

The Oneness of God and the inner Shirk

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 10 September 2021

أَرَأَيْتَ مَنْ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ ۖ أَفَأَنْتَ تَكُونُ عَلَيْهِ وَكِيلًا ﴿٣٣﴾ أَمْ تَحْسَبُ أَنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ يَسْمَعُونَ أَوْ
يَعْقِلُونَ ۗ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا كَالْأَنْعَامِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ سَبِيلًا ﴿٣٤﴾

“Have you seen him who takes his low desire for his god? Will you be a guardian over him? Or do you think that most of them hear or understand? They are only as the cattle; rather, they are farther astray from the path.” — ch. 25, v. 43–44

أَفَرَأَيْتَ مَنْ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمِهِ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِ وَقَلْبِهِ وَجَعَلَ عَلَىٰ بَصَرِهِ غِشَاوَةً ۖ فَمَنْ
يَهْدِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ اللَّهِ ۗ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

“Have you seen him who takes his low desire for his god, and Allah leaves him in error knowingly, and seals his hearing and his heart and puts a covering on his sight? Who can then guide him after Allah? Will you not be mindful?” — ch. 45, v. 23

These verses mention another kind of *shirk* or taking other things as gods besides the One God. This is where a person takes his low desires, that is, desires of this physical world, desires which are quite genuine in their own place, as being “his god”. Of course, “desires” are not an object such as an idol of stone, or the sun or the moon, before which a person can bow down with his body. They are unseen. The Western critics of Islam have said that the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad don’t teach anything deep, subtle or philosophical. They allege that the teachings of Islam cover only superficial and physical matters. Its prayers are only words to be uttered and various bodily motions and postures to be performed. Its heaven is a place of physical pleasures and comforts, and its hell is a place of torture of the body. These critics claim that Islam only tried to stop the primitive form of idolatry, in which people were bowing by their bodies before objects taken as gods, such as idols and other bodies.

But these two verses clearly show that Islam is also concerned with matters of the mind and heart, inward matters. A person bows before his low desires only with his mind and heart. The first verse tells us that such people have stopped listening to moral guidance and using their understanding and intelligence. This is how they become like cattle, because they fail to use those human faculties which distinguish humans from animals. So their only concern is to satisfy and fulfil those desires which humans have in common with animals, that is to say, desires and needs of the body. Animals only satisfy their bodily desires according to their needs. They don't have the intelligence to invent a thousand and one ways of satisfying their desires more and more, beyond all limits. But human beings do have that power. That is why when human beings only have the aim of satisfying their low, animal desires, they go more astray than the unthinking cattle, as the Quran says here.

Those who do not follow the true belief in one God, whether they are disbelievers in God, or members of a non-Islamic religion, or Muslims themselves, will often be found to take some low desire of theirs as the god that they worship. They will do anything, violate any moral standard, commit any injustice against others, in order to satisfy their base desires. They believe that satisfying some low desire or other, at any cost, will bring them ultimate contentment and happiness. Often, they seek the satisfaction of some low desire under the cover of following a religion or some noble sounding concept or way of life. This is the most subtle form of *shirk* and the most difficult to remove from within oneself.

Maulana Muhammad Ali, in his English translation of the Quran, writes in the footnote under the first verse I recited above as follows: "This verse shows how broad is the idea of *shirk* according to the Holy Quran. It is not simply worship of idols that is condemned, but blindly following one's desires is equally condemned. Many people who consider themselves the servants of the One God really bow in submission before the greatest of their idols, i.e., their desire. The belief in One God has here been brought to a perfection not to be met with elsewhere."

The second verse says that when someone "takes his low desire for his god" then

“Allah leaves him in error knowingly”. Here “knowingly” means that it is because Allah knows that he is taking his low desire for god that Allah leaves him stumbling in error. Allah does not leave anyone in error for no reason. It is when it is established as a matter of actual knowledge that a person is taking his low desire for god that Allah ceases to guide him. The words here, “Allah leaves him in error”, *adalla-hu Allāh*, are translated by some as: “Allah leads him astray” or “leads him into error” or “misguides him”. This expression about Allah occurs in other places in the Quran as well and many interpreters and translators give its meaning as Allah “leads astray” (i.e., makes them stray to the wrong path), or “misleads” or “misguides” certain people. But Maulana Muhammad Ali has explained in detail in a footnote in his English translation of the Quran that this expression also means “to find (that someone is) in error” or “to leave (someone) in (their) error”. He writes: “It is a plain fact that Allah guides people or shows them the right way by sending His messengers, and therefore He could not be spoken of as leading them astray” (note under 2:26).

Maulana Muhammad Ali adds that, wherever this expression is used, it is always mentioned that the people whom Allah “leaves in error” have done something wrong themselves in the first place, and it is as a result of their misdeeds that Allah leaves them in error. So here, in the second verse which I read, it is first stated: “Have you seen him who takes his low desire for his god?” Then it is said: “and Allah leaves him in error knowingly, and seals his hearing and his heart and puts a covering on his sight”. It is clear even from just this verse alone that this sealing of this person’s hearing, heart and sight by Allah is a result of this person’s own action. As the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement wrote in his lecture published under the title *The Teachings of Islam*: “If a man, for instance, closes all the doors of his room, the darkness which follows is an act of God” (p. 112, 1921 edition).

But let us also compare the words of my second verse with those in the first verse: “Have you seen him who takes his low desire for his god? Will you be a guardian over him? *Or do you think that most of them hear or understand? They are only as the cattle; rather, they are farther astray from the path.*” Here it is not said that Allah sealed their hearing or heart or that He made them to go astray by misguiding them,

but that this was their own condition. They focussed entirely on satisfying their low desires, as if these were the god that they wanted to meet, and to remain in this condition they suppressed and closed their sense of listening and thinking, and went further on the wrong path. So when the second verse says that it was Allah Who sealed their senses and their hearts and left them in error, it doesn't mean that Allah did this to them first and without any reason, but that this is the consequence of what they themselves did.

There is another statement about *shirk* which occurs twice in the Quran:

“Surely Allah does not forgive that a partner should be set up with Him, and forgives all besides that to whom He pleases. And whoever sets up a partner with Allah, he devises indeed a great sin.” (4:48; see also 4:116)

Why doesn't Allah forgive *shirk* or setting up a partner with Him? Those who commit *shirk* themselves don't believe that God can forgive their sins unless they also invoke the gods they have set up besides Him. For example, the Christian belief is that God cannot forgive except through the mediation and intervention of His son, Jesus. Even among Muslims there are people who believe that they can only obtain forgiveness from Allah through their religious head or *pir*, and not directly. So the question is: Why should Allah forgive someone who doesn't believe that Allah, by Himself, has the power to forgive him? This verse says that Allah can, and does, forgive every sin if you approach Him without making anyone else a partner with Him. You could belong to any religion but as long as you ask forgiveness from the One God, believing that He is the only One Who can forgive, then He may forgive you. Of course, in cases where a person has wronged another person, he must first of all make up any loss he has caused to his victim, unless the victim forgives him and chooses not to penalise him. But that is a separate matter which we are not discussing here.

If we think about it carefully, when a person commits any sin he is also committing *shirk*, even if he is a Muslim who claims to believe that there is no god but Allah. What he is doing is that, instead of seeking something lawfully from Allah, and striving to obtain it in the lawful and moral ways as taught by Allah, he is making

that thing take the place of Allah. Let us say, he is trying to get wealth or power by cheating, robbing and deceiving people. The desire for those things has become his god instead of Allah. If he repents and seeks forgiveness from Allah for just his misdeeds, then the underlying *shirk* which caused him to commit those misdeeds still remains. His victims and Allah can forgive him his misdeeds, but if he doesn't repent from the *shirk* which was underlying those misdeeds, then he will commit a similar misdeed again. He should also ask forgiveness of Allah for his *shirk*, for regarding other things as if they were gods.

We pray that may Allah enable us to follow the true meaning of the teaching that “there is no god but Allah”— *Ameen*.

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَنَاوَكُمْ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-