

## WITH THE SHAYKH



### On Celebrating the Prophet's Birthday

Shaykh 'Abd Allah Bin Bayyah<sup>1</sup>

---

The issue of celebrating the prophetic birthday, or *Mawlid*, is one over which scholars have differed. There were those who held that it was a reprehensible innovation; to the extent that some even held it to be prohibited. Others held it to be a praiseworthy innovation. The root of the difference harkens back to the actual taxonomy, or classification of innovation (*bid'ab*).

Thus there were those who held that innovations could be praiseworthy, such as the Shafi'is; and at their head was al-'Izz b. 'Abd al-Salām. Additionally, al-Qarāfi - though he was a Mālikī - also held this stance; elaborating upon it in great depth and at great length. His taxonomy incorporates innovations that are recommended (*mustahabb*), because of a proof to recommend them; innovations that are obligatory (*wājib*), because of a proof to obligate them; innovations that are reprehensible (*makrūb*), because of a proof to censure them; and so on. He thus classified *bid'ab* into five categories. Others disagreed with this classification and insisted that whenever the term *bid'ab* is employed without further qualification, then it is always blameworthy. They understood 'Umar's saying, may Allah be pleased with him, concerning the *tarāwīḥ* prayer: "What an excellent *bid'ab* this is," in a linguistic sense. This was the view taken by Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyyah, and also by al-Shāṭibī in his book, *al-Itiṣām*. Many Malikī and Ḥanbalī scholars then adopted this approach. As for the *Mawlid*, certain scholars wrote in support of it, like al-Suyūṭī, while others wrote against it. So in my opinion there is no need to prolong discussion of it, nor to fuel further debate about it.

In conclusion: whoever celebrates the *Mawlid* by relating events from the life of the Prophet, peace be upon him, or by recounting his splendid virtues; doing so without mixing this with any act that the Sacred Law deems repugnant; nor with the intention of it being recommended or obligatory - so if it is celebrated with the conditions I have mentioned; without bringing in to it anything that contravenes the Sacred Law; but out of love for the Prophet, peace be upon him - then, Allah willing, there is no problem with it, and he will be rewarded. This was mentioned by Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah who said that one will be rewarded for their intention. He states this in *Iqtidā' al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*.<sup>2</sup> As for those who abstain from the act, also desiring to conform to the prophetic guidance and fearful of falling into *bid'ab*, they too shall be rewarded, Allah willing. The issue is not really that big; nor is it necessary to pay it more attention than it actually deserves. Thus, here in one of the Muslim countries where the *mawlid* is celebrated and where certain acts of obedience are observed during these blessed days, the scholars here differ about it: some deem it reprehensible, while others permit it; each according to the methodology they traverse ...

Our attention must be directed at what is beneficial for the Muslims, by attempting to curb any schisms and facilitate ease. This ease is not founded on an empty premise; instead it is rooted in the Qur'an

and the Sunnah, and in what the Prophet, peace be upon him, commanded with regards reconciling mutual differences, thereby proceeding upon one of the basic objectives of the Sacred Law. Therefore, if we find an issue in which the actual difference is a valid one (*kbilāf mu'tabar*), then we respect that difference of opinion. This is not out of being overly accommodative, as some allege, nor out of being slack. Rather, it is out of respecting those differences predicated on an evidence from the Sacred Law which, from one angle, is not so clear-cut and, from another angle, cannot be entirely repudiated or dismissed out of hand.<sup>3</sup> So it is tantamount to having an apparent meaning, and tantamount to being a matter that cannot validate the newly introduced act. Some [scholars] see a justification for the act, while others do not.<sup>4</sup> Thus we say that both sides are upon goodness, Allah willing, as long as the act [of celebrating the *Mawlid*] is not mixed with wrongdoing, and providing the intention is sound. And Allah, Transcendent and Exalted is He, knows best.



#### ENDNOTES

1. From [www.binbayyah.net](http://www.binbayyah.net) (trans. Surkheel Sharif).

2. *Iqtidā' al-Ṣiraṭ al-Mustaqīm* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2003), 406. The actual passage reads: "Venerating the *mawlid* and taking it as a seasonal celebration - as some have done - entails a tremendous reward due to the good intentions involved, and its reverence of Allah's Messenger, upon whom be peace." A few pages earlier in the same book (p.403), Ibn Taymiyyah writes: "Such is also the case with what some people have newly-introduced, either out of imitation of the Christians in their observance of Christmas or out of love and reverence of the Prophet, peace be upon him - and Allah will reward them for their love and endeavour (*ijtibād*), but not for their innovation - which is taking the Prophet's birthday, peace be upon him, as an annual celebration."

3. In other words, the actual evidence (*dalīl*) is open to more than one legitimate interpretation.

4. The difference here goes back to the difference in juristic methods. Those that allow celebrating the *Mawlid* do so on the basis of *al-dalīl al-āmm* - general proofs whose scope is left unrestricted unless there is further proof to restrict them. Thus, in justifying the *Mawlid*, al-Suyūṭi writes: "Basically, celebrating the *Mawlid* is an innovation that has not been related from the Pious Predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) of the first three generations. Nevertheless, it involves good things as well as their opposites. So whoever seeks out the good and avoids the bad then it is a good *bid'ab*; if not, then not ... It has occurred to me that this can be inferred from an established origin which has been confirmed in the two *Ṣaḥīḥs*: When the Prophet, peace be upon him, first arrived in Madinah, he found the Jews fasting the Day of 'Āshūrā', when he inquired about this, they replied: 'This is the day wherein Allah drowned Pharaoh and saved Moses; so we fast in order to show thanks (*shukr*) to Allah.' From this we may conclude that gratitude can be expressed to Allah on a specific day for the bestowal of a blessing (*ni'mab*) or the removal of some harm (*niqmab*): this is expressed every year on that specific day. Gratitude to Allah can be shown through different forms of worship, such as prostration, fasting, giving charity, and recitation of the Qur'an. Therefore it is desirable to seek out the actual day [of the Prophet's birth; peace be upon him], so that it corresponds to the story of Moses and the Day of 'Āshūrā'." *Ḥawī li'l-Fatāwī* (Damascus: Idārah li'l-Tibā'ah al-Muniriyyah, 1933), 1:196. It also ties in, according to those who hold this view, with what Muslim records, no.1162, when the Prophet, peace be upon him, was asked about the significance of fasting Mondays. So he replied: "This is the day in which I was born and in which Revelation first came to me."

Those scholars who object to the annual *Mawlid* accept that the Qur'an and Sunnah are strewn with references to love, revere and praise the Prophet, peace be upon him. Thus from one angle the *Mawlid* - if it only entails love, reverence and lauding his praise - has a clear basis in the Sacred Law. However, commemorating his *Mawlid* on a specific date, annually, does not have an explicit proof to validate it. So from this perspective it is *bid'ab idāfiyyah*; an innovation that has a basis from a general angle, but not in the specific way or form it is practiced. Cf. al-Shāṭibi, *al-I'tisām* (Saudi Arabia: Dār Ibn 'Affān, 1995), 1:53, 367.