

1.2 THE CATEGORIES OF SHIRK

The study of *tawheed* cannot be considered complete without a careful analysis of its opposite, *shirk*. Some mention of *shirk* has already been made in the previous chapter and examples of it have been given to illustrate how *tawheed* may be obliterated. However, in this chapter *shirk* will be looked at as a separate topic whose grave importance Allaah has attested to in the Qur'aan:

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

“Surely Allaah will not forgive the association of partners (*shirk*) with Him, but He forgives (sins) lesser than that of whomever He wishes.”¹

Because the sin of *shirk* denies the very purpose of man's creation, it is to God the gravest of sins, the unforgiveable sin.

Shirk literally means partnership, sharing or associating,² but Islamically it refers to the act of assigning partners to Allaah in whatever form it may take. The following analysis of *shirk* will correspond to the three broad categories developed in the study of *tawheed*. Hence, we will first look at the main ways in which *shirk* can occur in the area of *ruboobeeyah* (lordship), then *asmaa' was-sifaat* (divine names and attributes), and finally in *Ibaadah* (worship).

Shirk in Ruboobeeyah

This category of *shirk* refers to either the belief that others share Allaah's lordship over creation as His equal or near equal, or to the belief that there exists no lord over creation at all. Most religious systems fall into the first sub-category of *shirk* in *Ruboobeeyah* while it is the philosophers and their man-made philosophies that tend to fill the second one.

¹ Soorah an-Nisaa, (4):48.

² *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, p.468.

(a) Shirk by Association: Beliefs that exemplify shirk by association are ones in which a main God or Supreme Being over creation is recognized, though His dominion is shared by other lesser gods, spirits, mortals, heavenly bodies or earthly objects. Such belief systems are commonly referred to by theologians and philosophers as either monotheistic (having one god) or polytheistic (having more than one god). According to Islaam, all of these systems are polytheistic, and many represent various stages in the degeneration of divinely revealed religious systems, which were all originally based on *tawheed*.

Within Hinduism the Supreme Being, *Brahman* is conceived as indwelling, all-pervading, unchangeable and eternal, the abstract, impersonal Absolute, in which all things have their origin and end. On the other hand the god *Brahma* is the personified creator of the universe who forms a trinity with the preserver god, *Vishnu* and the destroyer god, *Shiva*.³ Thus, *Shirk* in *Ruboobeeyah* is-expressed in Hinduism by the delegation of God's creative, destructive and preservative powers to other gods.

Christian belief states that the one God reveals himself in the three persons of Father, Son (Jesus Christ) and Holy Spirit. These three persons are nevertheless regarded as a unity, sharing one 'substance'.⁴ Prophet Jesus is elevated to divinity, sits on the right hand of God and judges the world. The Holy Spirit, which in the Hebrew Bible is the means by which God exercises His creative power, in Christian thought becomes a part of the God-head. Paul made the Holy Spirit the alter ego of Christ, the guide and help of Christians, first manifesting itself on the day of Pentecost.⁵ Consequently, *Shirk* in *Ruboobeeyah* occurs in the Christian belief that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are God's partners in all of His dominion, in their belief that Jesus alone pronounces judgement on the world, and in their belief that Christians are helped and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Zoroastrians (Parsis) conceive of God, Ahura Mazda, as being the creator of all that is good, and is alone worthy of absolute worship. Fire is one of the seven creations of Ahura Mazda and is considered his son or representative. But they also commit *Shirk* in *Ruboobeeyah* by conceiving of evil, violence and death as being the creation of another god called Angra Mainyu whom they represent by the symbol darkness.⁶ Hence, God's sovereignty over all creation (i.e. His

³ W.L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), pp.66-7 and 586-7. See also John Hinnells, *Dictionary of Religious* (England: Penguin Books, 1984) pp.67-8.

⁴ *Dictionary of Religions*, p.337.

⁵ *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, p.231.

⁶ *Dictionary of Religions*, pp.361-2.

ruboobeeyah) is shared with an evil spirit elevated to the level of an opposing god due to man's desire not to attribute evil to God.

In the Yoruba religion, followed by over 10 million people in West Africa (mainly Nigeria), there is one supreme God, Olorius (Lord of Heaven) or Olodumare. Nevertheless, modern Yoruba religion is characterized by a great many forms of Orisha worship, so that it appears as strict polytheism.⁷ Consequently, Yorubas commit *Shirk* in *Ruboobeeyah* by turning over all of God's functions to minor gods and spirits.

The Zulus of South Africa believe in one God, Unkulunkulu, meaning the ancient, the first, the most revered one. The principal specific titles for God are Nkosi yaphezulu (Lord of the Sky) and *Muvelingqanqi* (the first to appear). Their supreme Being is represented as a male, who along with the earth female, brings forth the human world. Thunder and lightening are in the Zulu religion acts of God, whereas sickness and other troubles in life may be caused by ancestors, the *idlozi* or *abaphansi* (those under the earth). The ancestors also protect, punish, or neglect the living, ask for food, are pleased with ritual and sacrifice, and take possession of fortune tellers (*inyanga*).⁸ Thus, *Shirk* in *Ruboobeeyah* occurs in the Zulu religion not only in their concept of the creation of the human world, but also in their attribution of good and evil in human life to the work of ancestral spirits.

Among some Muslims people, *Shirk* in *Ruboobeeyah* is manifested in their belief that the souls of saints and other righteous humans can affect the affairs of this world, even after their deaths. Their souls, it is believed, can fulfil one's needs, remove calamities, and aid whoever calls on them. Thus grave worshippers assign to human souls the divine ability to cause events in this life which in fact only Allaah can cause.

Common among many *Sufis* (Muslim mystics) is the belief in "*Rijaal al-Ghayb*"⁹ (men of the unseen) the chief of whom occupies the station called "*Qutub*" from which the affairs of this world are governed.¹⁰

(b) Shirk by Negation This sub-category represents the various philosophies and ideologies which deny the existence of God either explicitly or implicitly. That is, in some cases God's non-existence is stated (atheism), while in other cases His

⁷ *Dictionary of Religions*, p.358.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.363.

⁹ Literally, "men of the unseen world." The world is supposed to endure due to the intercessions of a hierarchy of "averting" Saints whose number are fixed, the place of one who dies being immediately filled. (*Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, p.582).

¹⁰ *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, pp.55.

existence is claimed, but the way in which He is conceived actually denies His existence (pantheism).

There are a few ancient religious systems in which God does not exist, foremost among them being the system attributed to Gautama Buddha. Buddhism, a reformist movement in Hinduism opposed to the caste system, was founded in the 6th century B.C. during the same period as Jainism. During the 3rd century B.C. it became the state religion. Eventually it was assimilated by Hinduism, Buddha himself becoming one of the avatars (incarnations of God). It disappeared from India but became dominant in China and other Eastern nations. Hinayana Buddhism (400-250 B.C.), the earlier and more strict of the two interpretations of Buddhism which arose after Gautama Buddha's death, makes it clear that there is no God; hence the burden of salvation belongs to the individual alone.¹¹ Thus, this ancient strain of Buddhism may be cited as an example of *Shirk* in *Ruboobeeyah* wherein God's existence is explicitly denied.

Similarly, in the teachings of Jainism as systematized by Vardhamana, there is no God, but liberated souls achieve something of this status, having immortality and omniscience; and the religious community treats the liberated ones as though they were divine, building temples to them and venerating their images.¹²

Another ancient example is that of the Pharaoh of Prophet Moses' time. Allaah mentioned in the Qur'aan that he negated the existence of God and claimed to Moses and the people of Egypt that he, Pharaoh, was the only true lord of all creation. Allaah quoted him as saying to Moses,

قَالَ لَنْ اَتَّخِذَ اِلٰهًا غَيْرِي لِاَجْعَلَنَّكَ مِنَ الْمَسْجُوْنِيْنَ

“If you choose a god besides me, I will surely imprison you.”¹³

and to the people

فَقَالَ اَنَا رَبُّكُمْ اَلْاَعْلٰى

“he proclaimed, ‘I am your Lord, the Most High.’¹⁴

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a number of European philosophers asserted the non-existence of God in what became known as the “death of God philosophy.” The German philosopher Philipp Mainlander (1841-1876) in his

¹¹ *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, p.72.

¹² *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, pp.262-3.

¹³ Soorah ash-Shoora, (26):29.

¹⁴ Soorah an-Naazi'aat, (79):24.

principal writing, *The Philosophy of Redemption*, 1876), states that the world begins with the death of God, since God is a principle of unity shattered in the plurality of the world and a principle of joy denied in the law of suffering which dominates the world.¹⁵ In Prussia, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) supported the idea of the “death of God” proposing that God was nothing more than a projection of man’s uneasy conscience and that man was the bridge to the superman.¹⁶ Jeal Paul Sartre, a French philosopher of the twentieth century, also echoed the “death of God” thought. He claimed that God could not exist because He was a contradiction in terms. The idea of God, according to him, is a projection which man must make, being what he is.¹⁷

Darwin’s (d. 1882) proposal that man was merely a glorified ape was widely adopted in the theories of social scientists and philosophers of the nineteenth century as it provided a “scientific” basis for the non-existence of God. According to them religion evolved from animism to monotheism along with man’s supposed social evolution from an independant individual to a national state and his physical evolution from ape to man.

Evolutionists attempt to escape the questions surrounding creation by claiming that there was none, and by assigning Allaah’s attribute of being without beginning and end to matter itself which He has created. Present day holders of this belief are the followers of Karl Marx, Communists and scientific socialists, who claim that the origin of everything in existence is matter in motion. They further claim that God is figment of man’s imagination, created by the ruling classes to justify their hereditary rule and divert the attention of the oppressed masses from the realities in which they live.

An example of this form of *shirk* among Muslims is that of many Sufis such as Ibn ‘Arabee, who claim that only Allaah exists. (All is Allaah, and Allaah is all). They deny the separate identity of Allaah and thereby in fact deny His existence. This idea was also expressed in the 17th century by the Dutch Jewish philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, who claimed that God is the total of all parts of the universe including man.

Shirk in al-Asmaa was-Sifaat

Shirk in this category includes both the common pagan practice of giving Allaah the attributes of His creation as well as the act of giving created beings Allaah’s names and attributes.

¹⁵ *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, p.327.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.391.

¹⁷ *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, pp.508-9.

(a) Shirk by Humanization

In this aspect of *Shirk in al-Asmaa' was-Sifaat*, Allaah is given the form and qualities of human beings and animals. Due to man's superiority over animals, the human form is more commonly used by idolaters to represent God in creation. Consequently, the image of the Creator is often painted, moulded or carved in the shape of human beings possessing the physical features of those who worship them. For example, Hindus and Buddhists worship countless idols in the likeness of Asian men and consider them manifestations of God in creation. Modern day Christian belief that the Prophet Jesus was God incarnate — that the Creator became His creation — is another good example of this type of *Shirk*. There have been many reckoned Christian painters like Michaelangelo (d. 1565), who painted pictures of God as a naked old European man with long flowing white hair and beard on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. These pictures have, in turn, been held by the Christian world in the highest esteem.

(b). Shirk by Deification This form of *Shirk in al-Asmaa' was-Sifaat* relates to cases where created beings or things are given, or claim, Allaah's names or His attributes. For example, it was the practice of the ancient Arabs to worship idols whose names were derived from the names of Allaah. Their three main idols were: al-Laat, taken from Allaah's name al-Elaah; al-'Uzza, taken from al-'Azeez; and al-Manaat, taken from al-Mannaan. During the Prophet Muhammad's era there was also a false prophet in a region of Arabic called Yamaamah, who took the name *Rahmaan* which only belongs to Allaah.

Among the *Shi'ite* sects is the *Nusayreeyah* of Syria, who believe that the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, 'Alee ibn Abee Taalib, was a manifestation of Allaah and give him many of Allaah's qualities. Among them too are the *Ismaai'is*, also known as Agha Khanis, who consider their leader, the Agha Khan, to be God incarnate. Also include in this category are the Druze of Lebanon who believe that the Faatimid Caliph al-Haakim bi Amrillaah, was the last manifestation of Allaah among mankind.

Claims of Sufis (Muslim mystics) like al-Hallaaj that they have become one with God and as such exist as manifestations of the Creator within His creation may also be included in this aspect of *Shirk in al-Asmaa' was-Sifaat*. Modern-day spiritualists and mediums, such as Shirley Maclaine and J.Z. Knight, often claim divinity for themselves as well as mankind in general. Einstein's theory of relativity ($E=mc^2$, energy is equal to mass times the square of the speed of light) taught in all schools, is in fact an expression of *Shirk in al-Asmaa' was-Sifaat*. The theory states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed; it

merely transforms into matter and vice versa. However, both matter and energy are created entities and they both will be destroyed, as Allaah clearly states:

اللَّهُ خَالِقُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ

“Allaah is the creator of all things...”¹⁸

كُلُّ مَنْ عَلَيْهَا فَانٍ

“Everything in (the world) will perish...”¹⁹

The theory also implies that mass and energy are eternal having no beginning or end since they are supposed to be uncreated and transform into each other. However, this attribute belongs only to Allaah who alone is without beginning or end.

Darwin’s theory of evolution is also an attempt to explain the evolution of life and its forms from lifeless matter without the intervention of God. One of the leading Darwinists of this century, Sir Aldous Huxley expressed this thought as follows:

“Darwinism removed the whole idea of God as the creator of organisms from the sphere of rational discussion.”²⁰

Shirk in al-‘Ebaadah

In this category of *shirk*, acts of worship are directed to other than God and the reward for worship is sought from the creation instead of the Creator. As in the case of the previous categories, *Shirk* in *al-’Ibaadah* has two main aspects.

(a) *Ash-Shirk al-Akbar* (Major Shirk)

This form of *shirk* occurs when any act or worship is directed to other than Allaah. It represents the most obvious form of idolatry, which the prophets were

¹⁸ Soorah az-Zumar, (39):62.

¹⁹ Soorah ar-Rahmaan, (55):26.

²⁰ Quoted in Francis Hitching’s, *The Neck of the Giraffe*, (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1982), p.254 from Tax and Callender, 1960, vol.III, p.45.

specifically sent by Allaah to call the masses of mankind away from. This concept is supported by Allaah's statement in the Qur'aan:

وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا أَنِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا الطَّاغُوتَ

“Surely we have sent to every nation a messenger saying, worship Allaah and avoid *taaghoot* (false gods).”²¹

Taaghoot actually means anything which is worshipped along with Allaah or instead of Allaah. For example, love is a form of worship which, in its perfection, should only be directed to Allaah. In Islaam, the love of God is expressed by total obedience to Him. It is not the type of love which man naturally feels toward creation; towards parents, children, food, etc. To direct that type of love towards God is to lower Him to the level of His creation which is *Shirk* in *al-Asmaa' was-Sifaat*. Love that is worship is the total surrender of one's will to God. Consequently, Allaah told the Prophet (ﷺ) to tell the believers:

قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ

“Say: If you love Allaah, follow me and Allaah will love you.”²²

The Prophet (ﷺ) also told his companions, “None of you is a true believer until I become more beloved to him than his child, his father and the whole of mankind.”²³ Love of the Prophet (ﷺ) is not based on his humanity but on the divine origin of his message. Thus, like the love of Allaah, it is also expressed by total obedience to his commands. Allaah said in the final revelation:

مَنْ يُطِعِ الرَّسُولَ فَقَدْ أَطَاعَ اللَّهَ

“Whoever obeys the Messenger has obeyed Allaah.”²⁴and

قُلْ أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ

“Say: Obey Allaah and obey the Prophet...”²⁵

If man allows the love of anything or anyone to come between himself and Allaah, then he has worshipped that thing, In this way, money can become one's god or even one's desires could become a god. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “*The*

²¹ Soorah an-Nahl, (16):36

²² Soorah Aal'Imraan, (3):31.

²³ Reported by Anas and collected by al-Bukhaaree (*Sahih Al-Bukhari* (English Arabic), vol.1, p.20, no.13) and Muslim (*Sahih Muslim* (English Trans.), vol.1, p.31, no.71).

²⁴ Soorah an-Nisaa, (4):80.

²⁵ Soorah Aal'Imraan, (3):32.

worshipper of the dirham will always be miserable,²⁶ and Allaah said in the Qur'aan,

أَرَأَيْتَ مَنْ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ

“Have you not seen the one who takes his desires as his god?”²⁷

Much emphasis has been placed on the evils of *Shirk* in *Ibaadah* (worship) because it contradicts the very purpose of creation as expressed in Allaah's statement:

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِي

“I have not created Jinn or mankind except for My worship.”²⁸

Major *shirk* represents the greatest act of rebellion against the Lord of the Universe, and is thus the ultimate sin. It is a sin so great that it virtually cancels out all good a person may do and guarantees its perpetrator eternal damnation in Hell. Consequently, false religion is based primarily on this form of *shirk*. All man-made systems in one way or another invite their followers to the worship of creation. Christians are called upon to pray to a man, a Prophet of God named Jesus, whom they claim to have been God incarnate. Catholics among Christians pray to Mary as the “mother of God”, to angels like Michael who is honored on September 29 (Michaelmas Day)²⁹ as well as to human saints, whether real or fictitious.

Muslims whose acts of worship fall into this category of *shirk* are those who pray to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) or to mystics in the Sufi hierarchy of saints, believing that they can answer their prayers, though Allaah has clearly said in the Qur'aan:

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَتَاكُمْ عَذَابُ اللَّهِ أَوْ أَتَتْكُمْ السَّاعَةُ أَغَيْرَ اللَّهِ تَدْعُونَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ
صَادِقِينَ

²⁶ Reported by al-Bukhaaree (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, (English-Arabic), vol.8, p.296, no.443).

²⁷ Soorah al-Furqaan, (25):43.

²⁸ Soorah adh-Dhaariyaat, (51):56.

²⁹ William Halsey (ed.), *Colliers Encyclopedia*, (U.S.A.: Crowell-Collier Educational Foundation, 1970, vol.16, p.110).

“Say: Think to yourselves; if there came upon you Allaah’s punishment or the Final Hour, would you then call on other than Allaah? (Reply) if you are truthful.”³⁰

(b) Ash-Shirk al-Asghar (Minor Shirk) Mahmood ibn Lubayd reported, “Allaah’s Messenger (ﷺ) said: *The thing I fear for you the most is ash-shirk al-asghar (minor shirk). The companions asked O Messenger of Allaah, what is minor shirk? He replied, ‘Ar-Riyaa’ (showing off), for verily Allaah will say on the Day of Resurrection when people are receiving their rewards, ‘Go to those for whom you were showing off in the material world and see if you can find any reward from them.’*”³¹

Mahmood ibn Lubayd also said, “*The Prophet (ﷺ) came out and announced, ‘O people, beware of secret shirk!’ The people asked, ‘O Messenger of Allaah, what is secret shirk?’ He replied, ‘When a man gets up to pray and strives to beautify his prayer because people are looking at him, that is secret shirk.’*”³²

Ar-Riyaa’

Riyaa’ is the practice of performing any of the various forms of worship in order to be seen and praised by people. This sin destroys all the benefits that lie in righteous deeds and brings on the one who commits it a serious punishment. It is particularly dangerous, because it is natural for man to desire and enjoy the praise of his fellow men. Doing religious acts to impress people or in order to be praised by them is, therefore, an evil which deserves man’s utmost caution. This danger is really significant to the believers, whose goal is to make all of the acts of their lives religious acts dedicated to God. In fact, the likelihood that knowledgeable true believers would commit *ash-shirk al-akbar* is small, since its pitfalls are so obvious.. However, for the true believer like everyone else, the chance of committing *riyaa’*’s is great because it is so hidden. It only involves the simple act of changing one’s intention. The motivating forces behind it are also very strong, since it comes from man’s inner nature. Ibn ‘Abbaas alluded to this reality when he said, “*Shirk is more hidden than a black ant creeping on a black stone in the middle of a moonless night.*”³³

Thus, great care has to be taken to ensure that one’s intentions begin pure and remain pure whenever righteous deeds are being done. In order to ensure this, the

³⁰ Soorah al-An‘aam, (6):40.

³¹ Reported by Ahmad, at-Tabaraanee and al-Bayhaqee in *az-Zuhd*, See *Tayseer al-‘Azeed al-Hameed*, p.118.

³² Collected by Ibn Khuzaymah.

³³ Reported by Ibn Abee Haatim and quoted in *Tayseer al-Azeed al-Hameed*, p.587.

saying of Allaah's name is enjoined in Islaam before all acts of importance. A series of *du'aas* (informal prayers) have also been prescribed by the Prophet (ﷺ) before and after all natural habits like eating, drinking, sleeping, sex, and even going to the toilet, in order to turn these everyday habits into acts of worship and develop in Muslims a keen awareness of Allaah. It is this awareness, called *taqwaa*, which ultimately insures that intentions remain pure.

The Prophet (ﷺ) also provided protection against the inevitable acts of *shirk* by teaching certain specific prayers which may be said anytime. Abu Moosaa said, "One day Allaah's Messenger delivered a sermon, saying, 'O people, fear *shirk* for it is more hidden than the creeping of an ant.' Those whom Allaah wished asked, 'And how do we avoid it when it is more hidden than the creeping of an ant, O Messenger of Allaah?' He replied, 'Say:

الهُمَّ إِنَّا نَعُوذُ بِكَ أَنْ نُشْرِكَ شَيْئًا نَعْلَمُهُ وَنَسْتَغْفِرُكَ لِمَا لَا نَعْلَمُهُ

Allaahumma innaa na'oodhu bika an nushrika bika shay'an na'lamuh, wa nastaghfiruka limaa laa na'lamuh. (O Allaah, we seek refuge in your from knowingly committing *shirk* with you, and we ask your forgiveness for what we do not know about).³⁴

In the following chapters a more detailed look will be taken at the most prominent areas in which *shirk* in its three aspects most commonly occurs.

³⁴ Collected by Ahmad and at-Tabaraanee.