

## 1.4 Forms of Shirk continued & Divine Attributes

**The word worship as we've used it so far was worship in the sense of deification. Is there another sense that worship may take? Does it have another meaning within Islamic context?**

This is an interesting question because in fact we could have a whole series just on the concept of what it means in Islam to worship, but I'll limit myself to your question as it relates to worship of other human beings.

According to Islam, blind obedience to other human beings, the refrain from using our Allah-given intellect and human faculties in searching for the truth is a form of worship of those individuals. To illustrate this I'll relate a story that occurred over 1400 years ago during the lifetime of Prophet Mohammed may peace and blessings be upon him.

At that time a passage was revealed in the Qur'an discussing those following their religious leaders prior to Islam. It says, "They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords in derogation of Allah." (9: 31) One of the companions of the prophet, Ali Ibn Hakim, who had some knowledge and background on Christianity, came to the prophet and said, "O messenger of Allah, it is not true that those people really worship their priests." So the prophet asked Ali, "Didn't some of those religious leaders make unlawful things that God made lawful?" Ali replied, "Yes." The prophet asked, "Didn't they take authority by also making lawful that which God made unlawful?" Ali said, "Yes." The prophet replied, "Well then that's who they worship." This really conveys the message that you don't have to bow down before a human being to be considered as worshiping that person. This denial of obedience, this limiting ones use of God-given capabilities such as intelligence, thinking, and the literacy to do research, is one form of worshiping those individuals. Interesting enough to say that this story is 1400 years old. It's remote, way back in history, but I consider it very relevant to today's generation and problems.

**Now how about obedience to a dictator? Would this still come under the concept of worship?**

This could fall under the worship of other human beings. Indeed some people misunderstand or misinterpret the various liberation movements that took place throughout the history of Islam. Many times they try to separate between what may be considered as social reform or political uprising on one hand versus purely religiously motivated types of uprisings. The fact of the matter, as far as Islam is concerned, is that obedience of dictators, just like obedience of clergy without thinking, constitutes a form of human worship. This type of obedience is a kind of acceptance of the authority of dictators above the authority of God.

Like I might have indicated before, in Islam there is nothing called one compartment that you should render unto the leader and another unto God. Everything should be rendered unto God. This is a kind of struggle that you find in the history of the Muslim people against dictatorship, past and present, which is a continuous and ongoing process.

More specifically, in the Qur'an we read, in chapter 5 verses 47-50, that those who do not rule in accordance with what God has revealed are regarded as unbelievers in the first verse, as oppressors in the second, and as rebels in the third. It is interesting to notice that this passage in the Qur'an simply says so of whoever does not rule in accordance with what Allah has revealed. It does not exempt Muslims. In other words, a person may pay lip service to their faith, a person may claim to even be a Muslim as a ruler whereas his actions and his behavior are contrary to Islam and are contrary to the revelation to Allah. Even that person, though he might nominally be called a Muslim, would definitely be going against Islam and that indicated quite frankly with the majority of rulers in Muslim countries today whether they have the titles of kings or sheiks or presidents. These titles (of being Muslim) are there to mislead people and indeed in many cases they're totalitarian regimes and dictatorships that are contrary to the Islamic conjunction and system of government.

**So far we have been limiting the concept of worship to worshipping extra-personal beings or phenomena. How about worshipping oneself or self-worship in the form of vanity and pride? How does Islam view these?**

Even this was not left out in the comprehensive coverage of monotheism in the Qur'an. It is regarded as worship of other mortals. It might take a variety of forms. Let me focus on two of those forms. In some cases it may even take the form of self-deification. The Qur'an, for example, narrates the story of the pharaoh during the time of Prophet Moses may peace and blessings be upon him. Chapter 79, verses 23 and 24, in the Qur'an says, " [The Pharaoh] collected (his men) and made a proclamation, Saying, "I am your Lord, Most High."

This is, perhaps, the utmost of human arrogance when a person claims to be the final and ultimate authority; to say what is to be done and what is not to be done. But self-worship also takes another more subtle form that many of us at times fall into in some form or other to some degree. That is when we take our own desires and our own opinions and place them as the ultimate source of guidance, the ultimate source of values to guide us in our lives. [This occurs] even though it may contradict with clear and decisive divine injunction.

In fact, there are many specific verses that discuss this in the Qur'an. One of those verses (in chapter 25, verse 43) says, "Have you seen him who takes his/her low desires and whims for his/her God? Will you be a guardian over him/her?" In other words, the term used in the Qur'an, "Illahahu," which means his God or his Lord. So instead of saying 'Allah or God is my Lord', I would say 'My desires,' 'What I want,' 'What I think,' is right and is my ultimate source and I put aside all revelations.

In my humble opinion, I consider this form of adoration or self-worship as one of the most serious abortions in our age. Many times we are tempted to say, 'Well material is everything. Let's put aside spiritual and moral teachings and divine revelations. As far as it serves my objectives, I can use it if not I'll just put it aside.' And we normally hear these statements made quite frequently: 'I know what's good for me.' 'I know what's best for me.'

Sometimes, we even go against the clear and decisive injunctions of Allah, even when we destroy ourselves through drinking, doing drugs, and other aberrations and still we say, 'I know what's good/best for me!' Again placing what we think is right, what we think is good supreme to and above what God Himself tells us.

**There is one concept still left. That is the concept of pantheism; God existing in everything and everywhere. How does Islam view this idea?**

I think this kind of argument mixes, as a philosophy, between the two different things. On one hand, to say that we can see the power of God, we can see, in a metaphorical sense, the hands of God and his compassion by looking at his creation all around us is one aspect. On the other hand, to argue that because God created everything and his power is manifested in everything, then God must be inside or incarnated in everything. I believe these two views should not be mixed.

From the Muslim standpoint, and this relates to one of the earlier discussions, is that the Qur'an encourages and implores us to look into ourselves, our environment, and the universe at large. By finding the functioning and operations of all of these things, we are bound to find that there must be a designer, a compassionate all-powerful Creator behind all of that. This doesn't mean that He is in the sun, or He is in the moon. This kind of aberration is simply carrying the argument too far, which is not acceptable in Islam.

**That takes care of the negation part of the creed. It is time now to start looking at the affirmative attributes of Allah from an Islamic standpoint and I was wondering if one could possibly define Allah, so to speak?**

There is a problem when we use the term 'define' because anything that is definable must be limited, must be finite. Allah or God is infinite. Then you can be subject to any definition because definition is limited and God is beyond limitations. This is one point.

This problem could be addressed by making a distinction between two things: the essence or nature of Allah and the divine attributes of Allah. Now let me explain what I mean by this. When we talk about the essence or nature of Allah, we can say that his nature and essence is so sublime, so transcendent, that our human minds, no matter how intelligent they may be, are incapable of completely grasping his essence. However, as far as the attributes of Allah, these can be within reasonable reach and understanding as far as our human comprehension goes. I say 'relatively' because again, when you talk of attributes of the infinite, you can't

completely separate the attributes from the essence but at least the distinction can be useful.

Sometimes people wonder how could we fail to understand the essence of God and only know his attributes/manifestations of power? What we forget when we make this argument is that even in physical and tangible things, we sometimes are unable to define their essence. Electricity, atomic energy, and many others can be examples of this. We can explain a great deal about electricity and how it works, but can we really describe the essence of electricity? We can't quite do that.

Another example is human beings. You can describe a human saying he's this tall and weighs this much and his face looks like this or that. That's fine but can you even with the best knowledge of psychology and psychiatry, understand the essence of a human being? Can you understand your own essence as a human being? What I'm saying here is even in physical and tangible things, in this universe, we are incapable of penetrating our understanding to fully comprehend their essence. Then how about comprehending the essence of the Supreme Being?

**As a matter of fact, even when we limit ourselves to using attributes rather than the essence, we find ourselves facing other problems. I was wondering if you can comment on that. The problem is if we're talking of Allah as being finite and ourselves in being limited and relative. This means we have to use relative terms that are understandable within our own vocabulary, so to speak. We start using terms that have human connotations. How do we reconcile these two? Like when we say God sees and hears. These are all terms that we understand in our own human context or perception. How do we bridge that gap when we start using these terms in reference to Allah?**

I think you are quite right when you point to the fact that no word in any human language, be it Arabic, English or other, can be completely accurate in conveying the attributes of Allah. However, through His infinite mercy, Allah has communicated with us in a way that we can understand. Like we said again, using terms that might not have exactly the same human or material meaning, but these terms would be useful in giving use some understanding and perspective about God Himself.

The Qur'an, also, in God's own words, warns us in taking these words in a very literal or very physical meaning that we understand as human beings. To make the point less abstract, here are a few citations from the Qur'an that illustrate the point.

The first, found in chapter 42 verse 11, says, "There is nothing whatsoever like unto God and he is the one that hears and sees all things."

Another moving passage, "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things." (6:103) Again, I repeat a citation that was used previously, because it is very crucial is chapter 112 that says, "Say (O Mohammed to the people): He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, the Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him." Notice the last part is very important, "And there is none like unto Him." There is no one comparable.

Whenever we use terms such as, 'God hears and sees,' it doesn't mean that He needs eyes to see with and it doesn't mean He needs ears to hear with. Even we as human beings sometimes don't see everything with our eyes. If I ask you to close your eyes for a second and imagine the shape of your TV set or your couch you can see it even when your eyes are closed. Similarly, we don't hear everything with our ears.

Of course, when we talk about Allah or God we're not simply making comparisons, we're simply saying that He does not need the physical or biological organs in order to be able to see or hear.

**It is clear that we are trying to say or emphasis the differences between God and His creatures. This brings us to a touchy, yet very relevant, question: how do Muslims reconcile themselves to or view the biblical statement referring to God having created man in His own image?**

You're referring to the first chapter in Genesis where God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." (Genesis 1:26) Muslims see two problems with this type of statement or any similar statement. First, as indicated previously, Allah does not have any image because he is not physical [in the human sense]. As was sited before, "There is nothing whatsoever like unto God." There is nothing whatsoever that you can

think of, or you know, or experience which is comparable to Allah because if He's comparable to anything that is physical then He is limited and finite. This is one thing to keep in mind.

From the Muslim standpoint, it is erroneous to reduce the infinite to any finite form including even the finite image. A way people have interpreted this kind of biblical statement throughout history was to imagine and draw out and make a picture of God in human form. A recent issue of Time magazine, dealing again with the new theological argument of God, reproduced four paintings/ pictures that people perceived as pictures of God. In all of them, invariably, there is a figure or face of a man, a relatively older man.

This is not acceptable to Muslims. In fact, these configurations of God raise a number of questions. First, why make a picture of a man and not a woman? Second, why are they pictures of whites and not blacks or yellow people (for example)? Why do the pictures contain facial features of Greeks or Romans rather than Chinese, Japanese, Africans or others? You open a whole can of worms once you reduce God to a certain image, which is quite limited by nature.

Fortunately, for Muslims, this problem never arises. In fact, my Christian friends have asked me, "When you think about God, do you have a mental picture of Him?" I tell them absolutely not. The spiritual image is much more valuable and important and more befitting (again I'm using image in a very allegorical sense here).

Why? Maybe when you reduce it to the physical you can identify with it. But this again, is a very serious error because you're limiting and destroying the whole notion of the transcendence and dissimilarity of God to his creatures.

**Now keeping these precautions in mind, can you explain to us some of the more specific divine attributes of God/Allah that is given in the Qur'an, for example?**

Obviously, when discussing the attributes of Allah, we're talking about the Creator, so the creation would come as one of the foremost attributes of Allah. This can be explained best by referring directly to the Qur'an. For example, chapter 6 verse 102, says, "That is Allah, your Lord! There is no god but He, the Creator of all things."

In the Qur'an, we also find that creation and sovereignty go hand in hand. Some believe that God created the earth and then left. Not at all. In the Qur'an it says, "Is it not his to create and to govern (or command)?" (7:53)

In chapter 42 verse 12, "To Him (Allah) belong the keys of the heavens and the earth: He enlarges and restricts. The Sustenance to whom He will: for He knows full well all things."