

Bid'ah as a Pathway to Shirk: Safeguarding Tawhīd in Contemporary Muslim Societies

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1st Published: 2026

Abstract: *Tawhīd, the uncompromising Aqidah in Allah, is the central principle of Islam and the foundation of Deen. The Qur'an and Sunnah repeatedly emphasize that Shirk, associating partners in Tawhid, is the gravest of sins, one that will not be forgiven without sincere Taubah. Throughout Muslim history, however, Bid'ah (religious innovations) have emerged as one of the most dangerous threats to Tawhīd. Bid'ah consists of practices introduced into Islam without any sanction from the Qur'an or the Talim of Rasulullah (S), often cloaked in cultural traditions or exaggerated acts of Taqwa. Their subtlety makes them particularly dangerous, for they appear outwardly good but gradually open the door to corruption and, ultimately, Shirk. Amir al-Mumineen 'Alī (as) in Nahj al-Balāghah describes Bid'ah as a mixture of truth and falsehood, an admixture that confuses Muslims and makes Bid'ah difficult to detect. Building on Ayah of Qur'an, Nabawi Talim, and the Hidayah of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), this paper explores how Bid'ah, though often introduced with good intentions, undermines the purity of Ibadah and weakens the foundation of Aqidah. The study examines three contemporary manifestations of Bid'ah: (i) ritual excess and misplaced Taqwa that overshadow Fard Ibadah, (ii) cultural assimilation through pagan-rooted customs such as Halloween, and (iii) social Bid'ah in Nikah practices that replace the call of the Qur'an for simplicity with materialistic and restrictive norms. These examples show that Bid'ah is not an abstract historical issue but a living danger, eroding both individual spirituality and collective identity. To safeguard Tawhīd, two complementary strategies are required. First, personal vigilance, Muslims must constantly examine their Ibadah, seek istaghfar for hidden forms of Shirk, and ensure their practices remain faithful to Qur'an and Ahl al-Bayt (as). Second, communal reform, scholars, leaders, and families must work to eliminate harmful customs, revive authentic Sunnah, and strengthen Islamic identity in the face of global cultural pressures. In conclusion, Bid'ah must be understood as a pathway to Shirk, not as minor errors. Protecting Tawhīd requires sincerity, humility, and adherence to the path of Rasulullāh (S) and the Ahl al-Bayt (as). Only by rejecting Bid'ah and upholding authentic Hidayah can Muslims preserve the purity of Aqidah in both personal life and society.*

Keywords: *Tawhīd, Shirk, Bid'ah, Qur'an, Sunnah, Ahl al-Bayt, Islamic reform, cultural practices, ritual excess, Nikāḥ.*

1. Introduction:

Among the most central and uncompromising Ta'lim of Islam is Tawhīd, without partner or associate. The Qur'an and Sunnah and Talim of Ahl al-Bayt (as) stress repeatedly that Shirk, the association of partners with Allah, is the gravest sin, one that undermines the very essence of Aqidah. Allah declares that He does not forgive Shirk except for those who repent (Qur'an 4:48). Rasulullah (S) warned that Shirk is more hidden than the creeping of an ant on a black stone in the darkness of night, reminding Muslims that even small deviations in Ibadah can carry immense danger. The mission of Rasulullāh (S) and the Imāms of Ahl al-Bayt (as) was to protect the Ummah from Shirk and to preserve the purity of Tawhīd. Yet history shows that Bid'ah in religion have repeatedly crept into Muslim societies. Unlike open disbelief, Bid'ah often disguises itself as an act of devotion or cultural practice. It is precisely this subtlety that makes it so dangerous. Amīr al-Mu'minīn 'Alī (as) explains in Nahj al-Balāghah (Sermon 50): [1]

Bid'ah is born from misguided desires and fabricated rulings, which contradict the Book of Allah. Falsehood, when mixed with elements of truth, becomes harder to recognize and easier for people to accept. As he says: [2]

"If wrong had been pure, it would not remain hidden from those who seek it; and if right had been pure, those who opposed it would have been silenced. But wrong and right are taken together, mixed, and swallowed whole. At this stage, Shaitān overpowers his followers, while only those survive for whom Allah has decreed protection."

This statement reflects the subtle nature of Bid'ah. It rarely appears as an open act of Shirk but instead grows gradually, spreading through cultural imitation, ritual exaggeration, or social practices that contradict Hidayah. Over time, such Bid'ah normalize deviation, weaken the spirit of Tawhīd, and open the way to Shirk.

2. Bid'ah and the Slippery Road to Shirk:

The Qur'an warns: [3]

"Surely Allah does not forgive that partners should be ascribed to Him, but He forgives what is less than that for whomsoever He wills. Whoever ascribes partners to Allah has indeed devised a great sin." (Qur'an 4:48)

This Ayah clarifies that even the smallest form of Shirk is an unforgivable sin unless one repents.

Rasulullah (S) also says: [4]

"Shirk is more hidden than the creeping of an ant on a black stone in the darkness of night."

Thus, even seemingly harmless Bid'ah can gradually lead to corruption in 'ibādah. A Muslim may begin with a minor ritual addition, but over time, entire communities adopt practices that dilute the core of Tawhīd. The Ahl al-Bayt (as) constantly warned against Bid'ah.

Al Imām al-Ṣādiq (as) says: [5]

“Every Bid’ah is misguidance, and every misguidance leads to the Fire.”

Therefore, vigilance is necessary, as Shaiṭ’ān beautifies Bid’ah to make them seem righteous.

3. Contemporary Manifestations of Bid’ah:

i. Excessive Ritualisation and Misplaced Piety

True ‘ibādah is rooted in Taat, humility, and Maḥabbah for Allah. Yet, many Muslims today are drawn to exaggerated or ritualised practices not sanctioned by the Qur’an or Ahl al-Bayt (as). For example, any religious gathering is a noble act, but if performed in a way that replaces Fard Ṣalāt, or done in theatrical gatherings for show, it becomes Bid’ah. Amir al-Mumineen ‘Alī (as) warned: [6]

“The most hated of people to Allah are those who imitate people in their religion, introducing in Islam what does not belong to it.”

This demonstrates that even acts of Taat must remain within the boundaries of Sunnah, otherwise they risk turning into Bid’ah.

ii. Cultural Customs and Pagan Practices (Example: Halloween)

One of the clearest examples in Western society is the adoption of Halloween by some Muslims. Although many see it as harmless fun, its origins are rooted in pagan beliefs concerning the dead, spirits, and superstitions. Such practices undermine Tawḥīd by normalizing ideas contrary to the Talim of Islam. By celebrating pagan-rooted customs, Muslims risk cultural assimilation that weakens their spiritual identity and introduces elements of Shirk, even if indirectly. Children should be taught instead to connect with the Qur’an, Du‘ā’, and authentic celebrations like ‘Eid al-Fiṭr, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Ghadir, Eid al-Mubahala, Eid al-Zahra

iii. Social Bid’ah in Nikāḥ and Marriage Practices

Nikāḥ in Islam is intended to be a simple and dignified institution. However, in many Muslim societies, cultural barriers and Bid’ah complicate this easy Sunnah, delaying Nikah and spreading corruption. The Qur’an commands: [7]

“Do not prevent them from marrying their husbands if they agree among themselves on reasonable terms.” (Qur’an 2:232)

Yet many fathers unjustly reject suitors due to tribal pride, wealth, or worldly status. This practice is condemned in both Qur’an and Shī‘ī tradition. Al Imām al-Bāqir (as) says: [8]

“When a man comes to you whose character and religion please you, then marry him [to your daughter]. If you do not, there will be tribulation and great corruption on earth.”

Unfortunately, contemporary norms often prioritize lavish weddings, excessive Mahr, and materialistic expectations, which are clear Bid'ah that obstruct the Sunnah of early and simple Nikah. The Ahl al-Bayt (as) emphasized ease and accessibility in Nikāḥ, seeing it as protection for chastity and society.

iv. The Path to Preserving Tawḥīd

To protect Tawḥīd in the age of globalization, Muslims must cultivate two key principles:

Individual Vigilance: Constant self-examination to avoid shirk, whether apparent or subtle. Practice to recite daily Du'ā', such as the Dua taught by Rasulullah (S), Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as), Al Imam Ali Ibn al-Husain Zayn al-Abidin (as). Every Muslim must read this Dua of Rasulullah (S): [9]

"Allāhumma 'innī Aa'ūdhu Bika An Ushrika Bika Wa-Anā a'lam, wa-Astaghfiruka Limā Lā A'lam"

"O Allah, I seek refuge in You from knowingly committing Shirk, and I do Istaghfar for doing so unknowingly."

v. Communal Reform:

Ulama, families, and teachers must work collectively to remove harmful Bid'ah. This includes simplifying Nikah, discouraging pagan-rooted Rusum, and ensuring that acts of 'ibādah align with Qur'an and Sunnah. Al Imām al-Ṣādiq (as) beautifully summarised: [10]

"Our affair is not to be taken up by everyone. Bid'ah destroy Deen, and our path is that which is supported by the Qur'an and our Sunnah."

4. Conclusion:

Bid'ah is not merely an old issue; it is a living threat to the Ummah's connection with Allah. Whether through exaggerated rituals, cultural assimilation, or oppressive social customs, harmful Bid'ah erode Tawḥīd. The responsibility upon every Muslim is to distinguish between authentic 'ibādah and deceptive practices. True Ibadah lies in Maḥabbah (love of Allah), sincerity in Ṣalāt, remembrance with humility, and adherence to the Sunnah of Rasulullah (S) and Talim of Ahl al-Bayt (as). The safeguarding of Tawḥīd requires a balance of awareness and reform, rejecting Bid'ah, upholding simplicity in Deen, and strengthening the bond between servant and Lord.

May Allah protect us from every form of Shirk and Bid'ah, and may He grant us the Tawfīq to remain firm upon the path of Tawḥīd and the Sunnah of Rasullāh (S) and his Ahl al-Bayt (as). Āmīn.

Sources:

1. *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon 50
2. *Ibid*
3. *Qur'an* 4:48
4. *al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, p. 388
5. *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1, p. 54
6. *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Saying 124
7. *Qur'an* 2:232
8. *al-Kāfī*, vol. 5, p. 347
9. *Sunan al-Nasa'i*, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, no. 10407; *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 27742, *Classified ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, vol. 1, p. 287, no. 3731.
10. *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1, p. 54

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