

Shirk & its Types (part 3 of 3)

Description: The Islamic stance with regards to associating other deities with Allah and attributing to others certain aspects which are exclusive and unique to Him. Part 3: The definition of lesser *shirk*, forms of lesser *shirk* and differences between greater and lesser *shirk*.

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Prerequisites

- Belief in Allah (2 parts).

Objectives

- To learn the definition of lesser *shirk*
- To learn some common examples of lesser *shirk*.
 - o Charms and omens
 - o Taking an oath in the name of other than Allah
 - o Showing off
- To learn the meaning and severity of *riya*.
- To understand how *riyaa* affects worship.
- To learn the prayer for protection against *riya*.
- To learn five differences between greater and lesser *shirk*.

Arabic Terms

- *Shirk* - a word that implies ascribing partners to Allah, or ascribing divine attributes to other than Allah, or believing that the source of power, harm and blessings comes from another besides Allah.
- *Sunnah* - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.
- *Ummah* - Refers to the whole Muslim community, irrespective of color, race, language or nationality.
- *Riyaa* - It comes from the word *ra'aa* meaning to see, to behold, to view. Thus the word

riyaa means showing off, hypocrisy, and dissimulation. Islamically *riyaa* means to perform acts which are pleasing to Allah with the intention of pleasing other than Allah.

Definition of Lesser *Shirk*

Lesser *Shirk* is what has been specifically called *shirk* in the Quran and *Sunnah*, but does not reach the level of greater *shirk*. Also, lesser *shirk* is said to lead to greater *shirk*. Some scholars have said lesser *shirk* is so vast that it is difficult to define it precisely. The most important examples of lesser *shirk* are:



Charms & Omens

Wearing charms, talismans, and amulets for protection against the evil eye, bad luck and the like thinking that Allah has placed these powers in them constitute lesser *shirk*. This is discussed in more detail [here](#).

Swearing an Oath in the Name of Other than Allah

Taking an oath, or swearing, in the name of someone other than Allah is a type of lesser *shirk* given that a person does not intend to venerate the one in whose name the oath is being taken, else it turns into greater *shirk*. The Messenger of Allah, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, said,

“The one who takes an oath in the name of other than Allah commits disbelief or *shirk*.” [1]

Riyaa (Showing-Off)

The Messenger of Allah said:

“The thing that I fear most for you is lesser *shirk*.”

They said: “O Messenger of Allah, what is lesser *shirk*?” He said:

“*Riyaa* (showing off), for Allah will say on the Day when people are recompensed for their actions: ‘Go to those for whom you were showing off with your deeds in the world, and see what reward you find with them.’” (*Ahmad*)

Riyaa is to perform worship in order to be seen and praised by people. *Riyaa* renders a deed void; the person earns sin instead of reward from Allah, and it exposes him to punishment.

Human beings, by nature like to be praised, are not fond of criticism, and do not like to be seen deficient in any way. Islam views doing religious acts to impress others instead of

pleasing Allah - what should have been done for Allah is done for people - as *shirk*. The Messenger of Allah said:

“Allah (glorified and exalted be He) said: ‘I am so self-sufficient that I am in no need of having an associate. Thus he who does an action for someone else’s sake as well as Mine will have that action renounced by Me to him whom he associated with Me.’” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

There is a good chance of a believer falling into *riyaa* because it is hidden, it sits in the heart, pollutes the intention, and a person has to be extremely vigilant to correct it. Ibn Abbas, one of the Prophet’s companions, said,

“*Shirk* in the Muslim nation is more hidden than a black ant crawling on a black stone in the middle of a moonless night.” [2]

Intention is a simple matter, but sometimes changing it can be difficult. A person has to listen to their heart and see what motivates a certain action. A Muslim has to carefully watch his intention to keep it pure whenever he performs a good deed like *salah* (ritual prayer), giving charity, fasting, serving his parents, or even smiling. Perhaps this is why the saying of Allah’s Name has been prescribed before all acts of importance in daily life – eating, drinking, sleeping, going to the toilet, waking up, and going to sleep. Remembering Allah keeps the heart aware of Allah and the intention pure.

Let us understand with simple examples how *riyaa* may affect worship:

(a) Let us say the basic motive when you stand up to pray is for people to see you, or notice you are praying, wishing to be praised. This invalidates the act of worship.

(b) Let us say you started off to pray with sincerity, your intention was to pray for Allah, but then you started thinking about pleasing people, and slowly your intention changed. You do one of the two things. If you resist the temptation of getting noticed, it will not have any effect on you because the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, said: “*Allah has forgiven my ummah for what crosses their minds, so long as they do not act upon it or speak of it.*” But if you do nothing and do not resist the temptation of doing the act of worship so you may be seen or noticed; instead you slowly start to beautify your *salah* (ritual prayer) to be noticed, and so the entire act of worship may become invalid.

(c) Unintended praise is not harmful. The Prophet was asked about that and said: “*That is the first glad tidings of the believer.*” It is not showing off if a person feels happy because he has done an act of worship; actually, it is a sign of his faith. The Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, said:

“Whoever feels happy because of his good deeds and sad because of his bad deeds, that is the believer.”

The Prophet has provided us with words of protection against this inconspicuous *shirk* that can be said anytime of the day. One day the Prophet delivered a sermon saying,

‘O People, fear ‘*shirk*’, for it is more hidden than the creeping of an ant.’ (At-Tabarani)

Those whom Allah wished asked, 'And how do we avoid it when it is more hidden than the creeping of an ant, O Messenger of Allah?' He replied, "Say,

'Allah-humma inna na-oodtho-bika an nush-rika bika shay-ann naa-lamu, wa nas-tagh-fi-ruka limaa laa naa-lam.'

'O Allah, we seek refuge with You from knowingly committing *shirk* with You, and we seek Your forgiveness for what we do unknowingly.'" [3]

Differences Between Greater *Shirk* & Lesser *Shirk*

(1) Both are defined differently.

(2) The greater *shirk* expels a person from the fold of Islam, whereas the lesser *shirk* does not take one out of Islam, but reduces one's belief in Allah.

(3) A person who dies committing greater *shirk* will be in Hellfire for eternity; this is not the case with one committing lesser *shirk*.

(4) Greater *shirk* wipes out and annuls all good deeds, whereas lesser *shirk* only ruins the deeds it motivates or is a part of.

(5) Greater *shirk* is not forgiven by Allah except through sincere repentance done before death; whereas it is up to Allah to punish or forgive lesser *shirk*.

Endnotes:

[1] Ahmad, Abu Daud, Al-Tirmidhi, Nasai, and Hakim.

[2] Ibn Abi Hatim

[3] Ahmad

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