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### OP-ED: Pedigreed bigotry —Feisal Naqvi



*The term "bid'a" has consistently been used throughout Islamic history to attack those accused of not following the sunna of the Prophet (pbuh). Mr Khan concedes as much when he alleges that a renowned Sufi saint once referred to Shias as "ahl al bid'a". As every scholar of Arabic knows, the term "ahl al bid'a" is universally translated as "heretics," not as "innovators"*

Since Atif Khan did not bother to lay out the conclusions implicit in his article ("Shariah and Sufi tariqah," Daily Times, March 20) let me do the honours. Cutting through the fat of Mr Khan's academic verbiage, his basic point is that the attitude towards Shias of his teacher, Sheikh Nuh Keller, is not just plain old bigotry but in fact highly pedigreed bigotry. Thus when Sheikh Nuh refers to Shiaism as "bid'a" he is not just giving his own opinion, but the opinion of "the entire lineage of Sufi scholars who ascribe to precisely the same views".

What I find most disagreeable here is that the article lacks the courage of its convictions. Take, for example, Mr Khan's outburst against sectarianism. We are told, repeatedly, that sectarianism is bad, very bad in fact, and so Shias should not be killed. We are also told that the Prophet (pbuh) strictly forbade sectarianism and said that "Allah's hand is over the group and whoever dissents from them [i.e., the group] departs to Hell."

All well and good, but the question is, who constitute 'the group'? According to Mr Khan, one adheres to 'the group' by following one of the four traditional schools of jurisprudence. In other words, one adheres to 'the group' by being a Sunni. Anybody who is not a Sunni (like, um, Shias) is therefore not of "the group" and presumably "depart[ing] to Hell."



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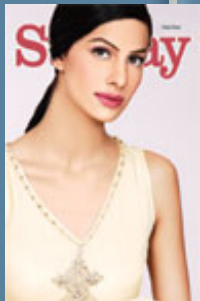
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Let me state again that while I respect Mr Khan's right to be a bigot, I do have a problem with mealy-mouthed hypocrisy. Why preach to the world that sectarianism is bad when you are also defining sectarianism to mean being a Shia? Unless Mr Khan's anger is actually directed at all those Hanafis who can't stand the Hanbalis, his condemnation of sectarianism amounts simply to a very thinly disguised condemnation of Shiaism.

The same dissimulation can be found in Mr Khan's analysis of the term "bid'a." Note first that there is no denial by Mr Khan that Sheikh Nuh referred to Shiaism not as "innovation," but as "bid'a." However, Mr Khan states repeatedly that "bid'a" does not mean "heresy" but instead only means "innovation."

This shows up Mr Khan as a bad student of his own teacher's writings. More specifically, Sheikh Nuh has written two articles that make it entirely clear that he considers the term "bid'a" to mean not just "innovation" but rather "reprehensible innovation."

In the first article, "How would you respond to the claim that Sufism is bid'a?", Sheikh Nuh writes that he does not consider Sufism to be "bid'a or reprehensible innovation" because even though elements of Sufism did not exist at the time of the Prophet (pbuh), neither did other Islamic disciplines, "like Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir), hadith, and Qur'an recital (tajwid)". In this context, Sheikh Nuh goes on to quote Imam Shafi'i as having said that, "Anything which has a support (mustanad) from the shari'a is not bid'a, even if the early Muslims did not do it".

In his second article, "The Concept of Bid'a in the Islamic Shari'a" the Sheikh writes that "There are few topics that generate as much controversy today in Islam as what is sunna and what is bid'a or reprehensible innovation." The same article goes on to make the following point:

"Islamic scholars have established the rule that any new matter must be judged according to the principles and primary texts of Sacred Law: whatever is attested to by the law as being good is acknowledged as good, and whatever is attested to by the law as being a contravention and bad is rejected as a blameworthy innovation (bid'a)."

Mr Khan could presumably defend his position with the argument that there is a distinction between even "reprehensible innovation" and "heresy." However, he would again be mistaken because "bid'a" has always been considered to be a very dangerous term in Islamic history. To quote Sheikh Nuh again, "Sunna and innovation (bid'a) are two opposed terms in the language of the Lawgiver." As a consequence, the term "bid'a" has consistently been used throughout Islamic history to attack those accused of not following the sunna of the Prophet (pbuh). Indeed, Mr Khan concedes as much when he alleges that a renowned Sufi saint once referred to Shias as "ahl al bid'a". As every scholar of Arabic knows, the term "ahl al bid'a" is universally translated as "heretics," not

as “innovators.”

In light of the above, Mr Khan’s pious homilies about how the misinterpretation of bid’a “feed into the sectarian divisiveness that costs lives” are irritatingly unctuous. Have no fear, Mr Khan. If anybody loses his life, it will only be another Shia: nothing for you to worry about.

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