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# **Chapter 7: Causes of Idolatry**

In the previous lesson, it has been explained that idolatry was not based on any proof, whether rational or transmitted from heavenly books. On this basis, we have to find out what factors led them to this creed. A few causes can be inferred from Qur'anic verses:

### 1. Not knowing Allah

The first cause of idolatry was not having the correct knowledge of Allah therefore equating Him with created things. It can be deduced from a number of verses that polytheists used to conceive that Allah was the same as created beings and that He had a spouse and offspring. Jews used to believe that Ezra was the son of Allah and Christians used to maintain that Jesus Christ was the son of God. They even used to believe that Allah had taken a spouse, as can be inferred from the following verses:

"Exalted be the majesty of our Lord, He has taken neither any spouse nor son."1

"Say, 'He is Allah, the One. Allah is the All-embracing. He neither begat, nor was begotten, nor has He any equal'."2

In "Nahj al-Bal@ghah", Im@m 'Al@ ('a) has excellently explained the ignorance of polytheists:

"He originated the creation without any example which He could follow and without any specimen prepared by any known creator that was before Him. He showed us the realm of His might, and such wonders which speak of His wisdom. The confession of the created things that their existence owes itself to Him made us realize that all argument has been finished about knowing Him (so that there is no excuse against it.) The signs of His creative power and standard of His wisdom are fixed in the wonderful things He has created. Whatever He has created is an argument in His favor and a guide towards Him. Even a silent thing is a guide towards Him as though it speaks, and its guidance towards the Creator is clear.

O Allah! I stand witness that he who likens Thee with the separateness of the limbs or with the

joining of the extremities of his body did not acquaint his inner self with knowledge about Thee, and his heart did not secure conviction to the effect that there is no partner for Thee. It is as though he has not heard the (wrongful) followers disclaiming their false gods by saying, 'By Allah, we had indeed been in manifest error, when we equated you with the Lord of all the worlds!"3

"They are wrong who liken Thee to their idols, and dress Thee with the apparel of the creatures with their imagination, attribute to Thee parts of body of their own thinking and consider Thee after the creatures of various types, through the working of their intelligence. I stand witness that whoever equated Thee with anything out of Thy creation took a match for Thee, and whoever takes a match for Thee is an unbeliever, according to what is stated in Thy unambiguous verses and indicated by the evidence of Thy clear arguments. (I also stand witness that) Thou art that Allah who cannot be confined in (the fetters of) intelligence so as to admit change of condition by entering its imagination nor in the shackles of mind so as to become limited and an object of alterations."4

In this sermon, Imm 'Alm ('a) has clearly explained that on account of not having correct knowledge, idolaters used to conceive Allah as created things and their deficient intellects used to imagine that he had limbs and body parts.

In the paragraph preceding the above quoted one, Im m 'Al ('a) has stated:

"...Then look on questioner, be confined to those of His attributes which the Qur'an has described and seek light from the effulgence of its quidance. Leave to Allah that knowledge which Satan has prompted you to seek and which neither the Qur'an enjoins you to seek nor is there any trace of it in the actions or sayings of the Noble Prophet (s) and other Imems of Guidance. This is the extreme limit of Allah's claim upon you. Know that firm in knowledge are those who refrain from opening the curtains that lie against the unknown, and their acknowledgement of ignorance about the details of the hidden unknown prevents them from further probe. Allah praises them for their admission that they are unable to get knowledge not allowed to them. They do not go deep into discussion of what is not enjoined upon them about knowing Him and they call it firmness. Be content with this and do not limit the greatness of Allah after the measure of your own intelligence, or else you will be among the destroyed ones. He is the Powerful, such that when imagination shoots its arrows to comprehend the extremity of His power; or the mind, making itself free of the dangers of thoughts, tries to find Him in the depth of His realm; or hearts, longing to grasp realities of His Attributes and openings of intelligence, penetrate beyond description in order to secure knowledge about His Being and cross the dark pitfalls of the unknown concentrating upon Him, He turns them back. They return defeated, admitting that the reality of His knowledge cannot be comprehended by such random efforts, nor can an iota of the sublimity of His honor enter the understanding of thinkers."5

Two points can be deduced from Imm 'Alm's ('a) statement:

- 1. A person who knows Allah in the way that prophets ('a) and the Im®ms ('a) have instructed mankind cannot believe that Allah has a partner. In short, if a person believes that Allah created the earth and the sky and that whatever is between them belongs to Him can never hold that Allah has a partner and an equal. How can a rational man maintain that Allah's partner is one of His own creatures? These two beliefs cannot co–exist.
- 2. Taking the first point into consideration, and also considering that idolaters used to believe that it was Allah who created the earth and the sky and whatever is between them, the question which comes to mind is: how did polytheists come to believe that Allah had a partner? The response to this question is that the root of their polytheistic beliefs lay in their misconception that Allah was like created things. They imagined that Allah had a partner in the same way that two created beings could be one another's partner in cosmic affairs.

### 2. Self-worship

It can be inferred from the Holy Qur'an that another cause of idolatry was following carnal desires. A number of verses denote this:

#### First verse:

"Say, "I have been forbidden to worship those whom you invoke besides Allah." Say, "I do not follow your desires, for then I will have gone astray, and I will not be among the [rightly] guided"."6

This verse denotes that in their idolatry, idolaters were under the influence of their carnal and sensual desires.

#### **Second verse:**

"These are but names which you have coined—you and your fathers—for which Allah has not sent down any authority. They follow nothing but conjectures and the desires of the [lower] soul, while there has already come to them the guidance from their Lord."7

## 3. Blindly following their forefathers

It can be inferred from many verses of the Holy Qur'an that idolaters used to believe in polytheism on account of blindly following their fathers and the customs of their forefathers. We will adduce some verses in this regard:

#### First verse:

"He said, 'You have taken idols [for worship] besides Allah for the sake of [mutual] affection

amongst yourselves in the life of the world. Then, on the Day of Resurrection you will disown one another and curse one another, and the Fire will be your abode, and you will not have any supporters'."8

In "*Tafs*" *al-M*", this verse has been interpreted as denoting that idolaters used to worship idols on account of their mutual affection and family relations. When they were asked why they were worshipping idols, they used to respond that they were following in the footsteps of their fathers. Therefore, some people were idolaters because their fathers had been idolaters and thus descendants too became polytheists on account of affection and love for their ancestors.

### **Second verse:**

"When they are told, 'Follow what Allah has sent down,' they say, 'We will rather follow what we found our fathers following.' What! Even if Satan be calling them to the punishment of the Blaze?"9

- 1. Serat al-Jinn 72:3.
- 2. Sirat al-Ikhlis 112:1-4.
- 3. Serat al-Shu'are 26:97-98.
- 4. Nahj al-Balghah, sermon [khutbah] no. 90.
- 5. Ibid.
- 6. Srat al-An'm 6:56.
- 7. Srat al-Najm 53:23.
- 8. Srat al-'Ankabrt 29:25.
- 9. Srat Luqmrn 31:21.

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