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Question 25: Is to resort to the divine saints {awliya'} for mediation {tawassul} regarded as polytheism {shirk} and tantamount to innovation in religion {bid'ah}?

Reply: *Tawassul* means to resort to a sacred being for mediation with God.
Ibn Manzur thus says in *Lisan al-'Arab*:

"توسل إليه بكذا تقرب إليه بحرمة أصرةٍ تعطفه عليه."

"If you resort to others for mediation; that is, respect and honor them, they will treat you tenderly."[1]
The Glorious Qur'an states:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُواْ اتَّقُواْ اللّهَ وَابْتَغُواْ إِلَيهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ وَجَاهِدُواْ فِي سَبِيلِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ﴾

"O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah, and seek the means of recourse to Him, and wage jihad in His way, so that you may be felicitous."[2]

In his *Sihah al-Lughah*, Jawhari describes "*wasilah*" {means} in this manner:

"الوسيلة ما يتقرّب به إلى الغير."

"*Wasilah* {means} is something through which one seeks nearness to another."

Therefore, a valuable being to which we resort for mediation may be meritorious deeds and sincere worship of God which bring us near to the Lord of the worlds, or a prolific person who enjoys a special station and esteem in the sight of God, the Exalted.

Types of tawassul

Tawassul can be divided into three types:

1. *Tawassul* by performing righteous deeds, as stated by Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti who expounds on the noble verse,

"وابتغوا إليه الوسيلة."

"And seek the means of recourse to Him":

"عن قتادة في قوله تعالى: "وابتغوا إليه الوسلية" قال: تقربوا إلى الله بطاعته والعمل بما يرضيه."

"Qatadah said concerning the verse, *"And seek the means of recourse to Him"*: Seeking nearness to God by obeying Him and doing that which pleases Him."3

2. *Tawassul* through the supplication of meritorious servants (of God), as the Holy Qur'an recounts in the tongue of the brothers of Yusuf (Joseph) (*'a*):

﴿ قَالُواْ يَا أَبَانَا اسْتَغْفِرْ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا إِنَّا كُنَّا خَاطِئِينَ * قَالَ سَوْفَ أَسْتَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ رَبِّيَ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴾

"They said, 'Father! Plead {with Allah} for forgiveness of our sins! We have indeed been erring'. He said, 'I shall plead with my Lord to forgive you; indeed He is the All-forgiving, the All-merciful'."4

It is evident from the quoted verse that the sons of Ya'qub (Jacob) (*'a*) had sought the means of recourse to Him through supplication, regarding this act as means of attaining forgiveness. Besides, Hadrat Ya'qub (*'a*) did not refuse their offer but promised to pray for the forgiveness of their sins.

3. *Tawassul* through spiritually dignified personages who enjoy special station and honor in the sight of God with the aim of seeking divine proximity.

Now, we shall review the proofs of *hadith*s and behavior of the Companions of the Messenger of Allah (S) and great figures of Islam:

1. Ahmad ibn Hanbal thus narrates in his *Musnad* on the authority of 'Uthman ibn Hunayf:

"إن رجلا ضرير البصر أتى النبيّ صلى الله عليه وأله وسلم فقال: ادع الله أن يعافيني ، قال: إن شئت دعوت لك وإن شئت أخرت ذاك فهو خير ، فقال: أدعه. فأمره أن يتوضأ فيحسن وضوئه فيصلّي ركعتين ويدعو بهذا الدعاء: اللهم إني أسألك وأتوجه إليك بنبيّك محمد نبيّ الرحمة يا محمد إني توجهت بك إلى ربي في حاجتي هذه ، فتقضى لي اللهم شفعه فيّ."

A blind man came to the Prophet (S) and said: "Pray for me and ask God to cure me." Upon hearing this he said: "I will pray for you if you want and if you like I will postpone it and the latter is better." The blind man said: "Will you?" The Holy Prophet commanded him to perform ablution as perfectly as possible, to say two *rak'ah*s {cycles} of prayer and then supplicate with these words: "O God! I beseech You and turn to You through Muhammad the Prophet of Mercy. O Muhammad! I turn to my Lord through you to grant this request. O God! Let him be my intercessor."[5]

Indeed, this *hadith* is considered acceptable by all *muhaddithun* so much so that after narrating the quoted *hadith* Hakim al-Nayshaburi describes it in his *Mustadrak* as an authentic {*sahih*} *hadith* while Ibn Majah who narrates it on the authority of Abu Ishaq says: "This tradition is authentic." In the book, *Abwab al-Ad'iyyah*, Tirmidhi confirms the authenticity of this tradition. Also Muhammad Nasib ar-Rafa'i says in *At-Tawassul ila Haqiqah at-Tawassul*:

"لا شك أن هذا الحديث صحيح ومشهور وقد ثبت فيه بلا شك ولا ريب ارداد بصر الأعمى بدعاء رسول الله صلى الله عليه وأله وسلم له."

"There is no doubt that this *hadith* is authentic and known... and it proves that through the supplication of the Messenger of Allah (S) the blind man has regained his sight."[6]

This tradition clearly shows that *tawassul* through the Holy Prophet (S), with the aim of fulfilling one's need, is permissible. In fact, the Messenger of Allah (S) commanded the blind man to pray in such manner and to supplicate the Lord of the worlds by seeking mediation to God through the Prophet (S). This is the same type of *tawassul* as that of divine people and those who have proximity to God.

2. Abu 'Abd Allah al-Bukhari thus says in his *Sahih*:

"إن عمر بن الخطاب رضى الله عنه كان إذا قحطوا إستسقى بالعباس بن عبد المطلب فقال: اللهم إنا كنا نتوسل إليك بنبيّنا فتسقينا وإنا نتوسل إليك بعم نبيّنا فاسقنا. فقال: فيسقون."

Every time there was draught, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab would pray for rain seeking mediation through 'Abbas ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib (uncle of the Prophet) and say: "O God! We used to seek access to You through our Prophet and You would shower us and now, we seek access to You through the uncle of our Prophet to shower us. And they would be granted their need."[7]

3. The issue of *tawassul* through the saints of God was such common and prevalent that the Muslims of the early period of Islam used to refer to the Prophet (S) as the mediator between them and God.

Sawad ibn Qarib recited a poem before the Holy Prophet (S) and he thus said:

وأشهد أن لا رب غيره وأنك مأمون على كل غالب وأنك أدنى المرسلين وسيلة إلى الله يا بن الأكرمين الأطائب.

And I bear witness that there is no god but Him and that you are indeed entrusted with all the hidden, And (I bear witness) that among the messengers, you—O son of the honorable and pure ones—are the nearest means {wasilah} to God.[8]

Albeit the Holy Prophet (S) heard this poem from Suwad ibn Qarib, he neither stopped him from reciting it nor accused him of polytheism {*shirk*} and innovation in religious beliefs {*bid'ah*}.
In the two lines we quote below, Imam ash-Shafi'i also points to this fact:

أل النبيّ ذريعتي

هم إليه وسيلتي

أرجو بهم أعطي غداً

بيدي اليمين صحيفتي

The progeny of the Prophet are my means {wasilah} to God.
I hope that I will for their sake be given my account-book in my right hand.[9]

Although the transmitted traditions regarding the permissibility of *tawassul* through divine people are plenty, the traditions which we have mentioned testify to the permissibility of *tawassul* and its consistency with the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (S), and the conduct of the Companions and great Muslim scholars, and they need no further comment.

What have been stated proves the groundlessness of the claim of those who say that *tawassul* through the nearest ones to God is an act of polytheism and innovation in religion.

1. Lisan al-'Arab, vol. 11, p. 724.
2. Surah al-Ma'idah 5:35.
3. Ad-Durr al-Manthur (Beirut), vol. 2, p. 280, under the stated verse.
4. Surah Yusuf 12:97-98.

5. Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal, vol. 4, “Part: Narrations of ‘Uthman ibn Hunayf,” p. 138; Mustadrak al-Hakim (Beirut), vol. 1, “Kitab Salah at-Tatawwa‘,” p. 313; Sunan Ibn Majah (Dar Ahya’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah), vol. 1, p. 441; At-Taj, vol. 1, p. 286; Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti, Al-Jami‘ as-Saghir, p. 59; Ibn Taymiyyah, At-Tawassul wa’l-Wasilah (Beirut), p. 98.
6. At-Tawasul ila Haqiqah at-Tawassul (Beirut), p. 158.
7. Sahih al-Bukhari (Egypt), vol. 2, “Kitab al-Jum‘ah,” “Bab al-Istisqa’,” p. 27.
8. Sayyid Ahmad ibn Zayni ad-Dahlan, Ad-Durar as-Sunniyyah, p. 29, quoting from Tabrani.
9. Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, As-Sawa‘iq al-Muhriqah (Cairo), p. 178.

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