

---

## The Concept of Shirk

**Dr. Abu Bakr Bhutta**

*Assistant Professor, Arabic Deptt, NUML, Islamabad.*

*Email: [mabhutta@numl.edu.pk](mailto:mabhutta@numl.edu.pk)*

**Dr. Bilal Hussain**

*Assistant Professor, English Deptt, NUML, Islamabad*

*Email: [bhussain@numl.edu.pk](mailto:bhussain@numl.edu.pk)*

### ABSTRACT:

The most fundamental article of faith in Islam is belief in strict Tawhid. The opposite of tawhid is known as shirk or associating partners with Allah Almighty. Shirk is the one unforgivable sin in Islam. The central doctrine of Islam is tawhid (divine unity) which came to mean that God does not need nor have partners to assist Him.

The texts of the Quran and Sunnah indicate that shirk and the ascribing of rivals to Allah sometimes puts a person beyond the pale of Islam and sometimes does not.

In this article we talked about the Shirk, its kinds and differentiate between Shirk and Tawhid. This research is divided into two main topic:

- A. Introduction to Shirk
- B. The Inter-Related Concept of Kufr and Shirk

**Keyword:** Shirk; Kufr; Introduction; Tawhid; Kinds

### A. INTRODUCTION TO SHIRK

#### i. Seriousness of Shirk:

The seriousness of Shirk can be understood by the fact that, with the attributes of Allah [سبحانه وتعالى] of Ar-Rahman and Ar-Rahim and with His Compassion prevailing over His wrath<sup>1</sup>, shirk remains an unpardonable sin.<sup>2</sup> So, if a person dies with it without repentance, it shall invoke no mercy or intercession at the Day of Judgment. Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, born in 1947 and a contemporary Islamic scholar, points out to its reason as follows;

“Because the sin of shirk denies the very purpose of man’s creation”.<sup>3</sup>

And as one denies away the purpose of life he would ultimately be denied of paradise,<sup>4</sup> for, none of the good deeds done with polytheism would be accepted.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, once Prophet ﷺ advised Hazrat Muadh not to associate anything with Allah, even if killed or burnt.<sup>6</sup>

## ii. Meaning of Shirk:

The word ‘*shirk*’ is used in antonym to ‘Tawhid’ or Oneness of Allah in the Qur’ān Hakeem. It is noted in, *Urdu Dā ira Mu‘ā rif Islamiyah*, that;

“This contrast, between the two concepts of Tawhid and *shirk*, is best expressed in the *Surahal-Ikhlā s*, with each Ayaat making impossible various evident forms of *shirk*”.<sup>7</sup>

### a. Literal Meaning:

Shirk literally means partnership, sharing or associating. It is used in the Qur’ān Hakeem in its literal sense in the meaning of ‘sharing’ (مشتريكون), used in relation with disobedient people, who would share in common suffering of hell.<sup>8</sup>

### b. Technical Meaning:

Technically, it refers to the act of assigning partners to Allah [سبحانه] and with this regard, about one hundred and fifty Ayaat (آیات) have occurred in the Qur’ān Hakeem.<sup>9</sup>

When Qur’ān Hakeem was being revealed, *shirk* was the sin in which all the nations of the world were indulged by equalizing the creation with the attributes and qualities of Allah [سبحانه وتعالى]. Therefore, a dialogue between the false deities and *mushrikeen* is presented in the Qur’ān Hakeem, when the *mushrikeen* will be entered into the Hell-fire, they will accept their fault of deeming the false deities equal to the Sustainer of all worlds.<sup>10</sup>

Another point to be noted is that, to restrict the meaning of ‘*shirk*’ to plain idol-worship is very inaccurate and confined understanding of ‘*shirk*’. As the Qur’ān Hakeem uses the word *’Ilā h* in any negative point that stops us from being close to Allah for that matter as it can be our desires as well.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, we can have god within us that we worship and obey with knowledge or without knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

### iii. Categories of Shirk:

The concept of shirk got a lot of extension during the debate on the articles of faith and it was when various Islamic sects accused the opposite party of it (*shirk*). The fact is, the issue of Tawhid is so fundamental and basic that even a slightest weakness of its belief is not permissible in the light of the Qur’an Hakeem. That is why, scholars in the Muslim world in

every era strongly opposed any form of inclination towards *shirk*, and therefore, even the slightest of dimness in this regard was not tolerated.<sup>13</sup>

In the following various categorization of shirk shall be briefly analyzed. *Shirk* is generally divided into two categories, this division is found in Ar-Rā ghib Al-Aṣṣ fahā ni's (died 502 H) *Al-Mufradā t fi Gharī b al-Quran*; namely:

1. Ash-Shirk al-Akbar (الشرك الأكبر)
2. Ash-Shirk al-Asghar (الشرك الأصغر);<sup>14</sup>

The former is when worship is directed to something or someone which is not God. It stands for the most evident form of idolatry, which God sent all prophets to call upon humanity to renounce.<sup>15</sup> And the latter, are acts that are linked with heart, i.e. apparently one is worshipping Allah, but in his heart he wants to seek the pleasure of people.

According to Ibn al-Qayyim [رحمة الله عليه] (691-701 H):

“The first form is unpardonable, while there is a room for forgiveness for the second form”.<sup>16</sup>

‘*Ash-Shirk al-Aṣṣ ghar*’ (الشرك الأصغر) has many grades based upon the purity or impurity of intention, and ‘*ash-Shirk al-Khafī*’ (الشرك الخفي) is one of them, in which one start to rely on personal efforts, resulting in being discontented with the situation destined for him.

*Ash-shirk al-akbar* is further divided into two types;

- First type: Shirk fi Dhā t (شرك في الذات)
- Second type: Shirk fi Ṣ ifā t (شرك في الصفات)

*Shirk fi Ṣ ifaat* (شرك في الصفات) which according to Hā fiz Ṣ alā ḥ ad-Dī n Yū suf more general form of shirk, comprises both of *ash-shirk fi al-’Asmā as-Ṣ ifā t* and *ash-shirk fi ’Ulū hiyyat*.<sup>17</sup>

There is yet another categorization, in which various forms of *shirk* are stated directly. For example, according to the Wahhabi categorization, *shirk* is of four kinds:

- (a) Shirk al-’Ilm (شرك في العلم) (b) Shirk at-Taṣ aruf (شرك في التصرف)
- (b) Shirk al-’Ibā dah (شرك في العبادة) (d) Shirk fi al-’ā dah (شرك في العادة)

*Shirk al-’Ilm* is crediting anyone with knowledge of the unseen, which includes having faith in astrologers etc.; or to suppose that prophets and holy men have any knowledge a part from that which God gives them; *Shirk at-Taṣ aruf* is ascribing power to other than God. It is shirk *at-Taṣ aruf* to look upon any human beings as an intercessor with God; and *Shirk al-Ebadah* is to believe in the authority of created things with respect

to removal of any affliction – e.g., excessively honoring of saints, kissing of holy stones, and praying at tombs.

According to Imam Ibn Qayyim [رحمة الله عليه] (691-701 H) there are a lot of forms to shirk and Allah knows best.<sup>18</sup> We should all bear various forms of shirk in our mind, learn about it well and warn people against it carefully and clearly. Thus, a Muslim becomes fully aware of all such grave matters.

**iv. Various Manifestations of Shirk:**

To keep it simple, various manifestations of shirk shall be highlighted as have occurred in the Qur'ān Hakeem:

**a. Worship of the visible objects:**

One of the primary and well-known form of shirk is the worship of the visible objects as done by the people of Prophet Noah.<sup>19</sup> The names of these five idols they used to worship, are communicated in the Qur'ān as *Wadd* (وَدًّا), *Suwa* (سُوءًا), *Yaghuth* (يَغُوث), *Ya'uq* (يَعُوق) and *Nasr* (نَسْرًا).

Hafiz Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 H) noted regarding these idols that they were virtuous people between the time of Prophet Adam and Prophet Noah. But, when they died, their companions made their images so they stay reminded of performance of worship. Then, when those people died, Iblis approached their ancestors and fooled them by saying that your ancestors used to worship them and in return they were granted rain.<sup>20</sup> It was the first nation in which the evil of polytheism crept in.

Ibn-e-Jarir at-Tabari (224-310 H) also noted that;

“These are statues that were worshipped in the time of Nooh”.<sup>21</sup>

Natural things like, idols of stone, sun, moon, stars and trees are also taken as objects of worship,<sup>22</sup> by sacrificing to them, either through invoking their names during the sacrifice, or by sacrificing to idols designating them, which they were forbidden to do.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the Qur'ān strongly forbids devotion to such created objects,<sup>24</sup> and commands all acts of devotion be directed towards Him alone.

**b. Worship of the Invisible beings:**

There are people who worship ‘jinn’ (الجنّ) translated as ‘invisible beings’ by Muhammad Asad<sup>25</sup>, hence, the beings concealed from man's senses (اصل الجنّ سترًا لشيء عن الحاسه) and covers to all kinds of invisible beings or forces.<sup>26</sup>

Such people should be well aware of the fact that these *genii* or demons have no knowledge of the unseen. This automatically negates any

form of magic, superstitious beliefs or assigning of good or bad fortune to things and that all sort of fear should be for Allah alone by believing in His Qadar, by putting our trust in Him and by struggling for the betterment in both worlds.<sup>27</sup> Further, it is mentioned in the Qur'ān that the angels whom the *mushrikin* worship will negate any form of worship done in their names.<sup>28</sup>

**c. Belief in more than one God:**

Some believe in two gods or more than two gods,<sup>29</sup> for example, the belief of Dualists, Christians and most of all, Hindus, who believe in hundreds of gods.

Allah [سبحانه وتعالى] makes it clear upon them that there is only One God and that if there had been more than one God then they would have stood apart in whatever it had created<sup>30</sup> and eventually would have started to fight for superiority, ending up in the universe of chaos.<sup>31</sup> Hence, the harmony present in the system of the universe is a massive testimony of Allah being one and only worthy of worship.

**d. Belief that there is no God:**

There are people who think that everything is created by accident, or as an outcome of blind forces of nature.<sup>32</sup> The Qur'ān in reply to them uses a forceful argument by imposing questions like; whether they themselves are the creators of their existence or they have come out to be perfect humans out of nothing.<sup>33</sup>

**e. Beliefs of the Christians and the Jews:**

These are the people who associate a son to Allah, the Qur'an Hakeem again and again negates such beliefs in strong words.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the Qur'an communicates that they also take rabbis and monks as Gods.<sup>35</sup>

One of the earliest exegete and historian, Al-Tabari (224-310 H) relates a hadith in the commentary of this 'ayah:

“Adi ibn Hātim asked the Prophet of God about it. He answered, ‘they used to say that things were permitted for them, so that they regarded them as lawful; and they used to forbid them some things so that they considered them forbidden’.”<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, obeying others in matters of lawful and unlawful forms kind of a major *shirk*.

**f. Worshipping of desires:**

The Qur'an informs that beside external idols, there is an internal idol as well. That resides in every human and if fed, nourished, listened to and

acted upon everything it wishes, can result in damaging one's relation not only with the Creator but also with fellow beings. This is called the desire or *hawa* (هَوَاة).<sup>37</sup>

It is due to following the desires that can lead anyone swerve from justice, distort the truth<sup>38</sup> and make man heedless from the remembrance of Allah [سبحانه وتعالى].<sup>39</sup>

**g. Ar-Riya: Seeking pleasure of other than Allah:**

This form is communicated in the *Surah al-Maun*, along with which the importance of one of the article of faith, i.e.; salat is mentioned. The Qur'an woes at such praying ones who are unmindful of their prayers and pray only to be seen and praised by people.<sup>40</sup>

Further, it is relevant to mention a *hadith* here, narrated by Jabir bin 'Abdullah [رضي الله عنه], that Prophet ﷺ said that the abandoning of *as-Salat* (prayer) is what divides a believer from shirk and kufr.<sup>41</sup>

**B. THE INTER-RELATED CONCEPT OF KUFR AND SHIRK:**

There are six articles of faith that appear in the Qur'an.<sup>42</sup> Kufr is essentially lack of belief or having a doubt in any of them.<sup>43</sup> Scholars differentiate between idolatry (shirk) and disbelief (kufr), in such a way that every shirk is kufr, but not every kufr is shirk.<sup>44</sup> An-Nawawi said:

“Kufr and shirk may carry the same meaning, which is disbelief in Allah, or they may be used separately, and kufr may have a more general meaning than shirk”.<sup>45</sup>

That is, if they are mentioned in the same context, then each one of them has a separate meaning, i.e. *kufr* would mean to deny or disbelieve in something that entails leaving Islam and *shirk* would mean associating other partners with Allah.<sup>46</sup> However, if each one of them is mentioned in different context, they would have the same meanings and implications.<sup>47</sup> Central tenets of Christianity are treated invariably as acts of the kafirs.<sup>48</sup>

The Qur'an communicates that no community had been devoid of the concept of God,<sup>49</sup> which means that rejection does not come out of sheer ignorance regarding the concept of God, rather is a result of finding release from the divinely imposed duties. Shabbier Akhtar wrote;

“The Qur'an philosophy of history is constantly reiterated: God sends messengers along with adversity so that the nations may suffer and thus repent in humility”.<sup>50</sup>

The Qur'an Hakeem recommends travelling through the earth as a religious duty and as a source of empirical proof of this pattern of history.<sup>51</sup>

So, after the message of Prophet is received people are generally divided into three categories:<sup>52</sup>

1. Momin (مومن): With heart that is alive<sup>53</sup>
2. Kafir (كافر): With Dead Heart
3. Munaafiq (منافق): With Diseased Heart (Allah [سبحانه وتعالى] causes them to deviate even further).

In order to establish a link between *kufir* and *shirk*, we see that a person might be living in a life of denial or heedlessness, before the message has arrived to him. This life of denial may consist of any form of sin, including the major sin of *shirk*, which in any case, is unpardonable.<sup>54</sup> This is the phase when a heart might be hard, but chances of returning to Tawhid, to which every individual is responsible and hence accountable, are there to make it soft. But the rejection 'after' the arrival of message to a person can lead to serious consequence of sealing of the heart.<sup>55</sup>

Hence *shirk* done after the rejection of the message turn out to be more heinous offense than living a life of mere denial.<sup>56</sup> His hidden worldly purposes become evident for which he uses the religion as a defense, seeking release from acknowledged but unpleasant divinely imposed duties.<sup>57</sup> So, a kaafir (كافر) denies Allah [سبحانه وتعالى], His prophet and the day of resurrection.<sup>58</sup>

The Qur'an indicates two other terms along with *kufir*, i.e. *kazib* (كاذب)<sup>59</sup> and *zulm* (ظلم),<sup>60</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu links *kadhb* and *kufir* in the following words:

"Shirk is neither more nor less than forgery, that 'forging against God a lie', *iftira ala Allah al-kazib* (افتري على الله الكذب). For, obviously, idolatry of polytheism consists in creating 'out of caprice' beings that are in reality mere names and nothing else. And via this route, too, shirk connects ultimately with *kufir*".<sup>61</sup>

Shabbier categorized denial into three forms, i.e., *kufir* (كفر), *kazib* (كاذب) and *shirk*.<sup>62</sup> Hence, again for establishing a relation between *kufir* (كفر) and *shirk*, also keeping in view *shirk* being *zulmun azeem* (ظلم عظيم) a kaafir (كافر) is actually a *mushrik* (مشرک) in terms of his *kadhb* on Allah that

He has taken others as His partners. And kaafir is he, who is a zaalim (ظالم) as he rejects to give Allah [وتعالى سبحانه] and His slaves their due right place.

Literally, zulm means to remove a thing from its rightful place, or to deprive a thing or person of its due share or right, as in an exchange of goods between two persons one pays less to the other and thus gains an advantage over the other. It is noted that:

“In the pre-feudal society of the Hijaz, riba transactions involved loans of money, commodity, grains or cattle to the poor and needy people by the usurers and merchants who charged exorbitant rates of interest or usury, thus, devouring the entire properties of the poor people and tribes. This exploitation of the poor is termed by the Quran as zulm”.<sup>63</sup>

In expressing the true reason behind the rejection of the message brought by the Prophet ﷺ by the pagans of Makkah, as the system of Tawhid was against such exploitation of the poor, Ayatollah Murtaza noted the following:

“These usurers, the Abu Sufiyan, Abu Jahls, and Walled ibn Mughirah, had not the least belief in these idols; they defended them only to preserve the existing social system. These defensive actions grew earnest just as Islam, the system of tawhid opposed to exploitation and usury, appeared. The idolaters, in seeing themselves faced with acute danger of extinction, advanced reverence for popular beliefs as a defense”.<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, just as *kufr* is an intentional choice, it makes the use of *shirk* as a cover for evil intentions easy and, hence, start affecting the life of a believer by way of mockery.<sup>65</sup> So *kafir* (كافر) and *mushrik* (مشرک) has the same meaning in the sense in which they are compared to a man, as highlighted by Izutzu, who stretches forth his hands in vain towards the mirage of water in the desert.<sup>66</sup> Or *kufr* (كفر) is a greater sin than ‘mere *shirk*’ as he is denying the message after it has reached him and clear signs are shown to him. In other words as Sheikh Hamza Yusuf pointed out that;

“*Kufr* is an active denial, not a passive state of ignorance. That is, denial must follow a clear understanding of what one is denying. Moreover, for



those who are sincere, it is not only understandable but necessary that they would search for the truth”.<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, we come to know that both *kufir* and shirk meets at a point of intentional preference to disbelief, in which a belief system or a religious system becomes a vehicle for abuses in a given social system. But it is not impossible to rise against such class systems and, so, Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari noted that;

“The Qur’an does not conceive of the Pharaohs’ and Abu Sufiyan defenses of the Shirk-ridden systems of their day, which incited the people’s religious sentiments against Moses and the Seal of Prophets, as being the inevitable product of these persons’ class situations. The Qur’anic conception is that they acted with duplicity and that, while in accordance with their God-given primordial nature they perceived and recognized the truth, they assumed an attitude of denial”.<sup>68</sup>

Therefore, it should be kept in mind that ‘an easy life need not lead to faith; a difficult life need not encourage rejection’<sup>69</sup> a man can always rise up against his own class interests ‘just as Moses did after having grown up amid the luxuries of a Pharaoh’.<sup>70</sup>

**Conclusion:** To conclude so we ask Allah to make our hearts steadfast in adhering to His religion until we meet Him, and we seek refuge in His Might may He be glorified from going astray.

## REFERENCES

1. Hadith Index no. 7
2. Al-Quran. 4:48
3. Philips 2005: 44
4. Al-Quran. 5:72
5. Al-Quran. 6:88
6. Hadith Index; No. 8
7. Vol. 11, 1973: 685
8. Al-Quran. 37:33; 4:12; 20:32
9. Urdu Dāira Mu‘ārif Islamiyah, Al-Mufradāt fi Gharīb al-Quran, Vol. 11, 1973:695
10. Al-Quran. 26:97-98
11. Al-Quran. 45:23
12. Shaikh, Dawah Highlights, April 1999: 10
13. Urdu Dāira Mu‘ārif Islamiyah Vol.11, 1973:686
14. Al-Aṣṣḥāḥāni: 259-260
15. Al-Quran. 16:36
16. Al-Jawziyah Vol. 1, 1972: 339-344

17. Yusuf: 47-51
18. Al-Jawziyah Vol. 1, 1972: 347
19. Al-Quran. 71:23
20. www.tafsir.com
21. At-Tabari, Vol. 29, 2001: 118
22. Al-Quran. 27:24
23. Delhvi 1996: 187
24. Al-Quran. 41:37
25. www.islamicity.com
26. Al-Asfahani: 98
27. Al-Quran. 34:14
28. Al-Quran. 34:40-41
29. Al-Quran. 16:51
30. Al-Quran. 23:91
31. Al-Quran. 21:22
32. Al-Quran. 45:26
33. Al-Quran. 52:35
34. Al-Quran. 19:88-92
35. Al-Quran. 9:31
36. www.altafsir.com
37. Al-Quran. 25:43
38. Al-Quran. 4:135
39. Al-Quran. 18:28
40. Al-Quran. 107:4-6
41. Hadith Index, No. 9
42. Al-Quran. 2:177
43. Al-Hilal, www.bimcrot.tripod.com
44. Yusuf 2008: 41
45. An-Nawavi, 1956:61
46. Al-Quran. 40:12
47. Al-Quran. 6:1; 13:33, (www.Islamonline.net)
48. Al-Quran. 5:72-73, Izutsu 2005:149
49. Al-Quran. 35:24
50. Akhtar 2008, 244
51. Al-Quran. 6:11; 27:69;30:42
52. Al-Quran. 2:2-10
53. Al-Quran. 6:122
54. Hadith Index; No. 10
55. Al-Quran. 63:3
56. Al-Quran. 3:90, 47:34
57. Al-Quran. 40:56
58. Al-Quran. 9:80; 9:84; 30:16
59. Al-Quran. 5:10
60. Al-Quran. 4:168
61. Izutusu 2005: 149-150
62. Akhtar 2008: 242-253
63. Al-Quran. 2:278-279, Haque 1996:41
64. Mutahhari 1985:100

<sup>65</sup> . Al-Quran. 55:57, 2:212, 18:106, 41:26, 47:32

<sup>66</sup> . Al-Quran. 13:14, (Izutu 2005 :150)

<sup>67</sup> . Yusuf 2008:45

<sup>68</sup> . 27:14, Mutahhari 1985:101

<sup>69</sup> . Akhtar 2008:252

<sup>70</sup> . Mutahhari 1985:102