

## **Monotheism in Islam with reference to *Tawhid, Shirk and Kufr***

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### **Abstract**

In true monotheism, as opposed to monolatry, there is only One God, and that God is a Creator God. This is the system of all the Abrahamic faiths and their derivatives, syncretic or otherwise, Yazidism, Mandeansabianism, Sikhism and Baha'ism; some forms of Buddhism; Taoism; early Zoroastrianism; and *Brahmic* Hinduism. In fact, it is the dominant form of religious belief in the world today, and has been for the last two thousand or so years. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss what monotheism is, its types, monotheism in Islam and Islamic monotheism i.e. *Tawhid* in contrast with *Shirk* and *Kufr*.

**KEYWORDS:** Monotheism, God, Islamic Monotheism, Tawhid, Shirk, Kufr

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

The word monotheism comes from the Greek "*monos*", which means one, and "*theos*", which means god. Monotheism refers to the belief, found in a great many cultures, in a single, universal God. Many religions in the world are classified as monotheistic, and the preeminent examples are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Forms of monotheism can also be found in other religions including Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and the Bahá'í Faith. Monotheism is usually contrasted with polytheism, which is the belief in many gods, and atheism, which is the absence of any belief in gods. The term "monotheism" was coined in 1660 CE by Henry More (1614-1687 CE), a member of the Cambridge Platonists, in order to better organize and categorize religions on a continuum.<sup>1</sup>

### **MONOTHEISM - BRIEF BACKGROUND:**

Monotheism has been found in a variety of cultures around the world, and is not exclusive to technologically advanced societies. Jews, Christians and Muslims all agree that God is an eternally existent being that exists apart from space and time, Who is the creator of the universe, and is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing) and omnibenevolent (all-good or all-loving). The religions, however, differ in the details: Christians, for example, would further affirm that there are three aspects to God - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The monotheistic religions can be traced back to the Aten cult in ancient Egypt, the *NasadiyaSukta* from the Vedic period of India, and *Ahura Mazda*, the one uncreated Creator of Zoroastrianism. There are also monotheistic denominations within Hinduism, including *Vedanta*, *Vaishnavism*, *Shaivism*, *Shaktism*, and *Smarthism*. More recently, Sikhism is a distinctly monotheistic faith that arose in northern India during the 16th and 17th Centuries, and the *Baha'i* faith, a religion founded in 19th Century Persia, has as its core teaching the one supernatural being, God,

who created all existence. Philosophical monotheism, and the associated concept of absolute good and evil, emerged in classical Greece, notably with Plato and the subsequent Neo-Platonists, who developed a kind of theistic monism in which the absolute is identified with the divine, either as an impersonal or a personal God.

#### **TYPES OF MONOTHEISM:**

- **Exclusive Monotheism:**  
It is a belief that there is only one deity, and that all other claimed deities are distinct from it and false. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and the Hindu denomination of *Vaishnavism* (which regards the worship of anyone other than *Vishnu* as incorrect) are examples of Exclusive Monotheism.
- **Inclusive Monotheism:**  
It is a belief that there is only one deity, and that all other claimed deities are just different names for it. The Hindu denomination of *Smarthism* is an example of Inclusive Monotheism.
- **Substance Monotheism:**  
It is a belief that the many gods are just different forms of a single underlying substance. It is found in some indigenous African religions.
- **Pantheism:**  
The belief in one God Who is equivalent to nature or the physical universe, or that everything is of an all-encompassing immanent abstract God.
- **Panentheism:**  
It is a belief similar to Pantheism that the physical universe is joined to, or an integral part of, God, but stressing that God is greater than (rather than equivalent to) the universe. It is also known as Monistic Monotheism.
- **Deism:**  
A form of monotheism in which it is believed that one God exists, but that this God does not intervene in the world, or interfere with human life and the laws of the universe. It posits a non-interventionist creator who permits the universe to run itself according to natural laws.

#### **MONOTHEISM IN ISLAM:**

At the very core of the Islamic tradition is monotheism. Like the other Abrahamic faiths, Islam asserts that monotheism is as old as humanity, and is the ultimate form of religious faith degrading into various forms of polytheism and idolatry over time. However, in Islam more so than Judaism or Christianity, monotheism is the linchpin by which the entirety of the belief system is held together. Islam has a simple but pointed philosophy concerning monotheism: there is only one God, called "Allāh ", and no others. He is all-powerful and all-knowing, the Creator, Sustainer, Ordainer and judge of the universe. God in Islam is strictly singular (*Tawhid*), unique (*Wahid*) and inherently One (*Ahad*), all-merciful and omnipotent. Allāh exists without place and the Qur'an states that "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision. God is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things"<sup>2</sup>. Allāh is the only God and the same God worshiped in Christianity and Judaism<sup>3</sup>. But, there is no Trinity, as in Christianity, and no claims which might suggest numerous creative entities. Rather, Allāh alone is the

sole entity for worship. There is no existence or supernatural powers to be worshipped other than Allāh; Allāh is All-Truth and the source of all creation. Allāh created the universe by himself. His power is not depleted in any way on the basis of what he has created.

The utmost determinant of Islamic faith centers on the *Shahadah*, or the Islamic creed, which declares and affirms Muslim belief in the unity of God (Allāh in Arabic) and the prophethood of Muhammad<sup>P</sup>. Its recitation is considered to be one of the Five Pillars of Islam by Sunni Muslims. To bestow Allāh's indivisible reality upon another god is considered by Muslims to be a lie, and stands as the only sin which Allāh will not forgive. Moreover, rewards and punishment in both earthly life and the afterlife are based heavily on monotheistic worship. With such emphasis of monotheism, then, it is of no surprise that the affirmation of the oneness of Allāh is one of the cornerstones in the daily faith offerings of the Muslim worshipper.

#### **ISLAMIC MONOTHEISM – TAWHID:**

*Tawhid* is the concept of God in Islam which says that only one God exists. It says that God is unique and one and He has no equal. It also says that since the God is the only creator, there is no room for lesser Gods or deities. Any lesser gods are therefore false. *Tawhid* is an essential part of Islam. To become a Muslim it is necessary to accept it. The concept of *Tawhid* has many implications. Since God is the only power, both good and bad flow from God. So, whatever good or bad occurs to an individual, both are from God and both should be accepted by people. Since God is the only power worth worshipping, reliance on any other source for help is not permissible. The Qurān explains the nature of God; it says “He is God the Only; God the Indivisible; He gives not birth, nor is He begotten, and He is, in Himself, not dependent on anything.”<sup>4</sup>

Associating any other thing or person as being comparable to God is called *Shirk* in Islam. This is the only sin in Islam which cannot be forgiven by God, unless a person turns repentant on Earth.

With regard to the Islamic definition of *Tawhid*, it means believing in Allāh alone as God and Lord and attributing to Him alone all the attributes of Lordship and divinity. It may be defined as follows: Believing that Allāh is One with no partner or associate in His Lordship (*Ruboobiyyah*), divinity (*Uloohiyyah*) or names and attributes (*Al-asma' wa'l-sifaat*). This indicates that *Tawhid* is the essence of the testimony that there is no god except Allāh and that Muhammad<sup>P</sup> is the Messenger of Allāh. Once this is understood, it should be noted that the scholars have divided *Tawhid* into three categories, as follows:

1. *Tawhid al-Ruboobiyyah* (Oneness of Divine Lordship)
2. *Tawhid al-Uloohiyyah* (Oneness of Divinity)
3. *Tawhid al-Asma' wa'l-Sifaat* (Oneness of the Divine Names and Attributes).

Literally *Tawhid* means “unification”, making something one, or “asserting oneness”, and it comes from the Arabic verb *Wahhada* which itself means to unite, unify,

or consolidate. However, when the term *Tawhid* is used in reference to God, *Tawhidullah*, it means realizing and maintaining of God's unity in all of man's actions which directly or indirectly relate to Him. It is the belief that God is One, without partner in His dominion (*Ruboobiyah*), One without similitude in His essence and attributes (*al-asma was-Sifat*), and One without rival in His divinity and in worship (*Uloohiyah / Ibadah*). These three aspects form the basis for the categories into which the science of *Tawhid* has been traditionally divided. The three overlap and inseparable to such a degree that whoever omits any one aspect has failed to complete the requirements of *Tawhid*. The omission of any of these aspects of *Tawhid* is referred to as *Shirk*, means sharing; the association of partners with God.

The three categories can be understood directly from Allāh's Book. This division of *Tawhid* is not from someone's opinion, nor is it merely a traditional way to explain *Tawhid*. It is a division that is taken directly from the Qurān and the *Hadith*. The first category *Tawhid al-Ruboobiyah* says that single out Allāh in understanding His actions, like His creating, providing, bringing of life and death, and keeping order in all affairs. A person understands that Allāh alone is the Creator, the Provider, the Ever-Living One in charge of all affairs. The second category *Tawhid al-Uloohiyah*, which says that single out Allāh within the actions of the servant. This includes all actions that draw them closer to Allāh like supplication, fear, hope, awe, longing, trust, seeking general assistance, seeking assistance in emergencies, sacrifice, taking oaths, etc. All forms of worship must be strictly for Allāh alone, and nothing can be done for other than Him. The third category *Tawhid al-asmaa' was-sifaat*, which says that believe in every Name and Attribute that Allāh affirmed for Himself, or those that His messenger Muhammad<sup>P</sup> affirmed for Him.

These three categories are understood directly from Allāh's Book. Every verse that mentions Allāh's Actions, like creating, providing, bringing life and death, and controlling affairs, is describing *Tawhid al-Ruboobiyah*. Similarly, every verse in the Qur'an that mentions the creation of the heavens and the earth or other created things is about *Tawhid al-Ruboobiyah*. Every verse in the Qur'an which is mentioning worship, whether it be a command to worship Allāh or a prohibition of *Shirk*, is about *Tawhid al-Uloohiyah*. Every verse mentioning something about Allāh's Names or Attributes is about *Tawhid al-Asmaa' was-sifaat*.

This word (*Tawhid*) and its derivatives are used with this meaning in the Qurān and the *Hadith*<sup>5</sup>. For example, the Qurān says:

- “Say (O Muhammad): He is Allāh, (the) One. Allāh the Self-Sufficient Master. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him.”<sup>6</sup>
- “And your God is One God, there is none who has the right to be worshipped but He, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”<sup>7</sup>

In *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*<sup>8</sup> and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*<sup>9</sup> it is narrated that IbnAbbās said: When the Prophet<sup>P</sup> sent Muādh ibn Jabal to Yemen, he said to him: ‘You are going to people from among the People of the Book, so let the first thing to which you call them be belief in Allāh alone (*Tawhid*). If they accept that, then tell them that Allāh has enjoined on

them five prayers every day and night. If they pray then tell them that Allāh has enjoined on them *Zakāh* from their wealth to be taken from their rich and given to their poor. If they agree to that then take it from them but avoid the best of people's wealth.'<sup>10</sup>

### **SHIRK:**

*Shirk*, "to share" in Arabic, is also a concept of Islam. Literally, it means the establishment of "partners" placed beside God. It is the antithesis of *Tawhid*<sup>11</sup>. It is also means supplicating to others than God, or believing that they hold the same attributes as Him in an equal or lesser degree. Within Islam, *Shirk* is an unforgivable sin if remained unpardoned before death: God may forgive any sin if one dies in that state except for committing *Shirk*.<sup>12</sup>

*Shirk* is defined in various ways. Some argue that there is only one type of *Shirk*. Muhammad<sup>p</sup> has classified *Shirk* into two categories:<sup>13</sup>

#### **1. Greater Shirk:**

Greater *Shirk* or *Shirk-e-Akbar* means open polytheism. It can be described in two forms:

- To associate anyone with Allāh as His partner (to believe in more than one god).
- To associate Allāh's attributes with someone else. (Attributing, considering, or portraying Allāh's knowledge or might to being those of anyone else)

Other interpretations also derived from the Qurān and the *Sunnah*<sup>14</sup> divide *Shirk* into three main categories. *Shirk* can be committed by acting against the three different categories.

##### **a. *Shirk al-Ruboobiyah* – *Shirk* in Lordship:**

This category of *Shirk* refers to either the belief that others share Allāh's Lordship over creation as His equal or near equal, or to the belief that there exists no Lord over creation at all.

- *Shirk* by association: This is the *Shirk* concerned with associating "others" with Allāh.
- *Shirk* by negation: This is *Shirk* in *Ruboobiyah* (Lordship).

##### **b. *Shirk al-Asma was-Sifat* – *Shirk* in names and attributes:**

*Shirk* in this category includes both the non-believer practices of giving Allāh the attributes of his creation as well as the act of giving created beings Allāh's names and attributes.

- ***Shirk* by humanization:** In this aspect of *Shirk*, Allāh 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 Allāh 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.
- ***Shirk* by deification:** This form of *Shirk* relates to cases where created beings or things are given or claim Allāh's names or his attributes.

##### **c. *Shirk al-'Ibadah* – *Shirk* in worship**

In this category of *Shirk*, acts of worship are directed to others and not to Allāh 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-Ibadah* has two main aspects.

This form of *Shirk* occurs when any act of worship is directed to someone else and not to Allāh. It represents the most obvious form of idolatry, against which the prophets were specifically sent by Allāh, calling the masses of mankind to give it up. Examples of this *Shirk* are asking for forgiveness, admittance to paradise, etc. that only Allāh can provide, from others and not from Allāh.

## 2. Lesser *Shirk*

Lesser *Shirk* or *Shirk-e-Asghar* means hidden polytheism. A person commits hidden polytheism when he says *Tawhid* but his thoughts and actions do not reflect his belief.<sup>15</sup> There is a saying Prophet Muhammad<sup>P</sup> “One who offers the ritual prayers in an ostentatious way is a polytheist. One who keeps the fast, or gives alms, or performs the Hajj to show the public his righteousness or to earn good name is a polytheist.” Likewise, other saying is, Mahmud ibnLubayd reported, “Allāh's messenger said: ‘The thing I fear for you the most is ash-*Shirk* al-Asghar.’ The companions asked, ‘O messenger of Allāh, what is that?’ He replied, ‘Ar-Riya (showing off), for verily Allāh 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.’” Mahmud ibnLubayd also said, "The Prophet came out and announced, 'O people, beware of secret *Shirk*!'"<sup>16</sup>

### ***KUFR:***

Knowing about *Kufr* is an essential part of Muslim's knowledge about his faith. Without knowing *Kufr*, you cannot do justice to *Tawhid*. *Kufr* is used in the Qurān for people who cover up or hide the truth. Generally, unbelief is called *Kufr*. It also uses this word to point out those who denied the favors of Allāh by not accepting his Dominion and Authority. Therefore *Kufr* is the opposite of *Imān* or disbelief in Allāh and a non-believer is called *Kāfir*. *Kāfir* is sometimes used interchangeably with *Mushrik*, another type of religious wrongdoer mentioned frequently in the Qurān and Islamic works.

However, unless a person has clear and irrefutable evidence, ensure not to haste in labeling a person who claims to be Muslim as a *Kāfir* or *Murtadd*<sup>17</sup>. The reason for not directly assigning a person the label of a *Kāfir* is the warning from Prophet Muhammad<sup>P</sup> in the below Hadith: Ibn Umar reports that the Prophet Muhammad<sup>P</sup> said “Any person who called his brother ‘O Unbeliever’ (has in fact done an act by which this *Kufr*) would return to one of them. If it were so as he (the accuser) asserted, (the *Kufr* of the accused would be confirmed, but if the *Kufr* was not true) then it returned to him (the man who called his brother Muslim a *Kāfir*).”<sup>18</sup>

Muslim belief/doctrine is often summarized in the six articles of faith<sup>19</sup>, in that the first five are mentioned together in the Qur'an<sup>20</sup>:

1. Allāh
2. His angels
3. His Messengers
4. His Revealed Books
5. The Day of Resurrection
6. *Al-Qadar*, Divine Preordainments, i.e. whatever Allāh has ordained must come to pass.

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#### REFERENCES:

- <sup>1</sup>More, Henry (1660).An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness. London: Flesher &Morden. p. 62.
  - <sup>2</sup> “The Qurān 6:103”
  - <sup>3</sup> “The Qurān 29:46”
  - <sup>4</sup> “The Qurān 112:0-14”
  - <sup>5</sup> The *Hadith* is a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Qurān.
  - <sup>6</sup> “The Qurān 112:0-14”
  - <sup>7</sup> “The Qurān 2:163”
  - <sup>8</sup> It is one of the two most trusted collections of hadith along with *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.
  - <sup>9</sup> It is considered the second most authentic hadith collection after *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.
  - <sup>10</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* Hadith No.7372 and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* Hadith No.19
  - <sup>11</sup> Kamoonpuri, S (2001), Basic Beliefs of Islam, Tanzania Printers Limited. pps 42–58.
  - <sup>12</sup> “The Qurān 4:48”
  - <sup>13</sup> Kamoonpuri, S: "Basic Beliefs of Islam" pages 42–58. Tanzania Printers Limited, 2001.
  - <sup>14</sup> prophetic tradition
  - <sup>15</sup> Kamoonpuri, S: "Basic Beliefs of Islam" pages 42–58. Tanzania Printers Limited, 2001.
  - <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>17</sup> who has done Apostasy
  - <sup>18</sup> Recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*
  - <sup>19</sup> Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, Muhammad; Khan, Muhammad Muhsin. Translation of the meanings of the Noble Qur’an in the English Language, King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur’an, Madinah, KSA, pp. 901,902.
  - <sup>20</sup> “The Qur’an 2:285”
- <sup>p</sup> Peace be upon him.