

Lesson 11: The Divine Unity in Worship

Calling to the worship (*'ibādah*) of One and Only God and abandoning the worship of false deities is one of the most important objectives of all the prophets of God ('a), as the Holy Qur'an thus says:

﴿وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا أَنِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا الطَّاغُوتَ﴾

“Certainly We raised an apostle in every nation [to preach:] ‘Worship Allah, and keep away from the Rebel’.”¹

The Muslim schools of thought have a consensus of opinion on worship as exclusive to God alone, but some sects (such as the Wahhābīs) have committed mistakes in interpreting worship. As a result, they mistakenly regard many practices of Muslim as a gesture of honor and respect to the prophets and righteous people as worshipping them and polytheism in worship (*shirk fī 'l-‘ibādah*).

So, by referring to the Holy Qur'an, it is necessary for us to know the true meaning of worship. Regarding the issue of the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) in worship, the Holy Qur'an has focused on the following concepts:

1. Godhood or Divinity (*ulḥiyyah*);
2. Mastership or Ownership (*mḥikiyyah*);
3. Creatorship (*khḥiqiyyah*); and
4. Lordship (*rubḥbiyyah*).

That is, only the Being who possesses the abovementioned Attributes is worthy of worship, and since the said Attributes can only be found in God, it follows that worship is due to Him alone, and now we shall quote examples of Qur'anic verses in this regard:

1. *Sḥrat al-Fḥtiḥah* first mentions the Lordship and Mastership of God and then declares that worship is

exclusive to God alone:

﴿ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ * الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ * مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ * إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ ﴾

“All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful, Master of the Day of Retribution. You [alone] do we worship, and to You [alone] do we turn for help.”²

2. In a universal invitation, the human beings have been summoned to the worship of God who has created all the human beings:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ ﴾

“O mankind! Worship your Lord, who created you and those who were before you.”³

3. The apostles and prophets of God (‘a) are reminded that Godhood (*ul^ḥhiyyah*) is exclusive to God alone. For this reason, they must worship Him alone:

﴿ وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا نُوحِي إِلَيْهِ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدُونِ ﴾

“We did not send any apostle before you but We revealed to him that ‘There is no god except Me; so worship Me.’”⁴

4. In another place, by citing that the Lordship (*rub^ḥbiyyah*), Godhood (*ul^ḥhiyyah*) and Creatorship (*kh^ḥliyyah*) exclusively belong to God, all the human beings are invited to worship Him [alone]:

﴿ ذَلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ خَالِقُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ فَاعْبُدُوهُ ﴾

“That is Allah, your Lord, there is no god except Him, the creator of all things; so worship Him.”⁵

5. Addressing the Holy Prophet (ﷺ), it is thus stated in another verse:

﴿ وَلِلَّهِ غَيْبُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَإِلَيْهِ يُرْجَعُ الْأُمُورُ كُلُّهَا فَاعْبُدْهُ ﴾

“To Allah belongs the Unseen of the heavens and the earth, and to Him all matters are returned. So worship Him.”⁶

6. In many verses, the idol-worshippers have been reproached for worshipping objects which cannot give them neither harm nor benefit:

﴿قُلْ أَتَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَمْلِكُ لَكُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا﴾

“Say, ‘Do you worship, besides Allah, what has no power to bring you any benefit or harm?’”⁷

﴿وَيَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَضُرُّهُمْ وَلَا يَنْفَعُهُمْ﴾

“They worship besides Allah that which neither causes them any harm, nor brings them any benefit.”⁸

﴿وَيَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَمْلِكُ لَهُمْ رِزْقًا﴾

“They worship besides Allah what has no power to provide them.”⁹

﴿إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَا يَمْلِكُونَ لَكُمْ رِزْقًا﴾

“Indeed those whom you worship besides Allah have no control over your provision.”¹⁰

What is Worship?

By studying the totality of the quoted verses, the meaning of worship (*‘ibādah*) can be inferred; that worship means any word or gesture of humility and humbleness before a being that is believed to have possessed all or some of the following characteristics:

1. He is Independent and Self-sufficient in His existence and existential perfections;
2. He is the Creator and Originator of all human beings and the universe, and all other creatures;
3. He controls anything and anyone what or who brings benefit and harm to the human beings and other creatures; and
4. He has direct and total involvement or interference in the destiny of the human being and the universe, and He occupies the station of [Exclusive] Lordship [over the entire Creation].

Therefore, the meaning of worship is constituted by two elements, viz. belief and action.

Belief is related to one of the abovementioned characteristics while action refers to any gesture coupled with humility and humbleness, but mere belief or action cannot constitute what is called ‘worship’.

In addition to the fact that this point can clearly be established by studying the verses quoted above, other proofs and pieces of evidence also indicate the same:

1. If we say that every gesture of humility before others – though not coupled with the belief in their Creatorship or Lordship – is considered ‘worship’, we must declare that the child’s meekness in front of her parents, the student’s humility before his teacher, the young’s show of respect to an elder, the ignorant’s humbleness toward the learned, and the like are all examples of worship. As a result, doing these gestures is an act of polytheism in worship although all these actions are encouraged and appreciated by the religious law and reason. Meanwhile, polytheism is essentially evil and knows no exception. For instance, the Qur’an has described it as a great injustice (*ʿulmun ‘aḥḥam*),¹¹ and injustice is essentially evil.

2. Prostration (*sajdah*) in front of others is regarded as the ultimate stage of actual humility, yet as stated in the Qur’an the angels were ordered to prostrate before Prophet ʿĪdam (ʿa),¹² and Prophet Yaʿqūb (Jacob) (ʿa) and his wife and children prostrated before Prophet Yūsuf (Joseph) (ʿa).¹³ If humility without the belief in Godhood is an act of worship, it follows that the action of the angels, Prophet Yaʿqūb (ʿa) and his children are clear manifestations of polytheism in worship.

3. In principle, it must be stated that humility of an imperfect being in front of a perfect being is one of the universal precedents (*sunan*) governing the creation. Whenever an entity feels a sense of weakness and inferiority toward another entity that is considered stronger and more perfect, he/it impulsively feels a sense of humbleness and humility toward the other entity.

4. Then, in order to benefit from the said perfection and power or to be immune from any harm to be brought by the other entity, through a suitable gesture, he/it would express his/its humility and humbleness. The humility and modesty of an ignorant person in front of a learned person, a learned person in front of a more learned person is among the many manifestations of the said innate humility, and as such, reason (*ʿaql*) and natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) regard it as something laudable, although the agent may be totally unaware of whether or not this action earns the approval and pleasure of the Law-giver.

Therefore, once humility and lowliness is expressed on account of a perfection which exists in another entity, we cannot consider it blameworthy and objectionable; in fact, such an action is rationally and religiously laudable.

It is very well acknowledged that expressing humility in front of another person is not permissible in two instances:

1. The person to whom humility is expressed is devoid of the perceived perfection for which humility is expressed. It is like the case of someone who expresses humility in front of another person, thinking that the latter person is learned or more learned than the former. In this case, what may be inadmissible would be the action and not the agent, because the motive of the agent in doing so is desirable. Similar is the case of someone who fasts on the day of *ʿĪd al-Fiṭr*,¹⁴ thinking that it is the last day of the month of Ramaḥḥān. Although fasting on that day is blameworthy and prohibited from the perspective of

religious law, this kind of undue expression of obedience cannot be treated as ‘worship’.

2. The said being possesses the intended existential perfection but not as independent and intrinsic in nature, as in the case of all beings in the universe. Now, if someone regards that existential perfection as inherent in a being and independently his/its own and in spite of knowing that such being is created by God and is in need of his Creator in many of his existential perfections, he still believes that some of the existential attributes and effects are delegated to that being, and therefore, that being acts independently of those aspects. In this case that person worships that being in view such belief he holds and expresses humility and lowliness in front of that being. This kind of humility or worship is not only inappropriate and blameworthy but also an act of polytheism.

At any rate, this conceptual analysis arrives at the same conclusion from a study of Qur’anic verses, and thus, the essence of worship is constituted by two elements. One is belief and intention while the other is actual humility and lowliness (belief and action).

The Wahhābīs and Polytheism in Worship

It becomes clear from the abovementioned points that the scope of polytheism in worship (manifest polytheism and not the other levels of polytheism) is so restricted and it has two types: one is the practical aspect while the other is the ideological aspect. That is, the expression of humility and lowliness in front of any being other than God – in whatever manner – coupled with the belief in his/its Godhood and Lordship.

The Wahhābīs¹⁵ have taken a very broad scope of polytheism, particularly in worship. According to them, any kind of humility or humbleness expressed in front of any being other than God is considered polytheism, particularly in worship. They cite two sets of Qur’anic verses to support this point. One set refers to the verses that refer to the polytheism, particularly in worship, committed by the polytheists during the time of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ).

In these verses, actions such as supplication, seeking intercession (*shaf‘ah*) and worshipping the idols with the intention of seeking nearness (*qurb*) to God have been regarded by them, the Wahhābīs, as examples of polytheism in worship. Another set refers to the verses which indicate that the polytheists during the time of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) had acknowledged the Divine Unity in Creatorship and Lordship. From this perspective, therefore, they were monotheists and not polytheists.

What can be concluded from these two sets of verses is that polytheism in worship has nothing to do with the belief in the Lordship and Mastership of the Object of Worship (*ma‘būd*); it is rather concerned with the performance of actions which are themselves considered acts of worship, and since worship is exclusive to God, performing those practices toward any being other than God constitutes polytheism in worship. This is the most important basis of the Wahhābīs in regarding as polytheists all other Muslims and recognizing themselves as monotheists (*muwaḥḥid*) with respect to worship.

Considering what we have stated in the discussion related to the Divine Unity in Lordship, the incorrectness of this basis is manifest, for the polytheists during the time of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) used to worship idols and other deities and their motive behind those acts of worship was to seek proximity to God and winning the intercession of the deities before God, as declared by the Qur'an, thus:

﴿وَيَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَضُرُّهُمْ وَلَا يَنْفَعُهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ هَؤُلَاءِ شُفَعَاؤُنَا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ﴾

“They worship besides Allah that which neither causes them any harm, nor brings them any benefit, and they say, ‘These are our intercessors with Allah.’”¹⁶

And it also says, thus:

﴿وَالَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ مَا نَعْبُدُهُمْ إِلَّا لِيُقَرِّبُونَا إِلَى اللَّهِ زُلْفَى﴾

“...and those who take guardians besides Him [claiming,] ‘We only worship them so that they may bring us near to Allah’.”¹⁷

The polytheists (during the Age of Ignorance) supposed that since the Divine Essence is unfathomable and one cannot comprehend the truth of His Essence, worshipping Him directly without any intermediary is not possible. For this reason, they used to worship other beings such as angels, deceased pious people and other creatures whom and which they believed to have some influence on the destiny of man and the universe. By doing so, they were expecting to gain the intercession of their objects of worship and thus attaining comfort in life, and to get nearness to the Lord of lords (*rabb al-ʿarb*).

Accordingly, the idols made of wood or stone were in reality representations of those deities and objects of worship, although those deities and objects of worship were gradually forgotten in the public memory and the idols became the real deities and objects of worship.

In any case, they used to worship their idols and objects of worship, and as declared in the previous discussion, belief in the Lordship and Mastership of the Object of Worship is implied in the meaning of worship. This is so while none of the Muslims observes the rites and ceremonies which are performed for the sake of saints (*awliyāʾ*) with the intention of worshipping them. They recognize God alone as the only One worthy of worship and they worship Him alone.

They observe these rites and ceremonies with the intention of honor and reverence to the sublime station of the saints who enjoy the special favor of God, and in reality, this in itself is a sort of worship to God, just as some Wahhābī scholars have interpreted worship (*ʿibādah*) to mean the performance of any action (verbal or bodily) which earns the good pleasure of God and has been enjoined by the Qur'an and the Prophet (ﷺ): ¹⁸

الْعِبَادَةُ إِسْمٌ جَامِعٌ لِكُلِّ مَا يُحِبُّهُ اللَّهُ وَيَرْضَاهُ مِنْ أَقْوَالِ الْعِبَادِ وَأَفْعَالِهِمْ مِمَّا أَمَرَهُمْ بِهِ فِي كِتَابِهِ عَلَى لِسَانِ رَسُولِهِ.

There is no doubt that showing honor and respect to the prophets and saints of God (‘a) by means of any action which is permissible and not prohibited by the religious law earns the pleasure of God, and it is one of the manifestations of honoring the Divine sacraments (*sha‘ir Allāh*), and the Qur’an regards it as an indication of the purity of hearts, saying thus:

﴿وَمَنْ يُعْظِمِ شَعَائِرَ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّهَا مِنْ تَقْوَى الْقُلُوبِ﴾

“And whoever venerates the sacraments of Allah—indeed that arises from God-wariness of hearts.”¹⁹

Therefore, comparing the practices of Muslims with respect to the practices which are observed for the sake of honoring the sublime station of the holy saints (*awliyā’*) with the intention of worshipping God and not worshipping the saints, with the practices of the polytheists with respect to their idols and objects of worship which are done with the intention of worshipping them is totally incorrect and baseless.

If we are supposed to compare the Muslims’ visitation to the graves of pious people to something else, we must do so with the rites pertaining to the visitation to the House of God (*Ka‘bah*), in general, and the kissing of the Black Stone (*al-‘ajal al-aswad*), in particular, which are done with no intention other than worshipping God and honoring the Divine sacraments.

At this juncture, one can know the refutation to all the Wahhābī objections to the other Muslim schools of thought with respect to the Divine Unity in worship. They regard as manifestations of polytheism in worship such practices as entreating (*tabarruk*) and imploring (*istighāthah*) the saints of God (*awliyā’*), seeking their intercession (*tawassul*), swearing to God by their right, seeking blessings (*tabarruk*) from their remnants, making a vow (*nadhr*) for the buried ones (*ahl al-qubūr*), and the like.

And their basis is nothing but comparison of these practices to the practices of the polytheists during the time of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) which are outwardly similar to each other. This is exactly their error because outward similarity of two actions can never be the basis of uniformity of religious ruling for both actions; otherwise, fighting and struggle in the way of God and in the way of *ghayt*²⁰ must have the same religious ruling, for they are the same outwardly and their only difference is in the intention or motive, as the Qur’an testifies, thus:

﴿الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ الطَّاغُوتِ﴾

“Those who have faith fight in the way of Allah, and those who are faithless fight in the way of the

The practices of the polytheists with respect to their objects of worship are coupled with the belief in the Lordship and Mastership of their objects of worship and the intention of worshipping them, while the practices of the Muslims in relation to the saints of God and their graves are in no way coupled with the belief in their Lordship and Mastership and the motive is to worship God through giving respect and honor to them as Divine sacraments – something which is acceptable and pleasing to God.

Review Questions

1. Concerning the issue of the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) in worship, what are the points emphasized by the Holy Qur'an?
2. Elucidate the two elements that constitute the essence of worship.
3. In what way will humility and lowliness in front of any being other than God become laudable and in what way will the same become blameworthy and unacceptable?
4. Why do the Wahhābīs regard any gesture of humility and humbleness in front of any being other than God as polytheism?
5. Write down the invalidity of the Wahhābī view on the Divine Unity in worship.
6. Are entreating (*tawassul*) and imploring (*istighāthah*) the saints of God (*awliyā'*) in conflict with the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*)? Why?

1. Sūrat an-Nahḥ 16:36.

2. Sūrat al-Fatīhah 1:2–5.

3. Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:21.

4. Sūrat al-Anbiyā' 21:25.

5. Sūrat al-An'ām 6:102.

6. Sūrat Hūd 11:123.

7. Sūrat al-M'īdah 5:76.

8. Sūrat Yūnus 10:18.

9. Sūrat al-Nahḥ 16:73.

10. Sūrat al-'Ankabūt 29:17.

11. Sūrat Luqmān 31:13.

12. “And when We said to the angels, ‘Prostrate before Adam,’ they prostrated, except Iblis: he refused and acted arrogantly.” (Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:34)

13. “And he seated his parents high upon the throne, and they fell down prostrate before him.” (Sūrat Yūsuf 12:100)

14. ʿId al-Fitr: the Islamic feast marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadān. [Trans.]

15. Wahhābī: follower of Muḥammad ibn 'Abdul-Wahhāb, the founder of the Wahhābī sect. For a critical review of Wahhabism, see ʿAyatullāh Ja'far Sābūḥānī, Wahhabism (Tehran: Naba' Organization, 1996),

<http://www.al-islam.org/wahhabism>; [1] Hamid Algar, Wahhabism: A Critical Essay (New York: Islamic Publications International, 2002). [Trans.]

16. Sūrat Yūnus 10:18.

[17.](#) *Sūrat al-Zumar* 39:3.

[18.](#) *Al-Jāmi‘ al-Farīd*, p. 290, quoting the book *Al-Kalīmāt al-Nafī‘ah* written by ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mu‘ammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.

[19.](#) *Sūrat al-‘ajj* 22:32.

[20.](#) The term *ṭaghūt*, which has been used eight times in the Qur’an, applies to any idol, object, or individual that prevents people from doing what is good, and leads them astray. Prior to Islam, *ṭaghūt* had been the name of one of the idols of the Quraysh tribe. This name is also used to mean Satan. Moreover, the term is attributed to the one who rebels against lofty values, or whose despotism surpasses all bounds and who claims the prerogatives of divinity for himself either explicitly or implicitly. [Trans.]

[21.](#) *Sūrat al-Nisā’* 4:76.

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