

Belief in Allaah (part 2 of 2): Shirk, the opposite of Tawheed

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

The Arabic word shirk is the opposite of Tawheed, Allaah's oneness, and is more inclusive than polytheism and idolatry. It means associating Allaah with other deities. Shirk is to associate others with Allaah in certain aspects designated as unique to Him and exclusively His in the Qur'aan and Sunnah.

There is no issue upon which Islaam is so strict as the one of monotheism (Tawheed). Associating partners with God (Shirk) is the deadliest sin, the greatest violation with which the Lord of the heavens and the earth may be defied. Death in the state of shirk permanently severs a person from divine grace:

[“Surely Allaah forgives not that a partner be set with Him (i.e. the sin of shirk), and forgives all besides that to whom he pleases.”]¹

Shirk has many forms, some of which will be discussed below.

The Greater Shirk

Acts which fall under this category of shirk are regarded as unforgivable. Allaah will not forgive them unless one repents.

[“Verily, Allaah does not forgive shirk, but He forgives other than that to whom He pleases”]

This category contradicts the very purpose of creation, as expressed in Allaah's statement:

[“I have not created jinn or mankind except to worship Me Alone.”]²

In this category of shirk, acts of worship are directed to beings other than Allaah or alongside Him, as is their rewards. Allaah gives an example of this type in the Qur'aan, in His saying:

[“So when they ride in the ships, they call upon Allaah, being sincerely obedient to Him, but when he brings them safe to the land, lo, they commit shirk with Him.”]³

¹ Qur'aan [4:48]

² Qur'aan [51:56]

³ Qur'aan [29:65]

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The Qur'aan stresses in many verses that Allaah does not share His powers with any partner. It warns those who believe their idols will intercede for them that they, together with the idols, will become fuel for Hellfire on the Day of Judgment.

The greater shirk includes invoking or supplicating to a false deity, prophet, angel, saint, idol, or anything besides Allaah. Christians pray to a man who they believe to share divinity with Allaah, the Prophet of Allaah Jesus, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*). Catholics direct certain types of worship to saints, angels, and Mary, which they regard as "veneration". All these things are regarded as shirk.

It is also considered shirk to pray to Prophet Muhammad, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*), or to graves of holy men.

Believing in the legislation of others, whether governments or religious leaders in opposition to the clear teachings of Islaam is also a major form of shirk, as Allaah says:

[“They (referring to Jews and Christians) took their rabbis and their monks to be their Lords besides Allaah.”]⁴

They took them as lords besides Allaah not by directly praying to them, but by wilfully accepting their changing the lawful into prohibited and the forbidden into lawful in Allaah's religion. They gave them the authority that only Allaah has - to legislate in divine law.

Another form of major shirk is giving any creation a portion of divine love reserved for Allaah.

[“And of mankind are some who take (for worship) others besides Allaah as rivals (to Allaah). They love them as they love Allaah. But those who believe love Allaah (more than anything else)...”]⁵

Lesser Forms of Shirk

Swearing by other than Allaah and carrying out religious acts for worldly gain, like showing off or to win favours are two of the lesser forms of shirk. Allaah's Messenger said:

“The thing I fear for you the most is ‘lesser shirk.’ The companions asked ‘Oh! Messenger of Allaah, what is “lesser shirk?” He replied showing off, for surely Allaah will say on the Day of Resurrection when people are receiving their rewards, ‘Go to those for whom you were showing off in the material world and see if you can find any reward from them.’”⁶

Once, the Prophet, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*), announced:

⁴ Qur'aan [9:31]

⁵ Qur'aan [2:165]

⁶ Ahmad, at-Tabaraanee, al-Baihaqee

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"O people, beware of hidden shirk! The people asked, 'O messenger of Allaah, what is hidden shirk?' He replied, 'When a man gets up to pray and strives to beautify his prayer because people are looking at him; that is hidden shirk.'"⁷

Showing off (riyaa in Arabic) is the practice of performing any of the various forms of worship in order to be seen and praised by people. Doing religious acts to impress people destroys the spiritual benefits of righteous deeds and incurs sin on the person. Sometimes, even the most pious are not spared of it because it is so hidden and the motivating force behind it is so ingrained. Getting rid of it involves that one concentrate upon the fact that they are performing the worship for Allaah's pleasure alone, and not the pleasure of people.

A Muslim must take great care to ensure intentions begin pure and remain pure whenever righteous deeds are being done. In order to ensure this, the saying of Allaah's name is enjoined in Islaam before all acts of importance. A series of informal prayers (du'aas) have also been prescribed by the Prophet (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*) before and after all natural habits to turn them into acts of worship and develop awareness of Allaah.

Everyday Examples of Shirk

Astrology and Horoscopes

Predicting the future by means of comparing the positions of stars and constellations, in conjunction with the time of year that a person was born is a type of Shirk. Only Allaah knows the future, so it is impossible to predict future events by studying the stars. This is a form of shirk because belief in astrology credits astrologers with knowledge of the future, as well as the fact that they ascribe certain powers to created objects – stars – that neither Allaah nor science has assigned.

Fortune-Telling

Reading palms, looking into a crystal ball, and other forms used to foretell the future are forms of shirk for the same reasons given above.

The Number 13

A common example of shirk is belief that the number thirteen is an unlucky number, especially in the West, where it is not uncommon for tall buildings not to have a thirteenth floor. It is shirk because it assigns the ability to bring bad fortune to a mere number!

Lucky or Unlucky Creatures

It has been a common custom for certain animals or objects to be associated with good or bad luck for many centuries in many parts of the world. For example, black cats, magpies, rabbits' feet, and horseshoes are thought to bring good luck. All of these examples are shirk because the ability to bring good or bad luck is assigned to Allaah's creation.

⁷ Ibn Khuzaimah

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All Muslims should avoid all forms of shirk, and the only way one can be sure to do so is if they study its different forms and understand well the concept of Tawheed. Shirk is the gravest of sins in Islaam, more severe than other grave sins such as murder and adultery, for it vies with the sole right of Allaah to worship. Thus, it is worthy that Muslims do their best to avoid shirk and become eligible to enter the Gardens of Paradise.