

Intercession

In the study of Divine Justice, one of the issues which ought to be raised, studied and analyzed is the issue of Intercession. Regarding intercession, there is much discussion and debate, which has especially intensified after the appearance of the Wahhabi sect. The Wahhabi sect is affiliated to Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and is currently the official religion in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is a sect which ostensibly claims to promote Divine Unity in worship—albeit in a superficial way, and thereby rejects many of the profound and lofty teachings of Islam. The *tawhid* promulgated by the Wahhabis, like the *tawhid* of Ash'arites, is in contradiction to many Islamic principles.

Objection And Question

The objections which are raised or can be raised against intercession are as follows:

1. Intercession is incompatible with Divine Unity (*tawhid*) of worship, and belief in it is a type of polytheism. This is the very objection raised by the Wahhabis and a pro-Wahhabi group among the Shias are enamoured by it also.
2. Intercession is not only incompatible with Divine Unity (*tawhid*) of worship but also with Divine Unity (*tawhid*) of Essence, since the logical necessity of belief in intercession is that the compassion and mercy of the intercessor is greater and more comprehensive than Divine mercy. For the presumption is that were it not for intercession, God would chastise the sinner.
3. Belief in intercession emboldens souls prone to sinning, in fact, encourages them to commit sins.
4. The glorious Qur'an falsifies and negates intercession. The Qur'an describes the Day of Resurrection in these words:

وَأَتَّقُوا يَوْمًا لَا تَجْزِي نَفْسٌ عَنْ نَفْسٍ شَيْئًا وَلَا يُقْبَلُ مِنْهَا شَفَاعَةٌ وَلَا يُؤْخَذُ مِنْهَا عَدْلٌ وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ

Beware of the day when no soul will compensate for another, neither any intercession shall be

accepted from it, nor any ransom shall be received from it, nor will they be helped. (Qur'an, 2:48)

5. Intercession is incompatible with the fundamental principle established in the Qur'an whereby the felicity of every individual is made dependent on his deeds. The Qur'an says:

وَأَنْ لَّيْسَ لِلْإِنْسَانِ إِلَّا مَا سَعَى

that nothing belongs to man except what he strives for. (Qur'an, 53:39)

6. The logical necessity of the validity of intercession is that we believe God can be influenced by intercession and that His wrath can be transformed into pleasure, whereas, God is immutable, not given to change and no factor can exert any effect on Him; mutability is essentially incompatible with the Divine Essence.

7. Intercession is, in a way, making exceptions, a kind of discrimination and injustice. Whereas the Divine system allows no injustice. In other words, intercession is an exception in the Divine Law, whereas Divine laws are universal, immutable, and permit no exceptions:

وَلَنْ تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ اللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا

and you will never find any change in Allah's precedent. (Qur'an, 48:23)

These are the objections that connect the discussion of intercession with Divine Justice, and form the basis for the inclusion of the issue of intercession in this book.

To elaborate: definitely, intercession does not encompass all criminals for in such a case, neither law nor intercession would have any meaning. But, the very nature of intercession is associated with discrimination and making exceptions giving rise to the objection that how can it be just a case of dividing criminals into two groups; a group which escapes punishment because of its affiliations to a party, and another group which is entrapped by punishments because it lacks such contacts?

We consider those human societies as corrupt, decadent, and unjust whose laws are suspended due to party affiliations; so how can we accept party politics in the Divine system? Any society which has intercession has no justice.

Weakness Of The Law

An indicator of the impotence and weakness of law in any society is the importance and influence of money, partisan politics, and coercion in it. Obviously when the rule of law falters in this way, it cannot apprehend the strong and powerful, and its only show of strength applies to the weak. A weak law can

only arrest weak criminals and bring them to court—being unable to apprehend powerful ones.

The Qur'an introduces Divine laws as powerful and effective, and categorically rejects the influence of money, partisanship, and coercion in the Divine court of justice. The Qur'an refers to these ideas by using the following terms: money is referred to as *adl* (derived either from the root word *udul*, since money given as a bribe causes deviation (literally 'udul') from truth; or from the root word 'adl' meaning equivalent or substitute), and party influence is called *shafa'ah*, and the recourse to external force is termed *nusrat*. Thus, we read in Surah al-Baqarah:

وَأَتَّقُوا يَوْمًا لَا تَجْزِي نَفْسٌ عَنْ نَفْسٍ شَيْئًا وَلَا يُقْبَلُ مِنْهَا شَفَاعَةٌ وَلَا يُؤْخَذُ مِنْهَا عَدْلٌ وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ

Beware of the day when no soul will compensate for another, neither any intercession shall be accepted from it, nor any ransom shall be received from it, nor will they be helped. (Qur'an, 2:48)

That is, the system governing the world hereafter is unlike the system operating in human societies, wherein an individual can escape from justice by seeking recourse to money or influence, or occasionally solicit help from his tribe and ethnic group, who employ their force against the law-enforcing agents.

In the early history of Islam, the rule of law was effective. It even affected the close friends and relatives of the rulers. When Ali (a) learned that his daughter had borrowed a necklace from the public treasury (*bayt al-mal*), though she had placed collateral for it and used it only on 'Id day, he strongly reprimanded her and firmly stated:

لو كانت أخذت العقد على غير عارية مضمونة مردودة لكانت إذن أول هاشمية قطعت يدها في سرقة

Had she had not borrowed it as other than a guaranteed item, then she would have been the first Hashimiyah to have her hands cut off for theft. [1](#)

When his cousin and learned companion, Ibn 'Abbas committed an offence, he wrote a letter to him criticizing him severely. He wrote: [2](#)

“If you do not refrain from your offence, I will discipline you with my sword! The same sword which I have never struck anyone with, but that he is relegated to the hell-fire! You know that my sword never falls on anyone but those who deserve hell, and this offence of yours has rendered you of the people of hell, deserving to be struck by my sword. I swear by God, even if Hasan and Husayn (a) were to commit this offence, I would not have spared them”. [3](#)

This is from the early history of Islam and the law-enforcer is the Leader of the Faithful (a), hence it is not surprising or strange. If you want to appreciate the extent to which the system set up by the Holy

Prophet (s) had progressed and what type people were dragged to the court of justice, consider the following incident:

Amr As was appointed governor of Egypt by Umar. One day the son of Amr As slapped a citizen's face. The aggrieved carried his complaint to Amr As who ignored it.

This chivalrous person travelled to Madina to lodge his complaint with Umar in person. 'Umar summoned Amr As and his son and took them to task. In this sentencing, a historical statement has been quoted from Umar. He addressed Amr As and his son saying:

متى استعبدتم الناس وقد ولدتهم أمهاتهم أحرار

Since when have you enslaved people to yourselves whereas their mothers have given them birth as free individuals?'

Saying this, he issued the order for retaliation.

Umar dealt even with his son in a similar fashion. When it was proven that his son had consumed alcohol, he executed the Divine penalty on him.

This was the justice taught to the Muslims by the Holy Prophet (s), and the Muslims had not yet forgotten it. In other words, it was a machinery set into motion by God's messenger, which more and less, kept its momentum going.

Types Of Intercession

In reality, *shafa'ah* is of several types, some of which are false, unjust and have no presence in the Divine scheme of things, whereas other types are true and just and do exist. The false *shafa'ah* (intercession) is against the Law and disrupts it, whereas the true *shafa'ah* supports and protects the law. The false type of *shafa'ah* is when a person wishes to use party influence to obstruct the path of justice. Based on such a perspective of *shafa'ah*, the criminal acts in contrary to the lawmaker's desire and in opposition to the aims of legislation. By invoking the help and influence of a certain party, he overcomes the legislator's wish and goal of legislation. This type of *shafa'ah* is injustice in this world and impossible in the world hereafter. The objections levelled against *shafa'ah* are actually aimed against this type of *shafa'ah*, which in any case is the type rejected by the Qur'an.

The other type of *shafa'ah* is the true one, which does not have any exceptions or discrimination, nor does it contravene any law or entail over-riding the legislators wishes. The Qur'an clearly supports this type of *shafa'ah*. Even the true *shafa'ah* has several types, as we shall soon elaborate.

Violation Of Law

The false type of *shafa'ah*, which is refuted by both rational and religious proofs, lies in a sinner using a means through which he can block the implementation of a Divine sentence and decree. This is similar to the backroom influences which transpire in corrupt human societies and courts.

Many common people consider this to be the type of *shafa'ah* practiced by prophets and Imams (a). They believe that the holy Prophet (s), the Leader of the Faithful (a), the holy Lady Fatimah (sa), and the infallible Imams (a) especially Imam Husayn (a)–are influential beings who can exert control in the Divine kingdom, alter the Divine Will, and contravene His law.

The Arabs of the pre-Islamic era who associated partners with God, believed in a similar type of *shafa'ah* for their idols. They claimed that creation is by God, with no deity having any partnership role in it, but in the governing of the world, the idols are His partners. The pre-Islamic Arabs' polytheism was not in relation to God as “Creator,” rather it was with respect to His station of “Lordship” and role as the Nourisher or Guardian of the world.

We know from human examples that sometimes a person can establish an institute but entrust its administration to another, or run it in joint partnership with others. This was the belief held by polytheists about God and the universe and the governing of the universe.

The Qur'an vigorously opposed this belief and repeatedly declared that there is no partner with God, neither in creation nor in administration. He alone is the Creator of the Universe, and He exclusively governs it. The kingdom and dominion of the world belongs to Him alone and He is the Lord of the worlds.

The polytheists who believed that governance of the universe is divided between God and other deities, did not see it as necessary upon themselves to strive to attain God's pleasure and acceptance. They claimed that we can win this pleasure and acceptance via the other deities, by offering sacrifices and through the ritual worship of idols, even though it may displease God, the Almighty. If we win the satisfaction of these gods and goddesses, so they thought, they will sort out the matter themselves with the Almighty God.

If someone amongst the Muslims were also to hold such a belief that besides God's kingdom there is a parallel dominion working alongside it, that would be tantamount to polytheism. If someone were to assume that one way is to attain Divine pleasure and acceptance and another way entail winning the approval and pleasure of, say Imam Husayn (a), and that each of these two ways can independently ensure man's salvation, then he has fallen prey to serious misguidance. In this incorrect belief, it is held that God is pleased with one set of things, whereas Imam Husayn (a) with another. God is pleased with the performance of compulsory acts like prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, Jihad, charity, truthfulness, righteousness, service to mankind, benevolence to parents, etc. And He is also pleased by refraining

from sins like lying, injustice, backbiting, consumption of alcohol, adultery, etc. But, in contrast, Imam Husayn (a) is not concerned with such things, his pleasure instead is attainable through the likes of mourning and weeping or at least feigning to cry—for his youthful son Ali Akbar. Hence, the what is at issue with Imam Husayn (a) is distinct from those things that concern God, the Almighty. As a logical conclusion to such a distinction, the attainment of Divine pleasure is difficult since it entails performing many tasks to win His approval; whereas winning the approval of Imam Husayn (a) is relatively easy—only mourning and chest beating are required. And once Imam Husayn (a) is satisfied, he will use his influence in the Divine kingdom through intercession and mend one's affairs. All the prayers, fasts, pilgrimage, Jihad, charity in God's way, etc. which we failed to perform will be forgiven, and sins we committed will be instantaneously wiped out.

Such a conception of *shafa'ah* is not only false and incorrect, but is also polytheism or shirk in God's Lordship, and an insult to the holy status of Imam Husayn (a), whose greatest source of pride was his total submission and devotion to God. In the same way that his noble father used to be extremely angered by the allegations made by the fanatics with respect to himself, and Imam Husayn (a) will also seek God's refuge from their exaggerated claims. Imam Husayn (a) was not martyred so that, God forbid, he could set up a system parallel to the Divine kingdom, or against his grandfather's *shafa'ah*, and thereby propose a means to escape God's laws. His martyrdom was not to attenuate the practical program of Islam or the Qur'anic laws. On the contrary, he sacrificed himself for the sake of reviving prayers, charity, and all other Islamic precepts.

He clarified his purpose of uprising thus:

إِنِّي لَمْ أَخْرَجْ أَشْرًا وَلَا بَطْرًا وَلَا مَفْسَدًا وَلَا ظَالِمًا وَإِنَّمَا خَرَجْتُ لَطَلْبِ الْإِصْلَاحِ فِي أُمَّةٍ جَدِي (ص) أُرِيدُ أَنْ أَمُرَ
بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَأَنْهِيَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ

I have not made my uprising neither for ulterior motives nor for seeking power, rather my uprising is to seek to reform my grandfather's community, to enjoin good and prohibit evil.[4](#)

We address him in the *ziyarat* in the following words:

أَشْهَدُ أَنَّكَ قَدْ أَقَمْتَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَيْتَ الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرْتَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَيْتَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَجَاهَدْتَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ حَتَّى أَتَاكَ
الْيَقِينُ

I testify that you established prayers, gave charity, enjoined good, prohibited evil, and strove in the way of God in its true sense, and acted upon His book and implemented His prophet's traditions [5](#)

Safeguarding The Law

Let us now examine what the right type of *shafa'ah* is? The right kind of *shafa'ah* which supports the law and safeguards the system, and whose existence is established by many proofs from Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions, mentioned in both Sunni and Shia sources, is of two types:

1. *Shafa'ah* of leadership or *shafa'ah* by action
2. *Shafa'ah* of forgiveness or *shafa'ah* by grace

The first type, is *shafa'ah* which entails salvation from perdition, reward of good deeds, and even attainment of higher stations. Whereas the second type is a *shafa'ah* whose effect is to ward off punishment and bring about forgiveness of sins the most it can possibly achieve is getting rewards and benefits, but it does not enable attainment of higher stations. This latter type is referred to by the Prophet (s):

قال رسول الله (ص): إِنَّمَا شَفَاعَتِي لِأَهْلِ الْكِبَائِرِ مِنْ أُمَّتِي، فَأَمَّا الْمُحْسِنُونَ فَمَا عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ سَبِيلٍ

I have stored my intercession for the members of my community who commit major sins; as for the virtuous, they shall not be punished.⁶

Intercession Of Leadership

In order to clarify this type of intercession, we need to recapitulate an issue discussed under “retribution in the hereafter” earlier on. We explained in that earlier discussion that behaviour and actions of humans in this world will be manifested and embodied in the world hereafter where its true reality will appear in full. Now we add that, in the world hereafter, not only will actions be embodied, but even relationships will be personified. Spiritual relationships which are established in this world between people will achieve a celestial and real form in the hereafter. When an individual becomes the means of guidance for another, the relationship between leader and follower will appear in its real form after resurrection, whereby the giver of guidance will manifest as leader and guide and the beneficiary as the follower and guided one. The same applies with misguidance and deviation.

The glorious Qur'an states:

يَوْمَ نَدْعُو كُلَّ أُنَاسٍ بِإِمَامِهِمْ

The day We shall summon every group of people along with their imam. (Qur'an, 17:71)

That is, every individual shall be resurrected with his own guide, who inspired him and was his role

model.

Referring to the embodiment of Pharaoh's leadership of his people, it states:

يَقْدُمُ قَوْمَهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فَأَوْرَدَهُمُ النَّارَ

On the Day of Resurrection, he will lead his people and conduct them into the Fire. (Qur'an, 11:98)

Pharaoh who in this world was misguided and a leader of the misguided, and the misguided of his community followed in his footsteps, will be embodied in the hereafter as their guide and leader. So, in reality we can say that Pharaoh was the intercessor and intermediary for his people both in the world here and in hereafter—an intercessor who caused others to sin and be misguided and who will be the medium for their entry into the hellfire in that world. His role in being a means to leading his people to hellfire is actually the embodiment of his being a means of their misguidance in this world.

The interesting point to be noted in the expression used in the Qur'an is that it states Pharaoh will lead his people to the hellfire. With such a statement, the Qur'an alludes to the embodiment of the effect of Pharaoh's misguidance, stating that in as much as he led them in this world to misguidance, so he will lead them to hellfire in the hereafter; in fact, leading them into hellfire in the hereafter is a clear manifestation and embodiment of leading them to deviation in this world.

Of course, it is obvious that in as much as righteous and misguided leadership in this world has many types and varieties, so also will be the case in the next world. For instance, all those who have been enlightened by the Prophet's (s) light of guidance and have benefited from that blessed personality's *shafa'ah*, will be under his leadership as he, may our souls be ransomed for him, will be the doyen of the virtuous, holding the *liwa al hamd* (the Banner of Praise) on the day of resurrection.

It is in this sense of *shafa'ah* that the holy Prophet (s) will be the intercessor for the Leader of the Faithful (a) and the holy Lady Fatima (sa), who in turn will be the intercessors for Hasanayn (a). In this way, every Imam will be the intercessor for the succeeding Imam and of his own followers and students. The hierarchy will be maintained for whatever it is that the other infallibles have, they receive it through the holy prophet.

In the same way, even the scholars will intercede on behalf of those who received their guidance and instructions. This process creates a multi-faceted linked chain wherein the smaller groups link to larger ones and the head of the chain is the holy personality of the honourable Prophet (s).

Intercessor, obeyed, prophet, gracious,

Bountiful, majestic, affable, marked with the seal of God.[7](#)

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Surging forward and all hearts follow,

The hands of all spirits cling to his cloak. [8](#)

* * *

Rumi:[9](#)

He is the intercessor in this world and in the yonder world—in this world (for guidance) to the (true) religion, and yonder (for entrance) to Paradise.

In this world he says, “Do Thou show unto them the Way,” and in yonder world he says, “Do Thou show unto them the Moon.”

It was his custom in public and in private (to say), “Guide my people: verily they know not.”

By his breath (powerful intercession) both the Gates were opened: in both worlds his prayer is answered.

He has become the Seal (of the prophets) for this reason that there never was anyone like him in munificence nor ever shall be.

A hundred thousand blessings on his spirit and on the advent and cycle of his sons!

Those fortunate Caliph-born sons of his are born of the substance of his soul and heart.

Whether they be of Baghdad or Heart or Rayy, they are his progeny without admixture of water and earth.

Wherever the rose-bough blossoms, 'tis still the (same) rose; wherever the wine-jar bubbles, 'tis still the (same) wine.

If the sun uplifts its head (rise) from the west, 'tis the same sun, not anything else. [10](#)

The reason why the traditions state that Imam Husayn (a) will intercede on behalf of a large number of people is that his movement, more than any other in this world, led to the revival of religion and the guidance of mankind.

As was mentioned earlier, the intercession by Imam Husayn (a) will not be in the sense that he will ask anything from God contrary to the Divine Will and pleasure. His intercession will be of two types: one type will be this same guidance created by him in this world, which will be embodied and personified in the hereafter; the other type will be explained later.

Imam Husayn (a) will be the intercessor for those who have been guided by his school, and he will not be the intercessor for those who have misused his school to misguide.

We should not overlook the fact that in as much as some have been guided by the holy Qur'an and others misguided, so also some have been enlightened by the school of Imam Husayn (a), while others have been misled, depending on the people themselves.

Referring to parables, the Qur'an asserts:

يُضِلُّ بِهِ كَثِيرًا وَيَهْدِي بِهِ كَثِيرًا ۚ وَمَا يُضِلُّ بِهِ إِلَّا الْفَاسِقِينَ

Thereby He leads many astray, and thereby He guides many; and He leads no one astray thereby except the transgressors. (Qur'an, 2:26)

Rumi has illustrated this matter using a profound and beautiful allegory: [11](#)

Beseech God continually that you may not stumble over these deep sayings and that you may arrive at the (journey's) end,

For many have been led astray by the Qur'an: by (clinging to) that rope a multitude have fallen into the well.

There is no fault in the rope, O perverse man, inasmuch as you had no desire for (reaching) the top. [12](#)

“*Rasan*” (in the Persian text of the poem) means rope. With a rope can one either ascend out of the well or descend into the depths of the well, depending on what choice we make.

The Qur'an and the school of Imam Husayn (a) are ropes which have the capacity to elevate man out of the abyss of damnation to the pinnacle of salvation; one is a rope from God (*habl min allah*) and the other is a rope from man (*habl min allah*). But if one were to misuse these two Divine ropes, the ropes would not be to blame, rather we would say that the individual never had the intention of elevating himself; and undoubtedly such people would be “led” by the Qur'an and the Husayni school to the abyss of hell. This reality would manifest itself in the hereafter in such a fashion that it would be by the order of the Qur'an and the Imams that these misled individuals would be relegated to hellfire. And this is the true explanation of (the Imam) being the Divider or Distributor of heaven and hell (*qasim al jannah wa al-nar*).

It has been narrated from the Holy Prophet:

فَعَلَيْكُمْ بِالْقُرْآنِ فَإِنَّهُ شَافِعٌ مُشَفَّعٌ وَمَا حِلٌّ مُصَدِّقٌ

The Qur'an is an intercessor whose intercession is approved, And a prosecutor whose truthfulness is accepted [13](#)

This is a truly amazing statement. He says: the glorious Qur'an is an intercessor for the believers and the virtuous mediating their way to the Paradise of eternal felicity, and it is also a prosecutor for the disbelievers and evil-doers-leading them to hellfire. For the first lot it is a gateway to heaven, and for the second a stepping stone to hell.

It is appropriate to name such an intercession as *shafa'ah* of leadership or *shafa'ah* by action, since the fundamental factor which determines salvation or damnation is the action of the individual.

Obviously, none of the objections raised against intercession apply to this type of *shafa'ah* as was explained above. And it is also abundantly clear that this type of *shafa'ah* is not only not incompatible with Divine justice, but rather it supports it.

Intercession Of Forgiveness

The second type of *shafa'ah* is intercession for the forgiveness and clemency of sins. This is the sense of *shafa'ah* which has been the target of attacks and objections by critics and opponents, but with the explanation that will be forwarded in this book, by God's will, it shall become clear that not only is no objection valid against it, on the contrary, it is one of the lofty and profound teachings of Islam.

Precedence Of Mercy

In the beginning we should recognize the fact that in order to attain salvation, in addition to deeds and acts performed by man himself, there has always been another universal phenomenon in operation, namely, the precedence of Divine mercy. The religious texts mention:

يَا مَنْ سَبَقَتْ رَحْمَتُهُ غَضَبَهُ

He whose mercy precedes His wrath. [14](#)

Hafiz in a famous ghazal says: [15](#)

The green expanse of sky, I beheld; and the sickle (the crescent) of the new moon;

To me, recollection came of my own sown-field; and of the time of reaping (the judgment-day)

I said: "O fortune! Thou hast slept; and appeared hath the sun:"

He said: "Despite all this, hopeless of the past, be not. [16](#)

What Hafiz meant by “past” – *shafa'ah* – is the precedence of Divine mercy over His wrath, though he could also have meant something else which has been alluded to in the verse:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ سَبَقَتْ لَهُمْ مِنَّا الْحُسْنَىٰ أُولَٰئِكَ عَنْهَا مُبْعَدُونَ

Indeed, those to whom there has gone beforehand (the promise of) the best reward from Us will be kept away from it. (Qur'an, 21: 101)

In any case, that which is fundamental in the scheme of creation is mercy, salvation, and felicity; disbelief, disobedience, and evil being accidental and non-fundamental. That which is accidental will be overcome by God's mercy, whenever possible. One of the evidences for the precedence of Divine mercy over Divine wrath is the felt presence of succour and support from the unseen realms. Divine forgiveness and effacement of the effects of sins is another proof for the precedence of Divine mercy and compassion over wrath and anger.

The Principle Of Purification

In the created order, one of the manifestations of Divine mercy is what might be called the “process of purification.” The created order is characterized by purification and cleansing. One of the instances of purification is the absorption of carbon dioxide by plants and oceans, thus cleansing the air. If the air which is polluted by the respiration of living beings and burning of fossil fuels were not to be purified by the plant and ocean refinery, the earth's atmosphere would soon lose its ability to sustain life and breathing would become impossible. The disintegration of animal carcasses and the catalysis of excreta from living beings is another example of cleansing and purification in creation.

Just as manifestations of purification and cleansing exist in the physical and natural world, they also exist in the spiritual world. Forgiveness and the effacement of the effects of sins belong to this category. Forgiveness means a cleansing of hearts and souls—to the extent that they can be purified—from the effects and consequences of sins.

Of course, some hearts lose the receptivity to be purified, to this extent that no celestial cleanser whatsoever can cleanse them. It is as if they become inherently polluted entities. When disbelief and shirk get established in a heart, it disables the hearts capacity to be purified. In the Qur'an, the consolidation of disbelief in the heart is referred to as “the closing of the heart” or “God's sealing.”

The Principle Of Equilibrium

Another proof for the precedence of Divine mercy over wrath in the realm of creation is the fact that health and equilibrium is the rule, whereas disease and sickness is the exception. In the constitution of every living being, there is an inherent power or faculty active in maintaining the health and equilibrium

of that being for its survival. One example is the presence of white blood corpuscles with their amazing defensive capabilities. Another example is the ability of living bodies to heal and repair themselves. Thus, bone fractures, cuts, wounds, and nutritional deficiencies are repaired and restored to a healthy state by this faculty.

From the religious point of view there is the concept of the *fitrah* (original nature or creation). Every child is born in this world with a pure *fitrah*

كَلِّ مَوْلُودٌ يُولَدُ عَلَى الْفِطْرَةِ حَتَّىٰ يَكُونَ أَبَوَاهُ يَهُودَانَهُ وَ يَنْصِرَانَهُ

Every newborn is born with the *fitrah*, but his parents convert him either to Judaism or Christianity. [17](#)

Inherent in every being who has deviated from its original path, there is a propensity toward returning to its primordial state. In philosophical terms, in every nature that suffers from an impediment (*qasr*), there exists an inclination to revert to its original natural state. *i.e.* there always exists in the universe a force to escape from disequilibrium and move toward health and equilibrium. These are proofs of the precedence of mercy over wrath. Forgiveness also stems from this same principle.

Universal Mercy

The principle of forgiveness is not an exception, rather a universal formula and a consequence of the predominance of mercy in the realm of creation. From this it becomes clear that Divine forgiveness is universal and embraces all existent beings to the extent of their possibility and receptivity. This principle is effective in the attainment of salvation and the escape from damnation for all successful beings; hence, the Qur'an states:

مَنْ يُصْرَفْ عَنْهُ يَوْمَئِذٍ فَقَدْ رَحِمَهُ

Whoever is spared of it on that day, He has certainly been merciful to him. (Qur'an, 6: 16)

Thus, if there were to be no Divine mercy, none would be saved from chastisement.

The Holy Prophet (s) referred to this fact in a sermon delivered to the Muslims towards the end of his noble life. in this sermon he emphasized that two things are crucial for salvation: action and compassion. An extract from the sermon is as follows:

أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّهُ لَيْسَ بَيْنَ اللَّهِ وَ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ نَسَبٌ وَلَا أَمْرٌ يُؤْتِيهِ بِهِ خَيْرًا أَوْ يَصْرَفُ عَنْهُ شَرًّا إِلَّا الْعَمَلُ. أَلَا لَا يَدْعِينَّ مَدْعَ وَ لَا يَتَمَنَّيَنَّ مَتَمَّنَّ، وَالَّذِي بَعَثَنِي بِالْحَقِّ لَا يَنْجَى إِلَّا عَمَلَ مَعَ رَحْمَةٍ وَ لَوْ عَصَيْتَ لَهْوَيْتَ. اللَّهُمَّ قَدْ بَلَغْتَ

O people! Verily there is neither any kinship between God and anyone nor any other relationship whereby one is entitled to receive goodness or ward off evil except through deeds. Beware! Let no claimant make any claim, let none harbour lofty expectations. I swear by the One who has raised me as a righteous messenger, there is no salvation save through deeds coupled with Divine mercy, even if I were to sin, I would perish. O Lord! Have I conveyed?[18](#)

The secret behind the seeking of forgiveness by the Holy Prophet (s), as well as by the rest of the prophets and the infallible guides (a), is this very principle of universal and all-embracing mercy. In fact, one can assert that, the nearer one is (to the all-perfect Being) the more he benefits from this principle. As a general rule, the more proximity one enjoys, the more one is enlightened by the *asma al husna*, i.e. the perfect Divine attributes. The Prophet (s) has declared:

إِنَّهُ لِيُغَانُ عَلَى قَلْبِي وَإِنِّي لَأَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ فِي كُلِّ يَوْمٍ سَبْعِينَ مَرَّةً

Effects of pollution appear on my heart and every day I seek forgiveness from my Lord seventy times.[19](#)

Connection Between Intercession And Mercy

What is the relationship between Divine pardon and intercession?

Divine forgiveness, like all other types of mercy, has a special order and scheme. In the second section of the book, we discussed in detail the fact that the universe has a system, and we explained that the necessity of a hierarchy is due to the differences between living beings. What's more, the differences between creatures is neither arbitrary nor created, rather it is inseparably inherent in them; specifically, it is their core identity and manner of existence. Hence, absence of these differences is tantamount to their non-existence, and positing their existence is incompatible with absence of differences.

From the above explanation it becomes clear that it is impossible that any of the manifestations of Divine mercy can be actualized without a hierarchy. A hierarchically organized universe in its turn requires that Divine forgiveness flow through the certain conduits to reach the sinners at the bottom—these conduits and mediums being none other than prophets and saints. By the same reason that the grace of revelation is not granted without an intermediary and all people are not raised and inspired to become prophets, no other Divine mercy descends without an intermediary. This implies that the mercy of forgiveness and pardon also cannot possibly descend without an intermediary.

Supposing that we had no access to proofs for intercession from traditional sources, we would be compelled to believe in it by logical and conclusive rational proofs, like the proof of the hierarchically organized universe (*mikan-i ashraf*).

If one accepts the existence of Divine forgiveness, authoritative logical proofs will compel him to believe

that Divine forgiveness must flow through the Logos or perfect soul—a soul which holds the status of Universal Sainthood (*wilayah kulliyah*). It is impossible for Divine grace to flow in creation without a certain order and account in place.

Fortunately, the Qur'an has guided us on this issue too. It, in conjunction with Islamic traditions—specifically keeping in mind all that has been narrated in the reliable corpus of Shia traditions about the Universal Sainthood (*walayah*) of the messenger of God (s) and the infallible Imams (a) as well as the lower levels of *walayah* proper to lower levels of faith—leads us to infer that the mediation for Divine forgiveness is not just a single universal Spirit, but universal souls and particular human spirits with an hierarchy between them; each having a specific role in intercession. This is one of the most significant and profound Islamic and Qur'anic teachings, and one which has been properly expounded only in the Shia school of thought by the infallible Imams (a) and their prominent students. It is to be considered as an achievement of this sect.

Conditions For Intercession

At its base, intercession is Divine forgiveness. When it is attributed to God who is the source of all goodness and grace, it is named as forgiveness. But when it is attributed to the intermediaries through whom the grace flows, it is named as intercession. It now becomes crystal clear that the preliminary and requisite conditions for forgiveness must also apply in the case of intercession. From the logical point of view, there is no prerequisite for forgiveness save the worth and merit of the recipient. If someone is denied Divine forgiveness, it due to his own disqualification, and is not related to, God forbid, the restrictiveness and limitation of Divine mercy. Unlike bank reserves, Divine mercy is not limited. The reserves of Divine grace are unlimited, but the merits of recipients vary, some may be devoid of all merits and thus incapable of benefiting from Divine grace.

According to religious sources, this much is certain that disbelief and polytheism are impediments to Divine grace. The Qur'an states:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَغْفِرُ أَنْ يُشْرَكَ بِهِ وَيَغْفِرُ مَا دُونَ ذَلِكَ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ

Indeed, Allah does not forgive that any partner should be ascribed to Him, but He forgives anything besides that to whomever He wishes. (Qur'an, 4:116)

For man to lose faith is to totally sever this connection to forgiveness, after which it is impossible for him to benefit from this immense grace. When the heart is sealed with disbelief, it becomes like the closed vessel which cannot allow any water in, even if it were to be dipped into all the great oceans of the world. The being of such a person becomes like the infertile soil wherein the water of Divine grace can only cause thorns to grow instead of flowers.

Rain in whose munificence there is no doubt,

Enables the growth of flowers in a garden and thorns in infertile soil.

If a flower fails to grow in the salty soil, it is not due to deficiency in rain, but due to the inadequacy of the soil.

The Qur'an explains this all-embracing Divine grace through the words of the bearers of the Divine Throne:

الَّذِينَ يَحْمِلُونَ الْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُ يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا وَسِعْتَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ رَحْمَةً وَعِلْمًا فَاغْفِرْ لِلَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا سَبِيلَكَ وَقِهِمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ

Those who bear the Throne, and those who are around it, celebrate the praise of their Lord and have faith in Him, and they plead for forgiveness for the faithful: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things in mercy and knowledge. So, forgive those who repent and follow Your way and save them from the punishment of hell. (Qur'an, 40:7)

We can infer from this verse both the infinite nature of Divine mercy, and the necessary qualifications required to entitle someone to receive Divine pardon.

One can deduct from the Qur'anic verses that faith is a necessary but not sufficient condition for attaining forgiveness and intercession. No one can enumerate with certainty all the necessary requirements, God alone knows them all. In the verse that promises forgiveness of all sins other than polytheism, the restriction of to whomever He wishes is mentioned, and in the verses on intercession the restriction of

وَلَا يَشْفَعُونَ إِلَّا لِمَنْ ارْتَضَىٰ

and they do not intercede except for someone He approves of. (Qur'an, 21:28)

is mentioned, both of which imply the same sense. Apparently, the Qur'an did not expound clearly all the conditions required for intercession, it thus retained the heart between the states of fear and hope. From this we can understand that the objection against the belief in intercession, to the effect that it emboldens one to sin, is invalid.

Intercession Belongs To God Alone

The fundamental distinction between true intercession from false intercession is that true intercession originates from God and ends with the sinner, whereas in the false intercession the reverse is true.

In true intercession, the source of intercession, namely, God the Almighty activates the intermediary. Whereas in false intercession, the recipient, namely the sinner is the activator. In the false variety, whose examples abound in the world, the intercessor acquires his intermediary status from the criminal, because he is the one who instigates the intermediary to intercede on his behalf. That is to say, the sinner is the one who appoints the intermediary to his role. However, in true intercession, which can be correctly attributed to the prophets, imams, and those enjoying Divine proximity, the intermediary role of the intercessor is bestowed by God; God is the One who grants the intermediary his role.

In other words, in false intercession, the intercessor is influenced by the interceded one (the sinner) and the intercessor then influences the One who accepts the intercession (Final authority); whereas in true intercession, the reverse is true; the One who accepts the intercession (the Final authority, God) is the cause who influences the intercessor, and the intercessor under His influence and by His Will, is effective on the sinner. In the false type of intercession, the one who sets the process into motion is the sinner, whereas in the true type of intercession, it is God the almighty.

Mulla Sadra in his commentary on Surah al-Hadid, has a subtle and scholarly explanation on the distinction between the true and false types of intercession, and why it is that the false type of intercession exists in this world but does not exist in the hereafter; in fact it is impossible for it to exist therein.

By expanding the scope of the discussion, he touches upon essential and accidental causes as well as essential and accidental ends. He asks how it is sometimes possible that in this world—meaning not just the human realm—accidental causes sometimes specify the destiny of a thing or keep a thing from reaching its essential end; allowing it to reach only its accidental end. The hereafter is not like this and in that realm accidental causes and ends do not apply.

Since the discussion is quite profound, we will withhold from explaining and commenting on it here and will instead refer scholars to the details as explained by Mulla Sadra himself in various places in his commentary.

The verses in the holy Qur'an which assert the impossibility of intercession without Divine permission allude to this fact. There is a particularly amazing and very interesting expression in this regard:

قُلْ لِلَّهِ الشَّفَاعَةُ جَمِيعًا

Say, 'All intercession rests with Allah. (Qur'an, 39:44)

This verse unequivocally and explicitly affirms intercession and intermediation, and explicitly attributes all intercession to God exclusively, since it is God who renders the (human) intercessor as an (effective) intercessor. This verse could possibly be alluding to the intercession that will transpire after the resurrection, and in philosophical terminology, may be referring to the arc of ascent. Or it could possibly

be referring to all intermediaries and the mediation of Divine mercy, which would then be the arc of descent. In other words, it could possibly include the entire universal sequence of cause and effects. Anyway, as far as it relates to intercession in the hereafter, it implies that without Divine permission, the criminal cannot activate the intercessor and likewise, without Divine authorization, the intercessor cannot affect anything.

The logical proof for this reality is that it is established in philosophy that the Necessary existent, is also necessarily existent in all aspects and modalities. To explain, as the necessarily existent Being is not an effect of any other being in its essence, by the same reason, it cannot be under the influence of any other causative entity with respect to its attributes and efficiency. It is exclusively and agent, accepting no effect or influence whatsoever from any other entity.

Tawhid And Tawassul

From our past discussion an important and profound fact emerges about unity in worship. That fact is that when seeking assistance and intercession of the sacred souls and saints, one must first ascertain that the one who is solicited and through whom one seeks help has been appointed by God as an intermediary. The holy Qur'an states:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَابْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ

O you who have faith! Be wary of God, and seek the means of recourse to Him. (Qur'an, 5:35)

As a general principle, to seek recourse to means and to use mediums is not in any way polytheism since God has created the means, and God is the one who has fashioned them to be effective mediums. What's more, it is God who has asked us to make use of these mediums and means—so all of this is nothing other than pure Divine Unity (*tawhid*). In this context, there is no difference whatsoever between material and spiritual mediums, between exoteric and esoteric means, between mediums of this world or the hereafter. Albeit, the material means can be recognized and identified through scientific and empirical methods, whereas the spiritual means can be discovered through religious guidance, based on Divine revelation—the Book and traditions of Prophet and infallible ones.

Secondly, when an individual seeks recourse to means or seeks intercession, he must focus attention on God, and from God towards the means and intercessor, since, as we explained above, the true intercession is one wherein the source of intercession activates the intercessor to effect intercession, and since God approves and grants permission, the intercessor can intercede. In contrast to this is the case of false intercession, wherein the original attention is directed toward the intercessor to influence the source of intercession. Hence, the criminal's attention is focused all the time on the intercessor, expecting the latter to exert his power and influence on the source of intercession and win his approval. Thus, if one's attention is directed primarily toward the intercessor rather than being subordinate to or

resulting from attention toward God, then it will constitute polytheism in worship.

Divine acts have a coherent order. If someone wants to neglect this order in creation, then he is misguided. It is for this reason that God the Almighty has instructed the sinners to seek recourse to the Holy Prophet (s), and, in addition to praying for forgiveness by themselves, also ask that sublime personality to pray for their forgiveness. The Qur'an states:

وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ ظَلَمُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ جَاءُوكَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا اللَّهَ وَاسْتَغْفَرَ لَهُمُ الرَّسُولُ لَوَجَدُوا اللَّهَ تَوَّابًا رَحِيمًا

Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you and pleaded to Allah for forgiveness, and the Apostle had pleaded for them (to Allah) for forgiveness, they would have surely found Allah all-clement, all-merciful. (Qur'an, 4:64)

Indeed, one cannot solely rely on virtuous deeds and piety; as the Prophet (s) himself declared towards the end of his noble earthly life: "There is no salvation save through deeds coupled with Divine mercy "

Response To The Objections

With the explanation we gave of the intercession of forgiveness, the objections against intercession can be answered thus:

1. Intercession is neither incompatible with unity of worship nor with unity of Divine essence, since the mercy of the intercessor is nothing but a manifestation of Divine mercy, and the intercession and mercy originates from the Lord. (response to the first and second objections)
2. In as much as belief in Divine forgiveness does not embolden anyone, rather only creates hope, so also belief in intercession does not encourage anyone to sin. Keeping in mind the fact that the pre-requisite condition for receiving forgiveness and intercession is Divine will and approval, it becomes clear that the effect of this belief is to the extent of saving hearts from despair and hopelessness, and retaining them in a state that lies between hope and fear. (response to the third objection)
3. Intercession is of two types: false and true. The reason why in some verses, intercession has been refuted whereas in others it has been approved of is this occurrence of two conceptions about intercession. The holy Qur'an sought to guide attention away from the false toward the true type of intercession. (response to the fourth objection)
4. Intercession is not incompatible with the principle of actions; since, actions are of the status of the passive cause whereas Divine mercy is in the position of the active cause (response to the fifth objection).
5. In the true intercession, there is no room for the concept that God can be influenced by any factor;

since, true intercession comprises a process that starts at the top and works its way down. (response to the sixth objection).

6. In intercession, as in forgiveness, there exists no injustice or Exceptions–Divine mercy being infinite. Anyone who is denied it is due to his total loss of receptivity towards it. *i.e.* denial is the result of the recipient's deficiency (response to the seventh objection).

- [1.](#) Bihar al Anwar, vol. 40, p. 338.
- [2.](#) See Endnote 77
- [3.](#) Nahj al-Balagha, letter 41.
- [4.](#) Manaqib, Ibn Shahr Ashub, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 44, p. 329.
- [5.](#) Al-Kafi, vol.4, p. 578.
- [6.](#) Wasa'il al-Shiah, vol. 15, p.336.
- [7.](#) Richard Francis Burton, Trans. The Golestan of Sa'di, Introduction
- [8.](#) Unknown poet.
- [9.](#) See Endnote 78
- [10.](#) Nicholson, vol. 6, p. 266, vrs. 167–171, 175–179.
- [11.](#) See Endnote 79
- [12.](#) Nicholson, vol. 3, 235, vrs. 4209–11
- [13.](#) Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 599.
- [14.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 95, p. 232.
- [15.](#) See Endnote 80
- [16.](#) Clarke, ghazal 407
- [17.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 3, p. 281.
- [18.](#) Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Shahr Nahj al-Balagha, vol.10, p. 184
- [19.](#) Tabatabai, al-Mizan, vol. 18, p. 245. Mustadrak al-Wasail, vol.5, p. 321, tradition 5987

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