

Question 36 : What is the criterion for distinguishing monotheism or the Unity of God {tawhid} from polytheism {shirk}?

Reply: The most important issue in the study of monotheism {*tawhid*} and polytheism {*shirk*} is discerning what their criterion is, and if this issue is not decisively settled, part of the secondary issues will remain unsolved. Along this line, we shall discuss the issue of monotheism and polytheism in different dimensions albeit in concise manner.

1. The unity of the Divine Essence {dhat}

The discussion of the unity of the Divine Essence may be in two ways:

a. God, whom scholastic theologians {*mutakallimun*} define as the “Necessary Being” {*wajib al-wujud*}), is One; He has no partner and nothing can be compared to Him. This meaning of monotheism is the same as that which God mentions in various ways in the Glorious Qur’an, such as:

ليس كمثلہ شیء

“*Nothing is like him.*”¹

Elsewhere, it says:

ولم یکن له کفوفاً أحد

“*Nor has He any equal.*”²

Of course sometimes, this kind of monotheism is vulgarly interpreted in another way and more attention is given to the numerical sense of monotheism and that is, God is One and not two.

It is quite obvious that this way of defining monotheism is incompatible with the Divine Station.

b. The Divine Essence is simple and not compound because a being's being constitution {*tarakkub*} of mental or external parts indicates that it is in need of its component parts and the "need" implies that there is "possibility" {*imkan*} and the possibility, in turn, necessarily mean that there is a need for a cause {*'illat*},³ and all these are discordant with the station of the Necessary Being.

2. The unity of the Divine creative power {*khaliqiyyah*}

The unity of the Divine creative power is one of the degrees of monotheism which is acknowledged by both reason {*'aql*} and revelation {*naql*}.

In the parlance of reason, we in relation to God represent a 'contingent' {*imkani*} order which is devoid of any sort of perfection {*kamal*} and beauty {*jamal*}, and whatever a thing possesses originally emanates from the fountain of the grace of the Essentially Sufficient {*ghani bi'dh-dhat*}. Thus, any manifestation of perfection and beauty that we see in the world belongs to Him.

When we consider the Qur'anic viewpoint, we see that the Qur'an contains numerous verses which stress the idea of the unity of the Divine creative power. Here is an example:

قل الله خالق كل شيء وهو الواحد القهار

"Say, 'Allah is the creator of all things, and He is the One, the All-paramount'."⁴

Therefore, the question of the unity of the Divine creative power in general is not disputed by theologians. What needs to be clarified here is that the unity of the Divine creative power has two interpretations, which are as follows:

a. If there exists any kind of causal system and causal relations among the creatures they all stem from the Cause of causes {*'illat 'l-'ilal*} and the Source of effects {*musabbab al-asbab*}. In reality, the Independent and Principal Creator is God and the effect of any other than God on all that occurs is ascribed to God and through the permission and will of God.

In this view, the system of cause and effect in the world, which contributes to unveiling the human knowledge, has been acknowledged. Meanwhile, this system belongs to God Who has brought into being this system and originated the effects and causality, causes and causation, and the agents.

b. There is only One Creator in the world and that is God, and in the order of the universe, there exists nothing that can affect or be affected among the things, and God is the Principal⁵ Creator of all natural

phenomena and human power has also no effect on His deeds.

Therefore, there is only One Cause in the world and He is the “substitute” of all that which is known as “natural causes”.

Of course, this interpretation of the unity of the Divine creative power is endorsed by a group of ‘Ash‘ari scholars, but some figures such as Imam al-Haramayn,⁶ and recently, Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh in his book on monotheism, reject this interpretation and adopt the first interpretation.

3. The unity of the Divine design {tadbir}

Since creation belongs exclusively to God, the design of the order of being also belongs to Him. There is only One Designer in the world, and by means of the rational proof {*dalil al-‘aqli*} that affirms the idea of the unity of the Divine creative power the unity of the Divine design is proved.

In numerous verses, the Glorious Qur’an states that God is the Only Designer of the world, as in the following:

قل أغير الله أبغي رباً وهو رب كل شيء

“Say, ‘Shall I seek a Lord other than Allah, while He is the Lord of all things?’”⁷

Of course, the same two ways of interpreting the unity of the Divine creative power are used for interpreting the unity of the Divine design, and what is meant by the unity of the Divine design is to believe that independent design belongs to no one other than God.

On this basis, all the sorts of subordinate designing among the creatures in the order of universe take place by the will and permission of God. The Holy Qur’an also points to this Divine design, stating:

فالمديرات أمراً

“By those who direct the affairs {of creatures}.”⁸

4. Monotheism in authority {hakimiyyah}

Monotheism in authority {*hakimiyyah*} means that authority belongs to God as a fixed right, and He is the Only Ruler over the individuals constituting the society, as the Glorious Qur’an says:

إِنَّ الْحُكْمَ إِلَّا لِلَّهِ

“Sovereignty belongs only to Allah.”⁹

Therefore, the rule of others has to be through His decree so that upright individuals may rule over the people and take them to the ultimate abode of felicity and perfection, as the Holy Qur’an states:

يا داوودُ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاكَ خَلِيفَةً فِي الْأَرْضِ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَ النَّاسِ بِالْحَقِّ

“O David! Indeed We have made you a vicegerent on the earth. So judge between the people with justice.”¹⁰

5. Monotheism in obedience {ta‘ah}

Monotheism in obedience means that the only object of obedience in essence {*muta‘ bi’dh-dhat*} and the One Whom the people have to follow is God, the Exalted.

Therefore, the necessity of obeying such people like the Prophet (S), Imams, *faqih*, mother, and father is something enjoined by Him and it occurs by His will.

6. The unity of the Divine legislation {taqnin or tashri‘}

The unity of the Divine legislation means that the right of legislation belongs only to God. On this basis, our heavenly book (the Qur’an) regards any decree which goes beyond the boundaries of the divine law as a source of infidelity, transgression and wrongdoing, as it says:

وَمَنْ لَمْ يَحْكُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ

“Those who do not judge by what Allah has sent down—it is they who are the faithless.”¹¹

وَمَنْ لَمْ يَحْكُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

“Those who do not judge by what Allah has sent down—it is they who are the transgressors.”¹²

مَنْ لَمْ يَحْكُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

“Those who do not judge by what Allah has sent down—it is they who are the wrongdoers.”¹³

7. Monotheism in worship {‘ibadah}

The most important issue of monotheism in worship is discerning the meaning of *‘ibadah* {worship} because all Muslims agree that the only object of worship is God, and no one other than Him should be worshipped. The Holy Qur’an says in this regard:

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ

“You {alone} do we worship, and to You {alone} do we turn for help.”¹⁴

From the noble verses of the Qur’an, it is inferred that this issue is a common principle in the mission of all prophets (‘a), and all divine envoys are assigned the responsibility of propagating it. The Glorious Qur’an says in this regard:

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.’”¹⁵

Therefore, the principle that only God has to be worshipped and no other than Him is worthy to be worshipped is beyond dispute. A person is not considered a monotheist without accepting this principle.

The dispute is over other things such as: What is the criterion for distinguishing “worship” from other than worship?

Or, can the act of kissing the hand of one’s teacher, father, mother, or an *‘alim* or scholar, for example, and paying any kind of homage or showing respect to those who possess rights {*dhu’l-huquq*}¹⁶ be the same as worshipping them?

Or, over the idea that worship in its absolute sense is not extraordinary humility and homage; rather, it has a valid element and so long as that element is not put into effect, humility of any sort—even that which has the form of prostration—is not deemed as “worship”.

So, it is necessary to see what element gives humility and homage the character of worship, which is an important subject.

Misconception about worship

A group of writers interpret *‘ibadah* {worship} as “lowliness” or “extreme humility”, but when want to interpret some Qur’anic verses, they fail. The Glorious Qur’an unequivocally states: “We ordered the

angels to prostrate before Adam”

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ

“And when We said to the angels, ‘Prostrate before Adam...’”¹⁷

The way prostration was done to Adam (Adam) (‘a) was the same as that which is done to God. This is while the first was intended to express humility and lowliness, and the second is regarded as worship and devotion.

Now, why do these two identical prostrations have different natures?

The Qur’an states in another place: “Hadrat Ya‘qub (‘a), along with his sons, prostrated before Hadrat Yusuf (‘a)”.

وَرَفَعَ أَبَوَيْهِ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ وَخَرُّوا لَهُ سُجَّدًا وَقَالَ يَا أَبْتِ هَذَا تَأْوِيلُ رُؤْيَايَ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَدْ جَعَلَهَا رَبِّي حَقًّا

“And he seated his parents high upon the throne, and they fell down prostrate before him. He said, ‘Father! This is the fulfillment of my dream of long ago, which my Lord has made come true.’”¹⁸

It is worth noting here that by the “dream of long ago”, Hadrat Yusuf (‘a) means the dream about eleven planets,¹⁹ the sun and the moon, prostrating to him. The Qur’an quotes Yusuf (‘a) as saying:

إِنِّي رَأَيْتُ أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِي سَاجِدِينَ

“I saw eleven planets, and the sun and the moon: I saw them prostrating themselves before me.”²⁰

Since Hadrat Yusuf (‘a) considers the prostration of his close relatives as the interpretation of the dream, it is clear that what is meant by the eleven planets is his eleven brothers, and by the sun and the moon his father and mother, respectively.

Having said this, it is evident that not only his brothers but also his father, Prophet Ya‘qub (‘a), prostrated before him.

Now, let us ask: Why cannot that prostration, which represents utmost humility and lowliness, be named “worship”?

The excuse is worse than the sin!

Unable to reply, the mentioned group says that since this kind of humility is a response to the order of God, it is not considered an act of polytheism.

But, it is very obvious that this reply is untenable; for, God never orders others to perform any act that has polytheistic nature.

The Glorious Qur'an says:

قُلْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَأْمُرُ بِالْفَحْشَاءِ أَ تَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

“Say, ‘Indeed Allah does not enjoin indecencies. Do you attribute to Allah what you do not know?’”²¹

In principle, the command of God does not change the nature of a thing. If the true meaning of showing humility to a certain person is to worship him and it is something enjoined by God then, it is a command to worship Him.

Resolving the ambiguity and the true meaning of ‘ibadah

Now, it is clear that the impermissibility of worshipping anyone other than God is unanimously accepted by the monotheists in the world. On the other hand, it is evident that the prostration of the angels to Adam (‘a) or that of Ya‘qub (‘a) and his sons to Yusuf (‘a) cannot be considered an act of worshipping those whom humility is shown.

Now, let us examine the element that makes humility in the first instance an act of worship, and does not make the same form of humility be within the ambit of worship.

The Qur’anic verses make clear that the humility shown to a being who is looked at as god or to whom divine acts are attributed is considered worship. From this statement, it is clear that the belief in God or belief that He can perform divine acts lends humility the sense of “worship”.

The polytheists of the world including the residents of the Arabian Peninsula and the like used to be subjected and humbled before beings whom they regarded as creatures of God and they also believed that those shown humility are capable of performing divine acts, the least of which were the forgiving of sins and enjoying the station of intercession.

A group of Babylonian polytheists used to worship heavenly objects and regard them as their “lords” {*arbab*} rather than “creators” to whom the management and administration of the world and human beings was entrusted.

The narrative of Hadrat Ibrahim (‘a) and his debate with that group is based on this very principle; for, the polytheists of Babylonia never regarded the sun, the moon and the stars as gods but as powerful creatures to whom the station of lordship and management of the world was delegated.

The Qur’anic verses which refer to Ibrahim’s (‘a) debate with the Babylonian polytheists are mainly concerned with the word “lord” {*rabb*},²² and the term “lord” is used in the sense of owner and manager of his own property.

The Arabs call the owner of house as *rabb al-bayt* and the owner of farm as *rabb ad-day‘ah* because the management of house and farm is entrusted to the owner.

By introducing God as the Sole Manager and Lord of the worlds, the Glorious Qur’an urges {the Muslims} to combat the group of polytheists, and invites them to worship the One and Only God, saying:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُوهُ هَذَا صِرَاطٌ مُسْتَقِيمٌ

“Indeed Allah is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him. This is a straight path.”²³

In another place, it says:

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.”²⁴

In *Surah ad-Dukhan*, it is stated:

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ رَبُّكُمْ وَرَبُّ آبَائِكُمُ الْأَوَّلِينَ

“There is no god except Him: He gives life and brings death, your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers.”²⁵

Quoting Hadrat ‘Isa (‘a), the Holy Qur’an thus says:

وَ قَالَ الْمَسِيحُ يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمْ

“But the Messiah had said, ‘O Children of Israel! Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord’.”²⁶

It is clear from what have been stated so far that showing any kind of humility to someone without considering that one as lord and god or attributing divine acts to that one cannot be called “worship”, no

matter how extreme that humility and lowliness are.

Therefore, even the extreme form of humility shown by a child to his mother and father or that shown by the *ummah* to the Prophet (S) can by no means be interpreted as worshipping those to whom humility is shown.

Consequently, such subjects as seeking blessings *{tabarruk}* through the belongings of sacred people, kissing the door and wall or their shrines, resorting to *awliya'* for mediation *{tawassul}*, calling on the pious servants of God, commemorating the birthday or death anniversary of eminent sacred people, and so on which some of the ignorant regard as polytheism or worshipping other than God, are not located within the parameters of worshipping other than God.

[1.](#) Surah ash-Shura 42:11.

[2.](#) Surah al-Ikhlās 112:4.

[3.](#) In the parlance of philosophy, whatever is possible *{mumkin}* is an effect *{sabab}* and needs a cause *{'illat}*. In the language of *'ilm al-kalam* *{scholastic theology}*, whatever is created in time is an effect and needs a cause. *{Trans.}*

[4.](#) Surah ar-Ra'd 13:16.

[5.](#) The original word used here is *bila wasitah*, which means "without any medium or agency". *{Trans.}*

[6.](#) See Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa'n-Nahl*, vol. 1.

[7.](#) Surah al-An'am 6:164.

[8.](#) Surah an-Nazi'at 79:5.

[9.](#) Surah Yusuf 12:40.

[10.](#) Surah Sad 38:26.

[11.](#) Surah al-Ma'idah 5:44.

[12.](#) Surah al-Ma'idah 5:47.

[13.](#) Surah al-Ma'idah 5:45.

[14.](#) Surah al-Fatihah 1:5.

[15.](#) Surah an-Nahl 16:36.

[16.](#) *Dhu'l-huquq*: literally, "owner/possessor of rights". *{Trans.}*

[17.](#) Surah al-Baqarah 2:34.

[18.](#) Surah Yusuf 12:100.

[19.](#) Or, eleven stars. *{Trans.}*

[20.](#) Surah Yusuf 12:4.

[21.](#) Surah al-A'raf 7:28.

[22.](#) Surah al-An'am 6:76-78.

[23.](#) Surah Al 'Imran 3:51.

[24.](#) Surah al-An'am 6:102.

[25.](#) Surah ad-Dukhan 44:8.

[26.](#) Surah al-Ma'idah 5:72.

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