'orthodox,' and 'mainstream,' synonymously to refer to the past pre-Puritan 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'an 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.

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.

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 traditional Muslims all over the world is strongly based on a passionate emotional attachment to the Prophet.

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.

Selected Bibliography

Abu-Shamah, Shihab-al-Din. *Al-Ba'ith 'Ala Inkar al-Bida' wa al-Hawadith*. Cairo: Mahmud Subayh, N.D.

al-Barzanji, al-Sayyid Ja'far. *Shar'h al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*. Cairo: Markaz Bin-al-Attar lit-Turath, 1997.

Bin-Mahfuz, Abd-Allah. *Al-Sunnah wa al-Bid'ah*. Kuwait, 1984.

al-Darsh, Mutawalli. *Fatwa on Mawlid*. The Worldwide Web: www.sunnah.org/ibadaat.

al-Fasi, Muhammad. *Shifa al-Gharam bi-Akhbar Balad Allah al-Haram*. Makkah: Maktabat al-Baz, 1987.

Haddad, Gabriel. *Mawlid: Celebrating the Birth of the Holy Prophet*. Durban: Imam Ahmad Raza Publications, 2002.

al-Jaza'iri, Abu Bakr. *Al-Insaf fima Qila fi al-Mawlid min al-Ghuluww wa al-Ijhaf*. Buraydah, Saudi Arabia: Dar al-Bukhari, 1988.

- Ibn-Abd-al-Salam, Izz-al-Din. *Qawa'id al-Ahkam fi Masalih al-Anam*. Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, N.D.
- Ibn-al-Hajj, Abu-Abd-Allah. *Al-Madkhal*. Cairo: Al-Matba'ah al-Masriyyah, 1929.
- Ibn-Kathir, 'Imad al-Din. *Dhikr Mawlid Rasul-Allah* Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 1961.
- Ibn-Khaldun, Abd-al-Rahman. *Kitab al-'Ibar*. Beirut: Maktabat al-Madrasah wa Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, 1959.
- Ibn-Taymiyyah, Ahmad. *Iqtida' al-Sirat al-Mustaqim wa Mukhalafat Ashab al-Jahim*. Cairo: Matba'at al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah, 1987.
- Ibn-Taymiyyah, Ahmad. *Majmu' Fatawa Ibn-Taymiyyah*. Makkah: Al-Ri'asah al-'Ammah Li-Shu'un al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn, 1996.
- Mahfuz, Ali. *Al-Ibda' fi Madarr al-Ibtida'*. Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 1956.
- al-Maliki, al-Sayyid Muhammad bin Alawi. *Hawl al-Ihtifal bi-Zikra al-Mawlid al-Nabawi al-Sharif*. Cairo: Dar Jawami' al-Kalim, 1998.
- al-Nawawi, Muhyi-al-Din. *Sharh Sahih Muslim*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1983.
- al-Nawawi, Muhyi-al-Din. *Tahdhib al-Asma' wa al-Lughat*. Cairo: Al-Matba'ah al-Muniriyyah, N.D.
- al-Shatibi, Abu Is'haq. *Kitab al-I'tisam*. Riyadh: Maktabat al-Riyadh al-Hadithah, N.D.
- al-Shatibi, Abu-Is'haq. *Al-Muwafaqat fi Usul al-Shari'ah*. Beirut: Dar al-Marifah, 1996.
- al-Shawkani, Muhammad bin Ali, *Nayl al-Awtar*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Halabi, 1960.
- al-Suyuti, Jalal-al-Din. *Al-Hawi li'l-Fatawa*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1982.

al-Suyuti, Jalal-al-Din. *Al-Amr bi'l-Ittiba' wa al-Nahi 'an il-Ibtida'*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Qur'an, 1987.

al-Turtushi, Abu-Bakr. *Kitab al-Hawadith wa al-Bida'*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1990.

Umm Muhammad, *The Observance of al-Mawlid al-Nabawi and Other Birthdays*. Jeddah: Abul-Qasim Publishing House, 1994.

al-Uthaymin, Muhammad bin Salih. *Al-Ibda' fi Kamal al-Shar' wa Khatar al-Ibtida'*. Riyadh: Dar al-Watan, 1990.

Von Grunebaum, Gustav. *Muhammadan Festivals*. London: Curzon Press, 1981.