

Chapter 11: Some Objections and the Answers Thereto

[An Objection to the Definition of Islam](#)

[Objection](#)

On page four of “*Shi‘ah dar Islam*”, the following remark is made: “*Islam* etymologically means surrender and obedience.”¹ Though this definition is etymologically correct, in the Islamic culture, *islam* applies exclusively to the religion preached by the Noble Prophet (“That which Muhammad brought”).

According to the definition of Islam you offer in that book, we would not be justified in construing Qur’anic verse,

وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ

“Should anyone follow a religion other than Islam, it shall never be accepted from him...”²

to mean that Islam is the ultimate religion, for *islam*, according to your explanation, means obedience, which can take the form of a multiplicity of religions no one of which would be superior to the others. Your definition of *islam* disagrees with *hadiths* that confirm the popular understanding of *islam*. (A number of these *hadiths* is recorded in the second volume of “*Usul al-Kafi*”.) Furthermore, there is universal consensus that *islam* is the name of the particular religion God revealed to Muhammad.³

[Reply](#)

Let me begin by quoting what I have said in “*Shi‘ah dar Islam*”: “*Islam* etymologically means surrender and obedience. The Holy Qur’an calls the religion which invited men toward this end “*islam*” since its general purpose is the surrender of man to the laws governing the Universe and men, with the result that

through this surrender he worships only the One God and obeys only His commands.”

Where do I say that *islam* has only one meaning and that is its etymologic meaning or that wherever *islam* appears in the Qur'an or *hadiths* it denotes solely this meaning? What I have said concerns solely the question of appellation and nothing more. You also acknowledge the etymologic meaning of *islam* in your letter: “*Islam* is absolute submission to God. This, however, does not become manifest unless one utters the two testifications of faith and abides by Islamic rules.”

At any rate, *islam* is the name of this sacred religion. This usage of *islam* as the name of a particular religion does not disown its etymologic meaning. As a matter of fact, in Islamic sources, the word is used in both senses. For an example of its usage in its etymologic meaning, it suffices to note the following verse:

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ دِينًا مِمَّنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ وَاتَّبَعَ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا ۖ وَاتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ خَلِيلًا

“And who has a better religion than him who submits [*aslama*: past participle, from *islam*] his will to God, being virtuous, and follows the creed of Abraham...”⁴

This verse indicates that the creed of Abraham was a manifestation of *islam* in the sense of submission to God. One finds *islam* used in this sense also in the words of Jacob's children:

قَالُوا نَعْبُدُ إِلَهَكَ وَإِلَهَ آبَائِكَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ إِلَٰهًا وَاحِدًا وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ

“They said, ‘We will worship your God, and the God of your fathers, Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, the One God, and to Him do we submit.’”⁵

You further contend that if *islam* denoted the etymologic meaning of the word and not the conventional meaning, we would not be justified in citing verse (3:85) as proof that Islam is the ultimate religion. This contention however is based on two presuppositions: one, that there is no reason other than the verse in question for Islam being the final religion and, two, that in this verse, *islam* denotes the conventional meaning, not the etymologic meaning. Both of these presuppositions, however, are false.

You further write, “*Hadiths* confirm the conventional meaning of the term.” No one denies that there is such a meaning. The point is: the conventional meaning does not discard the etymologic meaning. Thus, the *hadiths* in some cases refer to and describe the conventional meaning and in some cases point to the etymologic meaning (i.e., submission, obedience), explicating its various degrees.

As to your point that people all around the world know

islam

as the religion brought by Muhammad, there is no question about that. In fact, it was Abraham who first introduced this name:

مِلَّةَ آبَائِكُمْ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ۚ هُوَ سَمَّاكُمْ الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ قَبْلُ

“...the faith of your father, Abraham. He named you Muslims before...”[6](#)

Thus, the Qur’an refers to prophets after Abraham and their followers (e.g., Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Solomon, Queen of Sheba, Joseph, Jacob’s sons, Pharaoh’s magicians, and Jesus’ disciples) as those who embraced Islam. *Islam* was initially used in reference to the religion ordained by God in allusion to its being submission to Him; it was only in time that it became a proper noun, even as the Divine Names were first used as attributes for God in their etymologic sense, but due to repeated usage over a long period of time they turned into proper nouns for God. Nevertheless, the etymologic sense of *islam* is still preserved, a fact attested to by the *al-* that we occasionally attach to it—*al-islam*.[7](#)

Shaykhiyyah and Karimkhaniyyah: Deniers of Corporeal

Resurrection

Objection

The Shaykhiyyah and the Karimkhaniyyah, two Shi‘ah groups, differ from the majority Shi‘ah in that they deny the doctrine of corporeal resurrection—a principle article of faith—and hold certain unorthodox views concerning Imam al-Zaman. You, however, claim that their differences are not such that would constitute a division from the majority Shi‘ah, arguing that their difference lies in certain theoretic discussions not in the rejection of a principle of faith. This argument seems invalid in view of their rejection of the doctrine of corporeal resurrection.

Reply

Division within a religion or denomination occurs when a group of adherents renounce one or more of the primary doctrines of the faith. Now, the two groups in question retain belief in the doctrine of resurrection—which is a primary doctrine of faith—but interpret it differently. One who studies the Qur’an and the *hadiths* and concludes that the resurrection espoused by Islam is an incorporeal one will obviously reject the corporeal understanding of the doctrine of resurrection.

He is not however denying a primary doctrine, for according to his understanding, belief in resurrection, not corporeal resurrection, is an article of faith. That most people understand the doctrine of resurrection to indicate a corporeal resurrection does not make corporeal resurrection a primary doctrine for those who think otherwise. Some may counter by saying that the consensus among all Muslims that resurrection is corporeal makes this belief a primary doctrine. They should however be reminded that assuming that such a consensus does exist, it does not make this belief a primary doctrine, for consensus is authoritative only when it concerns the practical rules of Islam, not theological doctrines.

The Legitimacy of 'Irfan and Tasawwuf

Objection

In "*Shi'ah dar Islam*" where you explain the history and development of *'irfan* and *tasawwuf*, you clearly approve of these two tendencies. (The Imams and the *fuqaha'*, however, have declared such tendencies heretical, and as such they lack any credibility.) You write:

The gnostic is the one who worships God through knowledge and because of love for Him, not in hope of reward or fear of punishment... Every revealed religion and even those that appear in the form of idol-worship have certain followers who march upon the path of gnosis. The polytheistic religions and Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Islam all have believers who are gnostics. (132-3)

Your words imply that there are polytheists who worship God out of love for Him. But how can this be right?

Reply

In writing "*Shi'ah dar Islam*", our intention was to elucidate the Shi'ah doctrine, the history of its development, and its various branches and their beliefs. In accordance with this purpose, we disinterestedly gave some explanation as to the history and development of *'irfan*, without granting them any special credit. We explained reasons, both doctrinal and rational, for their point of view. The purpose of the book was of course not judgmental, thus we did not engage in distinguishing the truths in their claims from falsehoods, and it was for this reason that we did not give a detailed account of the opposition of the *fuqaha'* to them.

As to our explanation that some polytheists are *'arif* (gnostic), we refer to the Brahmins. They undergo severe spiritual exercises to worship the gods. They believe that through these exercises they achieve union, first, with the deities and, afterwards, with God. As a detailed account of their beliefs is beyond the scope of one or two letters, I suggest you study the Farsi translations of parts of the Vedas and the Upanishads, "*Furugh Khawar*", "*Tahqiq ma li al-Hind*", and Abu Rayhan's "*Athar al-Baqiyah*" in order to understand Hindu, Buddhist, and Sabeian gnosticism.

You further claim that I vindicate *'irfan* and Sufism. Yes, I do approve of *'irfan* but not that which is prevalent among some Sunni Sufi circles (and which has penetrated into some Shi'ah groups as well) who preach libertinism, play music, and dance. We mean the *'irfan* that derives from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which is based on sincerity in obedience and respects all religious rules. (This latter form of *'irfan* we have elucidated in "*Tafsir al-Mizan*".

[A question on the will of angels](#)

[Objection](#)

In volume 17 of "*Tafsir al-Mizan*" you write, "They [i.e., angels] do not disobey God in what He commands them. Thus, they do not possess an independent self with an independent will..." This argument seems fallacious. That they do not disobey God does not imply that they lack an independent self. The prophets and the Imams are infallible nevertheless they do possess an independent self and will.

If you mean that they cannot will other than what God wills, that is a universal law that governs all creatures:

"But you do not wish unless it is wished by God..."⁸

A couple of paragraphs down you paradoxically state that they are capable of perfection. How can they perfect themselves when they lack an independent identity?

[Reply](#)

Below that line you quote, we have clarified what we mean by "independent self." We mean the illusion of an independent identity that most people have. When this illusion is erased, egoism vanishes:

لَا يَسْبِقُونَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ وَهُمْ بِأَمْرِهِ يَعْمَلُونَ

"They do not venture to speak ahead of Him, and they act by His command."⁹

Thus, this independent self is what is commonly referred to as *al-nafs al-ammara*, of which the prophets and the Imams are also free. As to your question regarding their perfection, you have misunderstood my words. The phrase "*min sha'niha al-istikmal al-tadriji*" ("gradual perfection is of its qualities") describes physical matter not angels. In fact, we explain that angels are created in the most perfect state possible for them and so cannot perfect themselves.

Pharaoh, “The Possessor of Stakes” [Dhu Al-Awtad]

Objection

In volume 17 of “*Tafsir al-Mizan*” you mention that some have claimed that the Qur’an refers to Pharaoh as the “Possessor of Stakes” because he would impale the criminals with stakes. You discredit this explanation on the grounds that it is not supported by authentic sources. But how do you make this claim when Fayd Kashani in his “*Tafsir al-Safi*” has narrated a *hadith* that confirms this account?

Reply

The *hadith* you allude to is an *al-khabar al-wahid* (i.e., a *hadith* with, at best, a few chains of transmission). In the science of *usul al-fiqh* it is demonstrated that *hadiths* that fall into the category of *al-khabar al-wahid* are useful only in relation to *ahkam* (Islamic rules) and not *mawdu‘at* (the application of the rules)—though their chain of transmission be firmly valid [*sahih a‘la‘i*]—unless they possess certain truth-indicators that definitively affirms their authenticity (such as if we heard a *hadith* directly from the Imam).

Therefore, we cannot employ *hadiths* such as the one in question for interpreting the Qur’an. Moreover, it is a matter of fact, considering the numerous *hadiths* that express the necessity of evaluating *hadiths* by examining their compatibility with the Qur’an that it would be circular reasoning to interpret the Qur’an based on *hadiths* such as the one in question. So, in considering *hadiths* that are *al-khabar al-wahid*, our intention should be to evaluate their coherence with the Qur’an, not to interpret the Qur’an in accordance with them.

Objection

The phrase

“...For those who do good in this world there will be a good reward...”

occurs in *Surah al-Nahl* (16:30) and *Surah al-Zumar* (39:10). Although in both *surahs* the phrase is exactly the same, you take “*hasanah*” in *Surah al-Nahl* to mean reward in the Hereafter and the “*hasanah*” in *Surah al-Zumar* to encompass rewards both of this world and of the Hereafter. On what basis do you make this distinction?

Reply

Despite the similarity of expression, the context in which the phrase appears is different in each *surah*. In *Surah al-Nahl*, the phrase is uttered by God and is followed by

“...the abode of the Hereafter is better”.

In *Surah al-Zumar*, on the other hand, the phrase is uttered by the Prophet and is followed by :

“Indeed the patient will be paid in full their *ajr* (reward).”

In the Qur’anic vocabulary, *ajr* applies to both worldly and otherworldly rewards.

A Point Concerning Job’s Supplication

Objection

In volume 17 of “*Tafsir al-Mizan*”, you make the following observation regarding the verse

وَأَذْكُرُ عَبْدَنَا أَيُّوبَ إِذْ نَادَىٰ رَبَّهُ أَنِّي مَسَّنِيَ الشَّيْطَانُ بِنُصْبٍ وَعَذَابٍ

“And remember Our servant Job when he called out to his Lord...”¹⁰: “

his calling God by saying ‘my Lord’ is indicative that he called God to fulfill a need of his.” What appears in the verse in question is “his Lord” not “my Lord.”

Reply

When the verse says that he called on “his Lord,” it means that Job said, “my Lord.”

The Story of Job and the Conflicting Hadiths

Objection

In your examination of the story of Job in volume 17 of “*Tafsir al-Mizan*” you quote certain Judaic *hadiths*. Then, you discredit them by quoting other Judaic *hadiths*, both of which are derived from the Old Testament. What is your purpose in quoting two contradicting groups of *hadith* from the Judaic tradition?

In the science of *usul al-fiqh*, one of the determinants for preferring a *hadith* over another is its being opposed to Sunni viewpoints. The case at issue, however, involves two conflicting groups of *hadith* that are both in accordance with Judaic tradition. So, how do you solve this problem?

Reply

As expressed above, my intention in considering *hadiths* is not to interpret the Qur’an based on them; rather, it is to evaluate the *hadiths* based on the Qur’an. And about your final point regarding the *hadiths*’ being in accordance with Judaic tradition, it is impertinent. For, the principle you cite from the science of *usul al-fiqh* relates to religious rules of practice, not to other areas.

That is, if there are contradicting rulings regarding a certain action, the one opposed to the Sunni point of view is preferable. The case at issue, however, pertains to Qur’anic hermeneutics not religious law.

[A Point Concerning The Qur’anic Phrase Saying, “It is a great prophecy”](#)

قُلْ هُوَ نَبَأٌ عَظِيمٌ

“It is a great prophecy...”¹¹

[Objection](#)

In interpreting this verse in volume 17 of “*Tafsir al-Mizan*” you reject the possibility of the pronoun *huwa* referring to the Day of Judgment. But why should this possibility be unlikely when the verses prior to this one treat of the Day of Judgment, especially since in *Surah al-Naba’* you explain that *al-naba’ al-‘azim* is the Day of Judgment?

[Reply](#)

It is true that prior to the verse in question the subject is the Day of Judgment, but verse 65

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا مُنذِرٌ

“Say, ‘I am just a warner...’”

terminates that topic and begins a new one. This reading is corroborated by the *Surah*’s ending with this verse:

وَلَتَعْلَمَنَّ نَبَأَهُ بَعْدَ حِينٍ

“And you will surely learn its naba’ (tidings) in due time;”¹²

which is a reference to the Qur’an. Of course, let us point out that both the Qur’an and the Day of Judgment are “great tidings” and so there is no contradiction in *al-naba’ al-‘azim* referring to the Qur’an, on one occasion, and to the Day of Judgment, on another

¹. Shi’ah dar Islam: ‘Allamah’s book on Shi’ah history and doctrine. Sayyid Husayn Nasr has translated the work under the title Shi’ah. The quotation here is taken from his translation, p. 46. [trans.]

². Surah Al ‘Imran 3:85.

³. This is only a summary of the critic’s letter to ‘Allamah Tabataba’i.

[4.](#) Surah al-Nisa' 4:125.

[5.](#) Surah al-Baqarah 2:133.

[6.](#) Surah al-Hajj 22:78.

[7.](#) Lit., "the Submission." In the Arabic language, an al- is occasionally affixed to a proper noun that originally was not a proper noun. The function that al- plays in such a cases is referred to as talmih or allusion; for, it enables the word to allude to the original meaning of the word while also functioning as a proper noun. [trans.]

[8.](#) Surah al-Insan 76:30.

[9.](#) Surah al-Anbiya' 21:27.

[10.](#) Surah Sad 38:41.

[11.](#) Surah Sad 38:67.

[12.](#) Surah Sad 38:88.

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