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Chapter 9: Types of Polytheism

Polytheism, in its various respects, has different divisions, some of which we will examine hereunder:

1. Polytheism in Divinity

Polytheism in divinity denotes believing that besides Allah, another being is equally effective in the existing cosmos. This has previously been treated in detail under "longitudinal and latitudinal polytheism", and we adduced many reasons to prove that idolaters used to believe that idols can harm and benefit man as well as intercede on his behalf. For this reason, their polytheism can be called 'ideological idolatry'; it can also be termed 'manifest polytheism' because they used to openly declare their idolatry.

2. Polytheism in obedience

In this type of idolatry, the polytheist does not believe in the existence of effective beings besides Allah, but follows and obeys another creature besides Allah. The axis of this kind of polytheism is following and obeying other than Allah.

Obeying other than Allah is of three kinds:

First: Obeying other than Allah because Allah has ordered man to do so; for instance, Allah has ordered that the Noble Prophet (*s*) and the Im®ms ('a) ought to be obeyed. This kind of obedience is exactly the same as obeying Allah:

"O you who have faith! Obey Allah and obey the Apostle and those vested with authority among you. And if you dispute concerning anything, refer it to Allah and the Last Day. That is better and more favorable in outcome."

Here, we do not have two kinds of obedience, but one kind, and this is tantamount to monotheism.

Second: Obeying other than Allah in permissible matters of which Allah has not given specific orders; for example, drinking water in instances where Allah has not issued any specific orders. Now, if someone issues a definite order to drink water and we obey him, this would amount to obeying other than Allah, despite that it is not incompatible with monotheism because we have obeyed someone in a matter which Allah has permitted, even if it is not like the first kind, which is exactly like obeying Allah.

Third: Obeying other than Allah in a matter which conflicts and is incompatible with obeying Allah; for example, Allah has given orders that the ritual prayers ought to be performed, and someone else forbids the prayers. In this case, not performing the ritual prayers on account of obeying someone besides Allah is tantamount to polytheism in obedience; that is to say, one has preferred to obey someone other than Allah and has believed that obedience, which a prerogative of Allah, pertains to someone other than Allah. In short, obeying someone who opposes Allah denotes polytheism in obedience, and this is *har* and forbidden. Obeying Satan is also of this kind.

Democracy and obedience to Allah

Obeying any law which is incompatible or contrary to Allah's injunctions is polytheism in obedience, even if that law is [put forward] in the form of democracy. Democracy is approved when it is compatible with Divine injunctions or anything that is permitted by Divine law, but there is no democracy in the $w \otimes jib$ (obligatory religious duties) and the $har \otimes m$ (inviolable religious things). Even if all people were to vote that ritual prayers ought to be renounced, or that alcohol ought to be legalized, their ballot does not have any value.

Allah has commanded obedience to the Infallible Im m ('a), and during his Occultation, the Islamic jurist. Obeying the Islamic jurist and leader is exactly the same as monotheism in obedience and following forbidden democracy is exactly the same as polytheism in obedience.

It is for this same reason that the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran states that after the president has been elected, the consent or endorsement of the Islamic jurist and leader is necessary, because the people's vote does not by itself give him the religious authority to rule and be obeyed. The endorsement of the Islamic jurist and leader makes obeying the president tantamount to obeying Allah, and exactly the same as monotheism.

The prohibition of polytheism in obedience

The following verse proves the prohibition of polytheism in obedience:

First verse:

"Among the people are those who set up compeers besides Allah, loving them as if loving Allah—but the faithful have a more ardent love for Allah—though the wrongdoers will see, when they sight the punishment, that power, altogether, belongs to Allah, and that Allah is severe in

punishment."2

It has been mentioned in "Majma' al-Bay®n" that this verse means one of the following two possibilities:

- 1. Most interpreters of the Holy Qur'an have said that 'compeers' [ind delta] means idols worshipped by polytheists, meaning that some of the people love idols in the same way that they love Allah.
- 2. Some interpreters of the Holy Qur'an have said that 'compeers' means leaders and elders of any community who are obeyed and followed by their community. There is a *had* th transmitted from Im al-Begir ('a) that 'compeers' means oppressive leaders and their followers.

It is clear that 'compeers' does not exclusively mean leaders of a community, but also includes others, such as idols, which are followed by human beings. According to the second possibility, the above quoted verse will be interpreted in this way, "Some people love and obey their leaders in the same way that they love and obey Allah."

It has thus been written in "Tafs Ir al-MIZIN", "'Compeers' does not mean idols only, but also includes angels and human beings whom people have taken as their leaders and whom they obey without Allah's permission. The following verse proves this assertion:

"When those who were followed will disown the followers, and they will sight the punishment while all their means of recourse will be cut off."3

It can be deduced that because verse 166 pertains to leaders of a community and the people who follow them, verse 165 also refers to leaders of a community and does not exclusively pertain to idols. This is also confirmed by the aforementioned *had* th transmitted from Im al-Biqir ('a) that all oppressive leaders are conceived as 'compeers'.4

According to the meaning of the verse, as has also been mentioned in "Tafs Ir al-MIZIN", every person who is followed besides Allah is considered a compeer [of Allah], and obeying him is polytheism, even if he is an ordinary person and not a leader of the community, and even if we obey him besides Allah only on one instance.

Second verse:

"As for those who stay clear of the worship of the Rebel and turn penitently to Allah, there is good news for them. So give good news to My servants who listen to the word [of Allah] and follow the best [sense] of it. They are the ones whom Allah has guided, and it is they who posses intellect."5

It has thus been written in "Majma' al-Bay®n", "The Rebel [in the above quoted verse] means idols and Satan, and other interpreters of the Holy Qur'an have said that the Rebel [t®gh®t] denotes every individual who leads people to other than Allah. Therefore, it can be inferred that the above quoted verse

means that there is good news for those who stay clear of the worship and obedience of idols, Satan and all people who lead people to other than Allah." We will later prove that worship denotes obedience.

It may be asked why it has been inferred that people who follow the Rebel are polytheists? The response is that the verses preceding the above quoted verse pertain to polytheists. Verses 17 and 18 explain the attributes of monotheists, one of which is staying clear of the worship and obedience of the Rebel. Therefore, it becomes clear that the opposite of this is worshipping and obeying Satan, and this refers to polytheists.

Of course, we do not intend to say that juristic laws like being impure and others result or derive from polytheism in obedience, but we would like to say that one kind of polytheism is polytheism in obedience.

3. Manifest and hidden polytheism

The term hidden polytheism [shirk khaf] is found a lot in books of ethics.

Hidden polytheism is sometimes called minor polytheism [*shirk asghar*]. These two terms are employed as opposites of manifest polytheism [*shirk jall*] and greater polytheism [*shirk akbar*].

Hidden polytheism and/or minor polytheism have not been mentioned in the Holy Qur'an, but with the help of some *had* ths, some verses have been interpreted as referring to this kind of polytheism. We will discuss this later.

Hidden polytheism has not been defined in the *had* ths, but what has been mentioned in the traditions are explanations about instances and examples of hidden polytheism. One criterion [for hidden polytheism] has to be deduced by studying various instances of hidden polytheism. Therefore, it is necessary to initially adduce some of the *had* ths in which hidden polytheism has been mentioned:

- 1. Im al-S diq ('a) stated, "Do not be sanctimonious in your deeds, and do not perform your actions with the intention of showing someone who is not able to make you live or die, and who is not capable of solving any one of your problems because ostentation is a tree whose fruit is nothing else but hidden polytheism." 6
- 2. Im mal-S diq ('a) interpreted the Noble Prophet's (s) statement that "Polytheism is more hidden than the movement of an ant on a black stone in a dark night," thus, "The believers used to curse or speak ill about idols. This made idolaters also lose respect for Allah. Allah forbade Muslims from cursing idols so that unbelievers may not speak ill of Allah. Therefore, as a result of their cursing idols, the believers had unknowingly believed in a partner for Allah."7

Muslims can be conceived as becoming polytheists in two ways:

- a) They became polytheists by opposing Allah's prohibition that they ought not to curse idols. Of course, this is hidden polytheism.
- b) They became polytheists because they incite idolaters to speak ill of Allah and this by itself is a kind propagating idolatry unknowingly.
- 3. The Noble Prophet (s) stated, "Refrain from minor polytheism." They asked him what minor polytheism meant. He responded, "It means sanctimony and ostentation."8

The following are the verses which have been interpreted as referring to hidden polytheism:

First verse:

"And most of them do not believe in Allah without ascribing partners to Him."

Imem al-Sediq ('a) thus interpreted this verse, "A man who says that if so and so were not there [to help him], he would have been afflicted with hardships and his family would have been exterminated, has ascribed a partner to Allah; a partner in whom he puts faith and believes that he provides sustenance and repels calamities." The transmitter of [this] hadeth says, "I asked Imem al-Sediq ('a), 'Is saying that I would have been afflicted by hardships if Allah had not been merciful to me by sending so and so to help me the same as ascribing a partner to Allah?' Imem al-Sediq ('a) responded, 'This is not forbidden'."9

Second verse:

"Say, "I am just a human being like you. It has been revealed to me that your God is One God. So whoever expects to encounter his Lord—let him act righteously, and not associate anyone with the worship of his Lord'." 10

In regard to this verse, Im m al-Sidiq ('a) stated, "This kind of polytheism is sanctimony." 11

In another *had* th, a transmitter of traditions has said, "I went to see the Noble Prophet (*s*) and noticed that his face showed signs of anger. I asked why he was angry. His Holiness [the Noble Prophet (s)] responded, 'I fear lest my community become polytheists.' I asked, 'Your community will become polytheists after you have left?' The Noble Prophet (*s*) responded, 'Beware! My community will not worship the sun, the moon, idols and/or stones, but will be sanctimonious in their deeds, and sanctimony is exactly the same as polytheism, which I fear will engulf my community.' Then, he recited this verse, 'So whoever expects to encounter his Lord—let him act righteously, and not associate anyone with the worship of his Lord'."12

Characteristics of manifest and hidden polytheism

It is proper to explain the characteristics of manifest polytheism so that we may infer the meaning and criterion of its opposite namely, hidden polytheism. Manifest polytheism though not clearly defined in Qur'anic verses and the *had* ths means the polytheism which the prophets ('a) battled with and which made monotheists and polytheists encounter each other at war.

Characteristics of manifest polytheism

Here, we will not mention or explain all the characteristics of manifest polytheism, but only some of them:

- 1. A polytheist who is engulfed by manifest polytheism believes that, besides Allah, there is another being in the existing cosmos which is independently effective and conceives idols as independent gods besides Allah.
- 2. Polytheists who are under the influence of manifest polytheism love their idols intensely, and are antipathetic to monotheism.

"When Allah is mentioned alone, [thereat] shrink away the hearts of those who do not believe in the Hereafter, but when others are mentioned besides Him, behold, they rejoice!"13

It can be concluded from this verse that idolaters used to become disgusted when monotheism was mentioned. This can also be inferred from the following two verses:

"And We cast veils on their hearts, lest they should understand it, and a deafness into their ears. When you mention your Lord alone in the Qur'an, they turn their backs in aversion." 14

"Do not abuse those whom they invoke besides Allah, lest they should abuse Allah out of hostility, 15 without any knowledge. That is how to every people We have made their conduct seem decorous. Then, their return will be to their Lord and He will inform them concerning what they used to do."16

Therefore, aversion to monotheism is one of the best distinctive features of those engulfed by manifest polytheism.

3. Manifest polytheism was expressed through such actions as placing idols in houses and tabernacles, and giving idols names such as LEt and 'UzzE.

Absence of the aforementioned characteristics in hidden

polytheism

None of the three aforementioned characteristics are found in a person who is engulfed in hidden polytheism. Therefore, a person who is affected by hidden polytheism has the following three qualities:

- 1. A person who is under the influence of hidden polytheism never believes that there is an effective being independent of Allah and latitudinal with Him [in the existing cosmos]. He does not believe that there is a being which is effective besides Allah. Of course, out of heedlessness, he may sometimes conceive that someone besides Allah is effective, but as soon as he is admonished, he realizes his mistake and repents.
- 2. A person who is under the influence of hidden polytheism never has aversion for monotheism. He is not hostile when the Oneness of Allah is mentioned, but loves the Oneness of Allah.
- 3. A person who is engulfed by hidden polytheism does not make tabernacles for idols but is affected by sanctimony or ostentation.

Now, taking into consideration the aforementioned issues, we have to define and set up a criterion for hidden polytheism. Evidently, the most comprehensive criterion of hidden polytheism has been put forward by Qal'aj

, who has said, "Minor polytheism denotes considering or taking into view a being other than Allah when performing deeds." 17

This is a very good criterion.

But in a had th transmitted from Im al-Stdig ('a), a higher criterion has been mentioned:

A transmitter of *had* th says, "I asked Im al-S diq (*'a*) what this Qur'anic verse means, 'The Day when neither wealth nor children will avail except him who comes to Allah with a sound heart.' His Holiness (*'a*) responded, 'A sound heart is one which meets Allah while there is nothing besides Allah in it. This is attainable only by those who have decided to be ascetic in this world so that their hearts may be prepared for the hereafter'." 18

This *had* too has stated that the criterion of hidden polytheism is paying heed to other beings instead of Allah. What have been mentioned in the aforementioned *had* ths are instances of hidden polytheism. Of course, the religious injunction for hidden polytheism is not like the injunction for manifest polytheism. Manifest polytheism makes one a pagan and impure, and the *jih* dagainst him becomes w jib (obligatory), in the same way that the *jih* dagainst idolaters is w jib (obligatory) once ordered by an [Infallible] Im m.

Sanctimony and non-devotional deeds

Another difference between hidden polytheism and other kinds of polytheism is that hidden polytheism is not *har* m (prohibited) in all instances. To illustrate this point, we will quote what Shah degratule houstghayb said, "Worldly affairs which do not have an aspect of worship have not been explicitly classified as *har* m (prohibited). That is why jurists do not issue religious decrees stating that it is *har* m (prohibited). But as a precautionary measure, believers have to abstain from all kinds of sanctimony, even in worldly affairs." 19

Sanctimony in deeds which Allah has enjoined, such as the ritual, is *har* m (prohibited), but it is not *har* m (prohibited) in ordinary issues, such as eating food; for instance, it is not *har* m (prohibited) for one to eat less out of sanctimony.

- 1. Serat al-Nise' 4:59.
- 2. Srat al-Baqarah 2:165.
- 3. Srat al-Baqarah 2:166.
- 4. Tafser al-Mezen, vol. 1, p. 405, exegesis of verse 165 of Serat al-Baqarah.
- 5. Serat al-Zumar 39:17-18.
- 6. Mustadrik al-Wase'il al-She'ah, vol. 2, p. 107, as quoted from "Misbeh al-Share'ah".
- 7. Biher al-Anwer, vol. 69, p. 93, as quoted from "Tafser Qumme".
- 8. Kish®f, exegesis of verse 110 of S®rat al-Kahf.
- 9. Majma' al-BayIn, vol. 5, p. 462.
- 10. Srat al-Kahf 110.
- 11. Mustadrik al-Was 1'il, vol. 1, p. 104.
- 12. Ibid., p. 109.
- 13. Srat al-Zumar 39:45.
- 14. Strat al-Isrt' (or Bant Isrt'tl) 17:46.
- 15. Or 'out of transgression,' or 'wrongfully.'
- 16. Srat al-An'm 6:108.
- 17. Muʻjam Lughah al-Fuqah e', p. 261.
- 18. Use al-Kefe, vol. 4, section [beb] al-Ikhles, hadeth 5.
- 19. Greater Sins, discourse on polytheism [shirk bi'll h].

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