

Idolatry in Our Age

H A R U N Y A H Y A

S'hirk', the word used for idolatry in Arabic means "partnership/association".

In the Qur'an, to practise idolatry is to associate any other being, any other person, or concept with God, considering them to be equal to God, and to act upon this unsound belief.

In translations of the Qur'an, idolatry is explained as "associating a partner with God". It is expressed thus: "having another god besides God", or "worshipping another god besides God".

In its broadest sense, idolatry is to adhere to principles and values, or pursue a life style other than is consistent with the teachings and moral values of the Qur'an. Someone adopting such principles simply sets up the person laying down these principles as a partner to God. This person may be anyone; his father, grandfather, an ancestor he may so exalt the society he is a member of, the founders of an ideology, a philosophy or its followers. In this broad sense of idolatry, someone adhering to a different way of living other than the Qur'an, simply practices idolatry. He may call himself an atheist, Christian, or Jew. He may even appear to be a Muslim, performing his regular prayers, fasting and obeying the laws of Islam. Nevertheless, anyone harboring a thought or judgment opposing the Qur'an is a mere idolater; by such a stance he simply manifests his acceptance of the existence of a ruler other than God.

Idolatry does not essentially require an absolute denial of the existence of God. Rather, the majority of the idolaters avoid explicitly accepting such an attribute or "title". Never scrupulous in conduct, they deceive themselves throughout their lives. On the Day of Judgment, they still reject being involved in idolatry. The stance they adopt is explained in the following verse:

One day shall We gather them all together: We shall say to those who ascribed partners (to Us): "Where are the partners whom you (invented and) talked about?" There will then be (left) no subterfuge for them but to say: "By God, our Lord, we were not those who associated other gods with God." Behold! How they lie against their own souls ! But the (lie) which they invented will leave them in the lurch. (al-Ana'am, 22-24)

An idolater does not necessarily have to make "declarations". You will certainly never hear a statement like this: "I hereby take this divine being as a god besides God and I swear an oath of loyalty to him." Idolatry resides primarily, in the heart and is then disclosed through word and deed. From the standpoint of the Qur'an, having a preference for a being other than God underlies it. Giving preference to the will of some person over the Will of God, for instance, fear of other people rather than fear of God, or an attachment to some person rather than to Him are examples of idolatry described in the Qur'an.

From the foregoing, it is clear that idolatry is the diversion of the feeling of "love" from God to other beings. The strong attachment formed to idols is explained in the following verse:

Yet there are men who take (for worship) others besides God, as equal (with God): They love them as they should love God. But those of the Faith are overflowing in their love for God. If only the unrighteous could see, behold, they would see the penalty: that to God belongs all power, and God will sternly enforce the penalty. (Surah Al-Baqara, 2:165)

This verse makes it clear that "love" given to the wrong people lays the basis for "worshipping others than God" as well as idolatry. Unlike believers, unbelievers can never maintain an intimate relation with their Creator. They love either themselves or others, or both; they share out their love among their fathers, sons, brothers, wives, husbands, lovers, the people they are surrounded by, and so on. As well as for people, unbelievers feel attachment for non-living things, or rather concepts like money, possessions, houses, cars, status, prestige, etc.

The superior and gorgeous properties of all living things and non-living things alike, are mere reflections of the infinite attributes of God. The unique possessor of these features is God and therefore the only One worthy of loyalty, devotion and love. Feeling an attachment then for anything other than God is mere association of partners

with God.

In another verse, in the words of prophet Abraham, it is asserted that unbelievers leave God and strengthen the bond with their idols:

And he said: "You have taken (for worship) idols besides God, out of mutual love and regard between yourselves in this life; but on the Day of Judgment you shall disown and curse each other: and your abode will be the Fire, and you shall have none to help you." (Al-Ankaboot, 25)

Passion for women is the most striking example of ascribing partners to God in terms of love. The woman in question can be anyone—a spouse, a girl friend, or even a woman to whom one is platonically attracted. In consequence, if the love felt for a woman makes a man drift apart from God, makes him see a woman as equal to or at a higher level than God, then this is explicitly "ascribing partners to God." Such a mentality, assumed to be innocent behavior in society, has serious consequences, however, in the presence of God:

(The Pagans), leaving Him, call but upon female deities: they call but upon Satan the persistent rebel! (An-Nisa, 117)

This point of view also holds true for women. This type of love, unacceptable in the presence of God, is however encouraged in modern societies under the "innocent" rubrics of "love", "romanticism" or "dating." The indoctrination of romanticism—especially targeting young people—has devastating effects upon new generations. This is surely a great hindrance to the healthy development of the youthful mind and consciousness. As a result of this indoctrination, generations devoid of understanding, come into being. In such circumstances, the members of society live in a total unawareness of the purpose of their existence on Earth, and the exigencies of their religion and faith. Such people simply cling to an ignorant way of living and lead their lives without knowing what love of God or fear of God really means.

Another reason for the individual to drift into shirk is fear. Just like love, fear should be felt only for God. One who feels or shows fear for created beings simply attributes individual might to them. This is idolatry, pure and simple.

God has said:

"Take not (for worship) two gods: for He is just One God: then fear Me (and Me alone)." To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and on earth, and to Him is duty due always: then will you fear other than God? (An-Nahl, 51-52)

Unbelievers go in great fear of other people. This is narrated in the Qur'an:

...When (at length) the order for fighting was issued to them, behold! A section of them feared men as - or even more than - they should have feared God. They said: "Our Lord! Why have you ordered us to fight? Could you not grant us a brief respite?"... (An-Nisa, 77)

Apart from the feelings of love and fear, there are other attitudes leading man to idolatry.

The basis of idolatry is the preference for a person, or a thing over God, for instance, to prefer somebody's approval to God's, to fear somebody as one fears God or to love him as one loves God...Or to do for an idol what he doesn't do for God, or to make a sacrifice which he does not do for God's approval.

Given the foregoing arguments, it would be a shallow interpretation indeed to define idolatry as the worship of statues. This is surely an argument used by unbelievers to justify their stance. According to their explanation, idolatry ceased when the idols in the Ka'ba were broken at the time the message of Islam was communicated. If this argument were true, then the hundreds of verses warning believers against idolatry, and providing a detailed explanation about it, would have relevance only to a few primitive tribes in our day—a piece of a reasoning quite contradictory to the essence of the Qur'an. Furthermore from the Qur'an which will prevail until the Day of Judgement we understand that, in every age, pagans lived together side by side with believers. The related verse follows:

Strongest among men in enmity to the believers you will find the Jews and Pagans... (Al-Maeda, 82)

Turn back in repentance to God, and fear Him: establish regular prayers, and do not be among those who associate other gods with God Turn to Him, be careful of your duty to Him, be steadfast in prayer and do not be of the polytheists, who split up their religion, and become (mere) sects, each party rejoicing in its

own beliefs! (Ar-Rum, 31-32)

As the verses suggest, one of the most significant characteristics of polytheistic societies is their approach to true religion; they reject some commandments of the religion revealed by God and hence form divisions within the religion. The members of these divisions assume themselves to be on the right path and fight with one another. However, it should be kept in mind that even a minor diversion from the Qur'an is an addition or alteration to what God has revealed, and consequently a source of polytheism.

In the verses below it is stated that no deed of the pagans is accepted by God; even their prayers and worship:

But it has already been revealed to you, as it was to those who went before you, "If you were to associate other gods with God, truly fruitless would your work in life be," and you would surely be in the ranks of those who lose all spiritual good". (Az-Zumar, 65)

Out of what God has produced in abundance in tilth and in cattle, they assigned Him a share: they say, according to their fancies: "This is for God, and this for our partners!" But the share of their "partners" does not reach God, whilst the share of God reaches their "partners" ! Evil and unjust is their judgement! (Al-Anaam, 136)

A believer may commit various sins. However, behind these sins, there is no question of a revolt or a similar intention or act against God. What makes idolatry different from other sins is that, in contrast to the other sins, idolatry assigns another god besides God and invents a lie against Him. Thus idolatry is the greatest sin. It is in a way a manifestation of disrespect to God.

Accordingly, God mentions in the Qur'an that He will forgive any sin except idolatry:

God does not forgive those who set up partners with Him; but He forgive to whom He pleases; for anything else; to set up partners with God is to devise a sin most heinous indeed. (An-Nisa, 48)

God does not forgive the sin of associating other gods with Him; but He forgives whom He pleases for sins other than this: one who associates other gods with God, has strayed far, far away (from the right). (An-Nisa, 116)

Therefore in many verses of the Qur'an, God warns believers against idolatry and deters them from this greatest sin. The Qur'an explains idolatry in detail:

O you who believe! Truly, the Pagans are unclean... (At-Tawba, 28)
Being true in faith to God, and never assigning partners to Him: if anyone assigns partners to God, it is as if he had fallen from heaven and been snatched up by birds, or the wind had swooped (like a bird on its prey) and carried him off to far-distant place. (Al-Hajj, 31)
Turn back in repentance to God, and fear Him: establish regular prayers, and do not be among those who associate other gods with God. (Ar-Rum, 30)
Behold, Luqman said to his son by way of instruction: "O my son! Serve no other deity besides God: for false worship is indeed the greatest wrong-doing." (Luqman, 13)
Say: "I am but a man like yourselves, (but) the inspiration has come to me, that your God is one God: whoever expects to meet his Lord, let him do what is right, and, in the worship of his Lord, admit no one as partner." (Al-Kahf, 110)

Anything, living or non-living, which the pagans assign as partners to God by no means possess any divine attributes.

God states in the Qur'an that these partners can neither harm them nor profit them (Jonah, 18), cannot create anything (Jonah, 34, Al-Araf, 191), they cannot help anyone, not even themselves (Al-Araf, 192), and cannot lead to the righteous way (Jonah, 35). Despite their all being inherently weak, these "partners with God" are set up by pagans. The main reason for such an attitude is the fact that God bestows some of His attributes upon these beings.

The authority, sovereignty, supremacy, and prosperity a person possesses, for instance, truly belong to God. As a trial, God grants some of his attributes to some people in this life. Attributing all the power, possessions, etc. to a person's personality, and thus showing fear for him, would be merely associating partners with God. That person is neither a divine being nor someone who possesses the power to attain anything by himself. At this point, we hardly need mention that these are only imaginary beings one creates in one's own mind. In the Qur'an it is

described thus:

Behold! Truly to God belong all creatures, in the heavens and on earth. What do they follow who worship as His "partners" other than God? They follow nothing but fancy, and they do nothing but lie. (Jonah, 66)

A person who worships someone other than God will live to regret his delay in understanding that those partners had no virtues whatsoever. Those partners, whom they preferred to God in this life, will lead them to a great grief in the hereafter. Those partners are also the main reasons why pagans take God, Who has the sole power, honor, and glory, and Who is also the only One to be taken as the Protector, as their enemy. On the Day of Judgment, their fate will be as narrated in the following verses:

One day shall We gather them all together. Then we shall say to the idolaters, "To your place! You and those you associated with us as 'partners'. We shall separate them, and their "partners" will say: "It was not us that you worshipped! God is sufficient for a witness between us and you: we certainly knew nothing of your worship of us!" There every soul will prove the fruits of the deeds it sent before it: they will be brought back to God their rightful Lord, and their invented falsehoods will leave them in the lurch. (Jonah 28-30)

Then they will be asked: "Where are the deities to which you gave part-worship in derogation of God?" They will reply: "They have left us in the lurch: Nay, we did not invoke of old, anything that had real existence." Thus God leaves the unbelievers to stray. (Al-Ghafir 73-74)

The Qur'an defines the end of the pagans as follows:

But when they saw Our punishment, they said: "We believe in God, the one God and we reject the partners we used to associate with Him." But their professing the faith when they actually saw Our punishment was not going to profit them. Such has been God's way of dealing with His servants from the most ancient times. And so the rejecters of God perished utterly! (Al-Ghafir, 84-85)