

INNOVATION IN ISLAM (PART 1 OF 2): TWO TYPES OF BIDAH

Rating: 5.0

Description: A short introduction to the meaning of the word bidah and an explanation of why we should avoid matters newly introduced to the deen of Islam.

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Objectives:

- To understand the meaning of the word *bidah*.
- To understand that worldly innovations such as technology and transport are not matters to be shunned or avoided.
- To be able to recognise what is and is not innovation in Islam.

Arabic Terms:

- Bidah* - innovation.
- Deen* - the way of life based on Islamic revelation; the sum total of a Muslim's faith and practice. *Deen* is often used to mean faith, or the religion of Islam.
- Dhuhr* - the afternoon prayer.
- Rakah* - unit of prayer.
- Rajab* - the name of the 7th month of the Islamic lunar calendar.
- Shariah* – Islamic Law.
- Sunnah* - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.

Bidah is an Arabic word that comes from the root *Al-Bada'* meaning to create something without precedence. In English we would use the word "innovation". Before discussing *bidah* in any depth we must distinguish between two types of *bidah*. The first type is innovation in the matter of things pertaining to our worldly life. Things like technology, electricity and transport would come under this category. These things are permissible and in many cases could even be called desirable. The second type of innovation pertains to matters of the *deen*. In matters of religion *bidah* is not permissible and it can be dangerous to introduce new things in our religion. Because of the danger there are many quotations and traditions from the *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad that point this out.



“Whoever innovates into this affair of ours something that we have not commanded, it is to be rejected”.^[1]

The best speech is the Book of Allah and the best guidance and example is that of Muhammad, and the worst of all things are the newly invented things (in the religion), for every religious innovation is an error and a misguidance.”^[2]

“...Every religious innovation is a means of misguidance and every means of misguidance is in the fire.”^[3]

The *deen* of Islam has no need for *bidah*. The religion of Islam is complete and there is no need to introduce or invent new matters in the religion. This is confirmed by the Quranic statement **“This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your *deen*”** (Quran 5:3)

When a person innovates something and adds to the *deen* something that does not already belong to it, he implies that the religion is lacking and in need of improvement, or the implication is that Allah did not complete and perfect it His religion. This is clearly not the case as we can see from the above verse.

Why is it important to avoid *bidah*

Whilst Allah does not punish a person who falls into error due to ignorance we are obligated to educate ourselves to the best of our ability. The reality is that Allah will not accept an action that does not fulfil two important conditions. The first condition is that the action be done with a sincere intention to please Allah almighty. The second is that the action is done according to what is taught in the Quran and the authentic *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad. The action must conform to the *Sunnah* and not be in contradiction to it.

With this in mind let us revisit the meaning of *bidah*. Linguistically, it means creating or inventing something new, something without precedence. Legally, it is to add something new to the *deen* of Allah. Even if the action is invented as a way of drawing closer to or worshipping Allah it still does not become acceptable. It is still a sin.

How do we know if an act of worship is really an act of *bidah*?

On many occasions you will hear it said that Islam is a religion of informed knowledge. This implies that believers do not take things on face value. A believer takes the time to learn and understand the details of the *deen* and he learns to question actions or sayings that are not presented with clear evidence. If he takes the time to learn Islam a person is able to recognise what is a *Sunnah* action and what is *bidah*.

The following are six ways to distinguish between a *Sunnah* and a *bidah*:

1. An act of worship related to a cause or reason that has not been legislated:

It is not permissible to link an act of worship to a cause or reason that has not been legislated in the Quran or the authentic *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad. An example of this would be waking up to pray at night during the seventh day of the Islamic month of *Rajab* with the belief that Prophet Muhammad ascended to the heavens on this night. The act of praying in the night is something that is legislated in Islam with sufficient evidence from the Quran and *Sunnah*, however when it is linked to this reason it becomes a *bidah* because it is based and constructed upon a reason which is not established from the *Shariah*.

2. Type of worship:

It is also essential that the act of worship agrees with the *Shariah* in its type. If a person was to worship Allah with an act of worship whose type or mode has not been legislated, it would not be accepted. For example it is not ok to sacrifice a horse. This is something that would be a *bidah*, something new added to the *deen*. Sacrifice is limited by the *shariah* of Islam to lamb, cattle, sheep and camels.

We will continue our discussion of *bidah* in lesson 2 by looking at more ways to distinguish between a *Sunnah* and a *bidah* and listing some of the more common *bidahs* we see every day in mosques and among Muslims throughout the world.

Footnotes:

[2]

Saheeh Muslim

[3]

At Tirmidhi

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