



## The Absolute Truth About Sunnah and Bid`a

© Abdullah bin Hamid Ali

[The following is based on a lecture given at the Islamic Center of South Jersey on September 30<sup>th</sup> of 2005.]<sup>1</sup>

*In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful*

All praise is due to Allah. We seek His aid, His guidance, and His forgiveness. And we turn to Him in repentance. Whoever Allah (Glorious and Exalted is He) guides, none can misguide. And whomever He misguides, none can guide. I bear witness that there is no god other than Allah, Who is Alone and has no partner. I bear witness that Muhammad, son of `Abdullah, is His servant, His messenger, and final prophet to mankind. So may peace and blessing be upon our liege-lord Muhammad, his family members, his Companions and all those who follow them in righteousness until they Day that we all will be brought back and not a single soul will be able to flee from Allah and His judgment.

The following discussion is of an extremely important topic, especially with relationship to worship in Islam: namely, the meaning of *sunnah* and *bid`a*.

### Various Positions of the Classical Schools of Jurisprudence

In terms of classical Islamic scholarship, we find that the `ulama did not agree on the `asl, or the original ruling, that pertains to deeds. Many of the `ulama said that everything is *halal* until proven *haram*. Although

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<sup>1</sup> Transcribed by Sidi Lumumba Shakur

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that is very popular today and many believe it to be the standard opinion, it is not the standard opinion for most of the `ulama. Another opinion is that everything is *haram* until proven *halal*, meaning proven through the evidentiary scripture of the Qur'an and Sunnah. And this is also not the standard position amongst the totality of `ulama. And then there is the third opinion, which holds that nothing has a ruling, whether it is *halal* or *haram*, until the Sacred Law declares it to be. So, unless we know from our sources that something is designated to be *halal*, we don't call it *halal*. And the same thing goes for if it is *haram*, according to this opinion.

We also find in some of the schools, the Hanbali in particular, the `ulama distinguishing between `ibadat (acts of worship or rituals) and the `adat (matters of custom). So in relation to *salat*, *zakat*, *hajj*, and a number of other things, the ruling is that everything is *haram* until proven *halal*. But in matters of custom or everyday occurrences, such as washing the dishes or drinking sweetened water, the ruling is that it is *halal* until proven *haram*. One of the Hanbali scholars of this century, in a poem entitled *Manzuma al-Qawa'id al-Fiqhiyya* stated,

الأصل في عاداتنا الإباحة  
حتى يجيء صارف الإباحة

The original rulings as pertains to matters of custom is that they are permissible until something which changes the permissibility comes and does so.

And he said,

و النفس و الأموال للمعصوم  
و الأصل في الأبخاض و اللحوم  
تحريمها حتى يجيء الحل

But the original ruling in relationship to women's private parts, meat that we eat, taking of a person's life, and violating their person and wealth is that it is *haram*.

Since there are different opinions in that regard between the `ulama, there is no consensus about the original ruling of deeds in Islam. However, all scholars have agreed that every action has a ruling that is applied to it. When a scholar rules on an issue, he is giving his opinion in regard to that matter based on what he believes to be the view of the Creator (Glorious and Exalted is He). And in the end, no one can declare for certainty what is the truth 100% until we meet Allah (Glorious and Exalted is He), which brings us to the topic at hand: *sunnah* and *bid'a*.

### The Definition of Sunnah

*Sunnah* in its linguistic, literal sense means nothing more than a normal customary practice, or something that is habitual. And for this reason, the scholars of language define it as, "a way of doing something, a path, a methodology, an approach, a custom, or habit, whether it is something bad or good." This is what *sunnah* means linguistically, and it is this meaning that was intended by the Prophetic statement,

Whoever initiates in Islam a good *sunnah*, then he gets the reward of it and the reward of the one

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who does it after him until the Day of Resurrection. And it does not detract anything from his own personal reward. Whoever initiates in Islam a bad *sunnah*, then that person carries the burden of it and the burden of those who do it after him until the Day of Resurrection. And that does not detract from his burden at all.

So this *hadith* is using it in its linguistic sense, which is *sunnah* as just a way, path, or an example, nothing more. It doesn't mean *sunnah* according to the usage of the *fuqaha*, or *sunnah* according to the usage of the *usuliyyin*, or *sunnah* according to the usage of the scholars of *hadith*. Many times Muslims get into discussions and arguments about different actions and someone might say, "Well, you don't have to do that, it's only *sunnah*." And another person will respond, "Well what do you mean its only Sunnah? There are certain things in the Sunnah that are obligatory too." But people are arguing while not understanding that one person is using *sunnah* according to one group of scholars' definition and another person is using *sunnah* according to the definition of another group of scholars. So this one, every time they see the word "*sunnah*," may think it merely means recommended. So when they discover while learning the rules of *salat* that certain actions are only *sunnah*, they may think to themselves, "Oh, I don't have to do that," because they only understand *sunnah* in one way. Or if a ruling is based off of a *hadith*, a person may say, "Oh, I don't have to act on that, it is only *sunnah*." But in fact, a number of rulings originate solely from the Sunnah. On the other hand, one may think, "Well, the *sunnah* is what the Prophet did. So, we have to do it," since they are understanding "*sunnah*" in relation to it being a source of Islamic Law. So when they find that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) more than likely never prayed without covering his hair, they may deem it obligatory for us to do the same (while it is merely recommended or more appropriate according to most scholars). There is, however, an opinion amongst the Hanafis that holds it to be highly recommended for a person to pray with his head covered, such that it is *makruh* to not do so. And the person is considered sinful if repeatedly praying without covering his head. But other *`ulama* have evidence to support their position to the contrary.

At any rate, we must understand that the word *sunnah* itself has many different connotations. If you are talking about *sunnah* according to the scholars of *hadith*, then *sunnah* is, "anything reported about the Prophet whether it be a statement, an action, something indicative of approval of another's action or any description of him, his behavior or physical appearance." This is because the objective of the scholars of *hadith* is to determine what reports are sound and which of them are not sound, which of them are acceptable and which of them are not acceptable. So they include in their definition of *sunnah* the actual physical appearance of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) or even behavioral characteristics and idiosyncrasies that he might have had: like how he moved his hand, how he played with his hair – if he did, how he walked, his actual physical disposition, *etcetera*. So that is his *sunnah* according to them, as they are reporting *about* the Prophet. Their objective is to describe him, whether it be physically, his behavior, how he interacted with people, inscribing what he said, reporting what he did, instances when a Companion had did a particular action in the company of him and he didn't say anything about it, or may even have praised the action itself.

On the other hand, the scholars of *usul al-fiqh* (legal theory) or the principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, define *sunnah* as, "anything which has been transmitted from the Prophet, whether it be a statement, an action, or an expression of approval of another's action, that is fit to be used as a source of Islamic law." So for instance, when they declare that a particular *hadith* is *sahih*, they are stating that it is fit to be used as a legal proof. So when they say *sunnah*, they mean the Sunnah that is a source of law. So from the Companions we

learn that it is not permissible for a man to marry a woman and her aunt at the same time, this being established through the Sunnah, that is from the Prophetic legislation. Thus, we have to accept that ruling, even though it is not mentioned in the Qur'an.

There are also the scholars of *fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence), who take the rules established by the *usuli'in* and apply them to make judgments regarding the legality of everyone's actions, whether they are *haram* (unlawful), *wajib* (obligatory), *mandub* (recommended), *makruh* (disliked), or *mubah* (merely permissible). They therefore define *sunnah* as, "what has been reported about the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) whether it be a statement, an action, an approval or authorization of something that does not fall into the category of obligation." This is because the *faqih's* job is to label everything as either obligatory, recommended, disliked, neutral, and so on. So when he says *sunnah*, he means something that is not obligatory, but nonetheless permissible. So for instance, to pray two *raka's* after *maghrib* is not obligatory. Or to pray two *raka's* before *fajr* is not obligatory. Or to pray the *witr* prayer, according to the majority of the *'ulama*, is not obligatory. The Hanafis, however, deem it *wajib*, but they make a distinct between *fard* and *wajib* that the other schools generally do not.

So one of the first things that Muslims have to do in educating themselves is to learn terminology. Often, people get into arguments about things because of different acceptable understandings of a particular word, when in the end, they are saying the same thing. But they seldom acknowledge that the disagreement began with the difference in how the word is understood by each party. This is extremely important and is important when we talk about the issue of *sunnah* and *bid'a*. The issues are: what is considered *bid'a*, how the *ulama* define *bid'a*, the difference of opinion about the definition of what *bid'a* actually entails, and in the end, is there really a difference of opinion? This is the question that this article will attempt to answer: is there really a difference of opinion between the majority of the *'ulama* who say that *bid'a* divides into the five different categories (*ahkham al-shar'*), and the minority that holds the view that there is no such thing as good *bid'a*? Is Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi, the great Maliki scholar of the 8<sup>th</sup> Islamic century who held the latter view, actually in clear contradiction with the overwhelming majority of the *'ulama*? Or is he merely defining *bid'a* in a different way? And when we look at how things are actually applied, we see that there is actually not much difference of opinion, though sometimes there may be inconsistencies between the scholars.

So to summarize, *sunnah* may have different connotations. Sometimes Sunnah is a reference to not just what the Prophet did and said or authorized. But sometimes Sunnah is even a reference to what the Sahaba did, or what the Sahaba agreed upon. Sometimes *sunnah* is a reference to the general practice of the people of a particular area of the Muslim world. So when you come across the term in books, these are the things that you need to be aware of. Which definition of *sunnah* is being utilized? Is it talking about the Sunnah of the Prophet? Or is it talking about the Sunnah of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs? As in the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) mentioned in the famous hadith, "Follow my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs who will be after me." So Sunnah is sometimes a reference to what they did, "[F]ollow their Sunnah" or what the Rightly-Guided Caliphs agreed upon. And sometimes it is a reference to the local agreement of a particular city or village. So one needs to take these things into account.

### The Meaning of Bid`a

And when it comes to *bid'a*, everyone is aware of the famous hadith in which the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) stated, "Whoever introduces in this matter of ours what is not from it, will have it

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rejected.” In other words, it is not accepted. And in another hadith, both on the authority of his wife ‘Aisha (Allah be well pleased with her), the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, “Whoever does an action which does not have our command will have it rejected.” And in another hadith he stated, “And beware of newly introduced matters. For verily, every matter that is newly introduced is a [blameworthy] innovation.” So all of these things indicate that *bid`a* is to be condemned.

*Bid`a* in its linguistic sense means “something that is done without a precedent, or something that is completely new.” So when the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) says, “Every innovation is misguidance,” some may take it to mean that every single thing that is new, or that has no precedent, or did not exist during the time of the Prophet and his Companions is misguidance. This would mean, for instance, that cameras are misguidance, or the fan on the ceiling that didn’t exist at the time of the Prophet, or the light bulbs that we all benefit from, or the carpeting on our floors of even the poorest of homes is misguidance. But of course we know that the Messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace) did not mean this, which is proof that the hadith is not general, even though those who make no distinction between good and bad *bid`a* claim that it is. If the hadith is general, then the principle stating that the ‘general’ phrase is “*ma ‘amma shayayni fa sa’idan*” (“anything that is exclusive of two or more things”) applies to it. It therefore cannot exclude anything. Everything has to be included if we accept that it is general, because if “every *bid`a* is misguidance,” we must accept that every single thing is misguidance that did not exist during the time of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace).

But, the fact that nobody accepts that those things I mentioned are a form of misguidance is proof that the hadith is specific. Meaning, it is referring to innovation *in the din* of Islam: innovation in worship, practice, the *ahkham* or judgments of Islam, in the technical sense of the term. The Prophet’s (Allah bless him and give him peace) message was a *bid`a* in the eyes of most of his people. But he was commanded to say, “Say to them: ‘I am not a *bid`a* of the messengers [Koran 46:9].” Meaning that, I have not come with anything different than what the other messengers have come with. So we don’t accept that the Prophet was misguidance, because of being something new to those people. The point being that we have to accept that the hadith is not to be taken in that general fashion. But that we can accept that it can apply to acts of worship. And because it does apply to acts of worship, every action in general that has a specific bearing on the *din* of Islam must return to the classifications of the *fuqaha*. They classify actions into five different categories. What we do is either: unlawful, compulsory, recommended, permissible without dislike, or permissible with dislike. These are the rulings of all our actions. And so *bid`a* must necessarily be divided in the same fashion. So there must be a such thing as a compulsory *bid`a*, a recommended *bid`a*, a *bid`a* which is permissible without dislike, or *bid`a* that is permissible but with dislike, and a *bid`a* which is unlawful. This is how the overwhelming majority of the *ulama* look at *bid`a*. This position has been upheld since very early in the history of Islam. For instance, Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi`i explained in a statement that, “*Bid`a* is of two types: praiseworthy and blameworthy.”<sup>2</sup> And if anybody is from the Salaf, it is Imam

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Gibril Fouad Haddad says,

“A major contribution of Imam al-Shafi`i (ra) in the Foundations of Jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) is his division of innovation (*al-bid`a*) and innovated matters (*al-muhdathat*) into “good” and “bad” depending whether they conformed or not to the guidelines of the Religion. This is authentically narrated from al-Shafi`i from two of his most prestigious students in the latter period of his life, the Egyptian hadith Masters Harmala ibn Yah.ya al-Tujaybi and al-Rabi` ibn Sulaymân al-Muradi:

H.armala said, “I heard al-Shafi`i (Allah be well pleased with him) say:

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Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i. He is *the* Imam of the Salaf by consensus, so if he stated that there is such a thing as two types of *bid'a*, who can come today and claim to the contrary?

Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi al-Maliki's Explanation

Who in the history of Islam has ever claimed that there is not a such thing as a good *bid'a*, until we come to someone such as Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi, whose words will form the basis of the rest of our discussion? In the end, hopefully, we will see that Imam Shatibi's position was not too much different than that of Imam al-Shafi'i and the other Imams of Islamic history. The reason I chose Imam al-Shatibi as an example is that the Salafis love to quote Imam al-Shatibi in this regard, because they assert that there is no such thing as a good *bid'a*. At least that is what they say, often seeking legitimacy for their position through Imam al-Shatibi, the famous Maliki legal theorist of Islamic Spain. And we will now turn to his work entitled, *Al-Itisam*, so that we may get a better picture of what Imam al-Shatibi actually said.

For instance, he says,

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Innovation is two types (*al-bid'atu bid'atan*): approved innovation (*bid'a mahmuda*) and disapproved innovation (*bid'a madhmuma*). Whatever conforms to the Sunna is approved (*mahmud*) and whatever opposes it is abominable (*madhmum*).

He used as his proof the statement of `Umar ibn al-Khattab (Allah be well pleased with him) about the [congregational] supererogatory night prayers in the month of Ramadan: "What a fine innovation this is!"

Al-Rabi` said, "Al-Shafi'i said to us:

Innovated matters are of two kinds (*al-muhdathatu min al-umuri darban*):

One is an innovation that contravenes (*ma uhditha yukhalifu*) something in the Qur'an or the Sunna or a Companion-report (*athar*) or the Consensus (*ijma`*): that innovation is misguidance (*fahadhihi al-bid'atu dalala*).

The other kind is the innovation of any and all good things (*ma uhditha min al-khayr*) contravening none of the above, and this is a blameless innovation (*wahadhihi muhdathatun khayru madhmuma*).

`Umar (Allah be well pleased with him) said, concerning the prayers of Ramadan: What a fine *bid'a* this is! meaning that it was innovated without having existed before and, even so, there was nothing in it that contradicted the above."

Thus al-Shafi'i set forth the essential, indispensable criterion for the determination of true *bid'a*, as defined, among others, by Imam al-Haytami, Qadi Abu Bakr Ibn al-`Arabi, and Imam al-Lacknawi respectively:

"*Bid'a* in terms of the Law is everything innovated in contravention of the Lawgiver's command and the latter's specific and general proof."

"Only the *bid'a* that contradicts the Sunna is blameworthy."

"*Bid'a* is all that did not exist in the first three centuries and for which there is no basis among the four sources of Islam" i.e. Qur'an, Sunna, Ijma`, and Qiyas.

Consequently, it is not enough for something merely to be novel to be a *bid'a*; it must also contradict the Religion.

[For complete article see: [http://www.livingislam.org/n/sdb\\_e.html](http://www.livingislam.org/n/sdb_e.html)]

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Therefore, *bid`a* is an expression about a particular matter or a particular way of acting in the *din*, which is invented. And it is invented in a particular way that *resembles* the way that has been prescribed (*mashru`a*). And the objective of this new way is for one to go overboard in his devotion to Allah (Be He glorified and exalted)” That is the objective: to go overboard in devotion to Allah (Be He glorified and exalted). And in this definition is the assumption that there is already an [exclusive] way that has been legislated; and when someone comes and takes a different approach regarding that thing, this is the innovation, is blameworthy and is what the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) referred to in the hadith, “Every *bid`a* is misguidance.”

An example of this is the fact that during the time of the Prophet, a number of the Companions came to his wives complaining that they wanted to be like the Messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace) or wanted to do more than what the Messenger had done<sup>3</sup>.

One of them was concerned with the Prophet’s fast. And he was told that at times he fasted and at other times he didn’t fast. Another was concerned with how he interacted with his wives. And he was told that he had a number of wives and had regular interaction with them. And the third showed concern for his night prayers. So he was informed that sometimes he stood half the night, sometimes he stands a third of the night, and sometimes he sleeps. In spite of hearing these things, they felt that the only way to attain Allah’s forgiveness was to do more than the Messenger (SAWS), especially since he had already been forgiven for any oversight he had committed or was to commit in the future. So, the first replied, “I am going to fast forever and not break my fast.” The second said, “I am never going to touch women ever again.” And the last stated, “I am going to stand all night in the prayer and never sleep.” The news of this conversation reached the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) and he responded to them by saying,

“My state is not like your state.... Sometimes I fast and sometimes I break my fast. Sometimes I stand in the night and sometimes I sleep. And I marry women. Marriage is from my Sunnah. So whoever desires beyond my Sunnah is not from me.”

So here is a clear example of an innovation in which a group of the Companions were trying to develop a particular way of doing things, which went against the way the Messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace) had established. So this will clearly fall into the category that Imam al-Shatibi mentioned in the above definition.

That being said, this brings to mind the hadith of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace),

Whoever introduces something into this matter of ours which is not from it will have it rejected.

It is important to point out that he said, “...what is not from it.” “Whoever introduces something into this matter of ours which is not from it. . .” So we may find a number of different things that were not done

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<sup>3</sup> Because their rationale lead them to believe that given the disparity between their spiritual rank and that of the Messenger, to approximate to his state would require that they do more than what he had done.

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during the time of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) and which did not have a specific precedent. They may not have that specific precedent as in this case, whereas there is the precedent of the Prophet's marriages, how he would stand during the night and how he fasted. But there may be a number of things that do not have a specific precedent *per say*, but also do not contradict the spirit and objectives of Islam. And if it doesn't contradict the objectives of the *shari'ah*, it can be considered from the Sunnah of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace). So, "Whoever introduces something into this matter of ours which is not from it will have it rejected." But if it is *from it*, it is **not** rejected and is therefore acceptable. And this is how the reconciliation is made between the rulings of the *'ulama* of later times on new matters they deemed praiseworthy, and those things not having a specific precedent during the time of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace).

Imam al-Shatibi continues,

This definition is taken according to the opinion of those who don't include matters of custom within the definition of what *bid'a* is. But such people only restrict *bid'a* to matters of worship.

Meaning that in the *salat*, *zakat* or the other pillars, if something is done other than what has been prescribed, then you are free to call it a *bid'a shar'iyya* (legal innovation). If you, for instance, intentionally add another *rak'a* or extra movement, or add an extra statement or *du'a* into the prayer [where it does not belong], or something similar in the other pillars of Islam, it is an innovation. But with regard to how you get married, and so on, business transactions, and all these things, *bid'a* does not fall into that meaning.

He continues,

Then there is another definition for those who apply *bid'a* to acts of worship and custom. It is said in this particular regard that innovation is a matter of methodology or way which is invented and carried out in a form which resembles the way which has been prescribed, such that the one who does it seeks by it the [same] matter [or objective] which is sought by that [method] which has been prescribed.

So such a person knows that there is a specific way that has been legislated for us to do a particular thing, but then decides, "I think this way is better so I am going to do it this way." For instance, he knows that there are four *raka's* for *zuhr*, but states, "I'll make eight. That's got to be better than four. It's a greater number, so it has to be better than four. And instead of saying a short *surah*, I'll say a long *surah* in every *raka'* whether people are following me or not. They need to learn to be strong in their faith and they should desire to pray." So this is another definition.

The he goes on to explain some of the words in the definition.

As for the term *tariqa* (which is 'methodology' or 'way'), *sabil* (path), *sunnah* (habits or practices), all of them have one meaning and all of them have the meaning of 'that which has been drawn for one to walk upon.' And this way of doing things has been attached to a way of doing things in the *din*, because the *din* is where it is enlisted. And the one who does it attributes that action to the *din*.

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So this is where he makes the distinction between his definition and that of others,

But if it happens that this particular way or practice is something invented in relationship to secular matters specifically, that thing will not be called a *bid`a*.

If it is something that is restricted to worldly matters, secular things, we don't refer to it as a *bid`a*. Imam al-Shatibi is making it clear by this statement that although the majority of the `ulama applied the term *bid`a* to even things which related to worldly matters, he does not imitate them in this. So when the Prophet said, "Every *bid`a* is misguidance," he said that he is referring only to matters related to the *din*. So on that basis there is no such thing as a good *bid`a*, if the identification of *bid`a* is restricted in such a manner. Actions cannot be invented or introduced into the religion of Islam that lack precedent. So there is no such thing as a good *bid`a*, since "Every *bid`a* is *dalala* (misguidance)" as the Prophet said. And if the term technically applies to a non-religious affair, it is not classified as a legal *bid`a*, but is called by another name.

[Later al-Shatibi says],

And so an example of new things which are worldly matters which are newly introduced that have no precedence are the different arts and crafts that have been invented, which did not exist in the past among the different countries and different peoples, which had no precedent before them. And since we know that the different approaches in the *din* divide into different categories, and among those different categories that they divide into are those things which have a basis in the *shari`ah*, and there are others that do not have a basis in the *shari`ah*, as a result of this, we have specifically applied this definition (*bid`a*) to those things which do not have a basis in the *shari`ah*.

In other words, Imam al-Shatibi is stating that a *bid`a* is anything that does not have a basis or foundation in the Sacred Law. To state it plainly: if it doesn't have a basis, it is a *bid`a*, but if it *does* have a basis, it is not called a *bid`a*. Even if it didn't exist during the time of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) in that specific form, as he is going to clarify, *in sha Allah*.

So then he says,

In all of this it is said,

meaning that *bid`a* is something that has no basis in the *shari`ah*, because the specific characteristic of a *bid`a* is that it is something which is outside of what the Divine Lawgiver has envisioned,

that by mentioning this specific part of the definition, all of those things which appear to a person at first glance as being things which have been invented, newly introduced and condemnable which pertain to the *din*, this particular characteristic of the definition excludes those things from being considered innovations. Such as the innovation or introduction of the science of *nahw wa tasrif* (Arabic grammar and word conjugation), definitions, legal source methodology, the science of *kalam* or `aqida, and all the other sciences which serve the *shari`ah* of Islam. For verily, even though these are things which did not exist during the first age of Islamic history, the foundation of those things were present in the Law at those times, though

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they specifically did not exist. An example of that is the order given to vowel the Qur'an that has been transmitted from the past.

We know this from the order given by `Ali ibn Abi Talib to Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali (Allah be well pleased with them both) to do the *`irab* (grammatical breakdown) of the Qur'an. In the famous narration, `Ali ibn Abi Talib heard one of the people attempt to recite the verses of *Surah al-Tawba*, "...Allah declares innocence from the mushrikin, as does His Messenger," but who instead recited it as, "Allah declares innocence from the mushrikin and He declares innocence from the Messenger." When `Ali ibn Abi Talib heard this *ajami*, non-Arab, recite this, he said, "We have to do something about this." And he ordered Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali to record the Arabic language and develop a system to teach the language and proper grammar. So here we have a foundation or precedent for the science of *nahw* in the *shari'ah*. And the basis is the order given by the Companions because there was a necessity for it.

He continues,

And the sciences related to the language are things which guide us to a correctness about the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

So to record the science of Arabic grammar, Arabic language, the methodology of words and so on, are things which help us to understand the Qur'an and Sunnah, to preserve the Qur'an and Sunnah, in its meaning, its pronunciations, and its recitation. And although they did not exist at that particular time, they have a necessity which lead to them being established and transmitted, and they cannot be referred to as being *bid`a* according to Imam al-Shatibi's definition.

He says,

The reality of the sciences related to language, they are the essence or knowledge of true devotion done with the different expressions of the Law, which indicate the different meanings that they indicate, in relationship to how they are to be taken and how they are to be conveyed.

And another example that he gives is *usul al-fiqh* (Legal Theory). [He says],

As to *usul al-fiqh*, it is something whose meaning is no more than for one to isolate all the small particulars and combine them into general broad categories with their different proofs, so that these things can be divided into particular categories, and be clearly in front of the eyes of the *mutjahid* so that he can easily extract from the Qur'an, Sunnah and the other sources of Islam, what should be extracted from them. And the same thing goes for *`ilm al-kalam*, the science of speculative theology. Because *ilm al-kalam* is nothing more than establishing the different proofs of the Qur'an and Sunnah, or those things, which result from the Qur'an and Sunnah in the area of *tawhid* and that which pertains to *tawhid*. Just as *fiqh* is the establishment of those things that are in the area [or realm] of actions and secondary matters related to our actions.

Congruence Between the Two Points of View

So in the end, when one looks at the difference between what the majority of the *`ulama* said about *bid`a* and its different definitions, and what Imam al-Shatibi stated, there is only a difference in expression or semantics. For instance, Imam al-Shatibi said in response to the hadith that Umar ibn al-Khattab gathered the Companions behind one imam in the *masjid* after he saw them praying individually that, "...this is not a *bid`a*," even though Umar ibn al-Khattab said, "What a good *bid`a* this is." Imam Shatibi replied,

That was a metaphor. He didn't really mean *bid`a* as in the hadith of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace). He meant it metaphorically, because he had a basis for his actions.

And that is the fact that the Prophet had already prayed *tarawih* for three nights in congregation. On the other hand, the majority of the *`ulama* said that what Umar did was a *bid`a*, and the proof that it was a *bid`a* is that he said it was. And a proof that there is such a thing as a good *bid`a* is that he said, "This is a good *bid`a*." So for them, a *bid`a* is 'what did not exist during the time of the Messenger;' whereas Imam al-Shatibi envisioned *bid`a* as 'that which does not have a foundation in Islam, whether it was done in the time of the Messenger or afterwards.' So something which is new, as long as they have a textual basis, even according to Imam al-Shatibi, is not a *bid`a*. And they may base it on not just a general verse from the Qur'an, or a general statement from the Sunnah, but on *`ijma* (scholarly consensus), *qiyas* (legal analogy), *ihstihsan* (the analogy inconsistent with what is apparent) or *al-masalih al-mursala* (the consideration of an unspecified interest), or the various other sources of Islamic law that the different Schools accept. But other *`ulama* said, "It didn't exist during the time of the Prophet, and therefore it is a *bid`a*."

For example, when they gathered the Qur'an into one Book, the Prophet didn't do it in his time and therefore it was a *bid`a*. Imam al-Shatibi replied,

No, it is not a *bid`a*, because Abu Bakr did it. And the Messenger of Allah said, 'Follow my example and the example of the Rightly-Guided Successors, cling to it with your molars.'" So there is a basis for it and it therefore is not a *bid`a*.

But the majority classify it as a *bid`a*, because they define *bid`a* in a different way. Or when the Companions decided to canonize one official reading of the Qur'an, even though it had been allowed during the time of the Prophet for them to read the Qur'an in their different dialects. [For he (saws) said] "The Qur'an has been revealed in seven different ways, so recite for them whatever is easy for you." But during the time of Uthman ibn `Affan, he ordered that those which were not written in the dialect of the Quraysh be burned, and established one official text or reading of the Qur'an and sent them off to the different corners of the Islamic world. The Prophet didn't do that and so it is a *bid`a* according to the majority. Imam al-Shatibi however replied with the same response. So the majority defines *bid`a* as what was outside of the time of the Messenger and Imam al-Shatibi defined it merely as, "whatever doesn't have a foundation."

### Inconsistency and the Misrepresentation of His Opinion

Now Imam al-Shatibi does run into some problems, because he displays a certain amount of inconsistency in his approach. And a lot of it is rooted in his tenacious clinging to the rulings of Imam Malik in Anas (Allah be well pleased with him) in passing his judgments. So for instance, you find that there are reports that Imam Malik disapproved of what is known as "*qira'a jama'iyya*" or reciting the Qur'an in congregation. In the Maliki *madhhab*, that is the popular opinion. If you go to places like Morocco, it is something that is done all

the time. They do it after *fajr*, they do it after *maghrib*, and in some places they even do it after *‘asr*. They gather to recite half a *juz*’ of the Qur’an collectively, recite a collective *du’a* and return to their daily routines. It gives the *masjid* a spiritual ambience, and engenders the awe that a sanctuary should have. Additionally, the people who work full-time, but have memorized the Qur’an in the past, can sit in those circles and review their Qur’an, because they might not have the time or concentration to review it at home because of their children, wives, chores and other distractions. So they can come to the *masjid* to do this and keep it in their memory. But there are those who deny that there is benefit in it and Imam al-Shatibi declares, “This is a *bid’a* that has no basis.” But it does have a basis, because of the hadith in which the Prophet said, “No people gather together in any of the houses of Allah to recite the Book of Allah, to study it with one another, except that mercy covers them, tranquility descends upon them, the angels surround them, and Allah mentions them to those in His presence.” So here we have a general statement, “No people gather together in one of the houses of Allah,’ which is the *masjid*, “reciting the Book of Allah, and studying it with one another,” except that things happen. Imam al-Shatibi stated that there is no basis for it, but there is a basis for it. There is a report from the hadith itself, even if there may not be a specific precedent during the time of the Prophet. But Imam al-Shatibi cannot explain to us today, why he seemingly contracted himself by giving a definition and then ruling in a manner, which seems to go against it. Allah have mercy on him! But we don’t know what he will say. But it is clear that there is a contradiction, there is an inconsistency in his approach and his methodology, so we have to take that into account too in our critique of Imam Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (Allah be well pleased with him) and his position on *bid’a*. But what we really need to understand is that those who use Imam al-Shatibi as a proof for their not being a such thing as good *bid’a*, have utterly misunderstood his opinion, and have distorted his opinion to the extent that many Muslims deny the concept of *bid’a hasana* (a good innovation).

### Imam al-Shatibi, Ibn Hazm, and Linguistic Dissidence

The truth is that there is a such thing as good *bid’a*. Only Imam al-Shatibi does not like to call something which has a basis in Islam a *bid’a*. This is similar to the position of Ibn Hazm al-Zahiri who said that there is no *majaz* or figurative language in the Qur’an. The majority of the *‘ulama* said, “There is *majaz* in the Qur’an,” and asked him, “Why don’t you accept that there is *majaz* in the Qur’an?” He replied, “Because ‘*majaz* is the brother of lying or falsehood,’ and to call the Qur’an *majaz* is tantamount to calling Allah a liar. i.e. ‘He really didn’t mean what He said.’” But then when you look at Ibn Hazm and his interpretation of the different verses of the Qur’an which others describe as figurative, you find that he interpreted them the same way that the rest of the *‘ulama* do. So for instance, there was a famous scholar from the Maliki School, Ibn Khuwayz Mindad, who had a tendency towards literalism, and he said about the verse in *Surah al-Baqarah* where Allah says, “*Verily there are some stones from which rivers burst forth. Some of them fall out fear of Allah,*” [Ibn Khuwayz Mindad said], “This indicates that stones have intelligence.” Ibn Hazm said about Ibn Kuwayz, “And perhaps that stone had more intelligence than he does.” And for this reason it was said, “The tongue of Ibn Hazm and the sword of Hajjaj were blood-brothers,” as he was very hard on anyone who opposed his positions. But when you look at the verses which are “problematic,” he gives them a figurative interpretation, but simply refused to call it *ta’wil*. But that is how he dealt with the issue.

So we have come full circle and have returned to what was previously mentioned about definitions and varying terminology. It is one of the rules of debate that you always have to define your terms. What are you debating about? How do you understand that term? This one may be speaking about this particular term from this aspect, and that one from that aspect. So you have to be clear from the very beginning. For

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perhaps there is no need to debate if it is discovered that the basis of the disagreement is a mere semantic difference.

We ask Allah (Be He glorified and exalted) to increase our knowledge of Islam and our practice.

*Wa aquli qawli hadha. Wa astagfirullah li wa lakum wa li as-siril-muslimina wal-muslimat.*

(I say this and I ask Allah's forgiveness for me and for you, as well as for the rest of the Muslims, male and female.)