

The Line of Demarcation between Monotheism and Polytheism

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What constitutes the line of demarcation between monotheism and polytheism (including both theoretical and practical forms of them)? Which idea is monotheistic and which is polytheistic? What kind of action constitutes practical monotheism and what kind of it constitutes practical polytheism? Is it polytheistic to believe in the existence of anything other than Allah? Does the unity of His essence require us not to believe that there exists anything in any form besides

Him not even as His creation? (a sort of ontological monism)

It is obvious that the created things are the work of Allah. They cannot be considered to be His rivals. Allah's creations are the manifestation of His exuberant power. A belief in the existence of a created thing as a thing created by Allah is, not contrary to monotheism. It is rather complementary to it. Hence the line of demarcation between monotheism and polytheism

cannot be the existence or the non-existence of anything other than Allah.

Does a belief in the causation of the created things amount to polytheism or the plurality of creatorship? Does a belief in the unity of the Divine work necessarily imply that we should reject the system of causation and ascribe every effect direct to Allah? For example, should we

believe that fire has no role in burning, water has no role in quenching thirst, rain has no role in making plants grow and medicines have no role in curing, and that it is Allah direct who burns, quenches thirst, makes the plants grow and cures the diseased. Is it true that the presence or absence of other factors makes no difference? At the most it can be said that

Allah usually performs His acts in the presence of certain factors.

If a person has the habit of putting a cap on his head when he wants to write a letter, it cannot be said that the presence or absence of a cap has any effect on his letter writing. The only thing is that he does not like to write a letter without a cap. According to this view, the same is

the nature of the presence and the absence of the things called causes and factors.

Should we believe otherwise, we will be ascribing partners to Allah in His work. That is the view of the Asha'irah and the Predestinarians. This view again is not correct. Just as a belief in the existence of a created thing is not tantamount to the belief in the plurality of the Divine essence, but is complementary to the belief in the oneness of Allah, similarly a belief in the causation system is not tantamount to the belief in the plurality of creatorship. As the created things are not self-existing, similarly they are not independent with regard to their effectiveness.

As all existing things depend on Allah for their existence and effectiveness, there is no question of the plurality of creatorship. The belief in the causation system is actually complementary to the belief in the creatorship of Allah. It certainly would have amounted to polytheism if we believed that the created things were independent from the viewpoint of their effectiveness, or believed that the relation between Allah and the world was that of a manufacturer and the things manufactured. A vehicle initially needs a manufacturer to manufacture it, but when it is completed, i

t operates according to its own mechanism. Even if the maker dies, the vehicle will continue to work. Should we think that the relation of the natural factors, such as water, rain, energy, heat, earth, plants and man to Allah is of a similar nature, as sometimes the Mu'tazilah tend to think, the idea would certainly lead to polytheism.

The created things depend on their Creator for their effectiveness as much as they depend on Him for their origin, existence and survival. The world is His creation and a blessing from Him. It depends on Him totally. Hence the effectiveness of the created things is actually the effectiveness of Allah and their creativeness is His creativeness and an extension of His work. Even it may be said that to describe the belief that the created things have a role in the affairs of the world as a polytheistic idea, is in itself a polytheistic idea, for it implies an unconscious belief in the independence of the existing things, as is betrayed by the presumption that a belief in their effectiveness will amount to the belief in two centres. Anyhow, a belief or an unbelief in the causation of the things besides Allah is not the line of demarcation between monotheism and polytheism.

Is a belief in the supernatural power of an existing thing whether an angel or a man such as an Imam or a Prophet polytheistic, while a belief in the power and effectiveness of a Prophet or an Imam etc. within the normal limits is not so? Similarly is it also a polytheistic idea to have a belief in the power and effectiveness of a man who has died, for a dead man is apparently nothing more than inorganic matter?

Obviously from the viewpoint of natural laws inorganic matter has neither consciousness, nor power nor will. As such to believe that a dead man has perception or to greet a dead man, to show respect to him, and to call and implore him for anything, all should be polytheistic acts, for they mean ascribing supernatural power to a being other Allah.

Similarly it also should be polytheistic to believe that the earth of a particular place is effective in curing diseases or that prayer is granted at a particular place, for such a belief is tantamount to believing in the existence of a supernatural power in a lifeless thing. As all that is natural, is identifiable, experimentable and perceptible, to believe in the effectiveness of the things cannot

be polytheistic as supposed by the Asha'irah, but it is certainly polytheistic to believe in the supernatural power of the created things.

Existence has two sectors: physical and metaphysical. The metaphysical sector is the exclusive domain of Allah, while the physical sector is the exclusive domain of the created things or is a domain common to Allah and the created things both. A number of functions having a metaphysical aspect, such as giving life, causing death, providing means of living etc., along with some normal and ordinary functions, fall within the exclusive domain of Allah. That is the position as far as theoretical monotheism is concerned.

As for practical monotheism, any spiritual, that is non-physical, heed paid to a being other than Allah with a view to establish a spiritual relation with him, to draw his attention or to seek response from him, constitutes polytheism, and amounts to worshipping him. As the worship of a being other than Allah is neither allowed by reason nor by Islamic law, it puts such a worshipper outside the pale of Islam.

Further, the nature of any rite, involving such a heed is not different from that of the rites performed by the idolaters in respect of their idols. The performance of such rites means to ascribe metaphysical power to the personage involved in them (for example an Imam or the Holy Prophet). The above is the view that is held by the Wahhabis and the semi-Wahhabis of our age.

In our times this view has gained considerable currency and in certain circles it is considered to be a sign of clear thinking.

But from the monotheistic point of view, it is as polytheistic as the theory of the Asha'irah. In fact it is the worst theory from the viewpoint of the unity of creatorship and the unity of Divine work.

While refuting the theory of the Asha'irah, we said earlier that they denied the causation system on the plea that a belief in the effectiveness and causation of the created things would amount to a belief in the existence of several sources and origins besides Allah. We pointed out that the things could originate sources only if they were self-existing and were independent of Allah.

Asha'irah appear to have unconsciously believed in some sort of the independence of the created things. This belief is evidently polytheistic as it amounts to the denial of the unity of the Divine essence. Anyhow, they did not realize the consequences of their theory. They wanted to affirm the unity of creatorship, but unwittingly ended in supporting the plurality of the essence. The same criticism is applicable to our own semi-Wahhabis. They also unwittingly accord a kind of self-independence to the created things, for they think that to believe in any

supernatural factors is tantamount to believing in a power rival to Allah. These people overlook the fact that the supernatural deeds of a being whose entire existence depends on Allah and who has no independent status of his own, are in fact attributable to Allah before being attributed to him.

He is nothing more than a medium through which Divine favour is conveyed. Is it polytheistic to believe that the angel Jibril is the medium of revelation and knowledge, Mikail is the medium of the means of living, Israfil is the medium of Resurrection and 'Izrail is the medium of carrying away the souls?

From monotheistic point of view, this theory leads to the worst kind of polytheism, for a belief in it amounts to a sort of the division of work between the Creator and the created. According to this theory the supernatural deeds fall within the exclusive domain of Allah and the natural deeds fall either within the exclusive domain of the created or are common to the domains of the Creator and the created. To believe in an exclusive domain of the created means a belief in the polytheistic idea of the plurality of work. Similarly to believe in a common domain is another kind of polytheism.

Contrary to the current conception, Wahhabism is not only a doctrine opposed to Imamate, but it is also opposed to monotheism and humanity. It is anti-monotheistic because it believes in the division of work. As explained above Wahhabism is a sort of disguised polytheism. It is anti-human in the sense that it does not give any credit to human talent and ability which have made man superior even to the angels.

As expressly mentioned in the Holy Qur'an, man is the vicegerent of Allah and the angels were ordered to prostrate themselves before him. Nevertheless, Wahhabism still want to degrade man to the level of a wild animal.

Further, to make such a distinction between the living and the dead as to say that the dead are not alive even in another world and that the entire personality of man consists in his body, which turns into inorganic matter after his death, is a materialistic and ungodly idea. We will deal with this question later when we discuss about the Day of Judgement.

To make a distinction between the unknown mysterious effects and the known effects of the things and to regard the first as metaphysical in opposition to the second, is another kind of polytheism.

Now we can comprehend what the Holy Prophet meant when he said that infiltration of polytheism into belief is so quiet and imperceptible as the crawl of an ant on a smooth stone in the darkness of night.

The fact is that the dividing line between monotheism and polytheism is the relationship

between Allah on the one hand and man and the world on the other. This relationship is that of "from Him" and "to Him". In the theoretical monotheism the line of demarcation is "from Him".

"We all are from Allah".

So long as we recognize every truth and every existing thing to be having the quality of being from Him in its essence, its attributes and its work, we identify it correctly from the monotheistic point of view. It is immaterial whether it has one single effect or several effects or no effect at all, and whether it has or has not any supernatural effects. Allah is not the Lord of the metaphysical world alone. He is the Lord of the whole world. He is as close to the physical world as to the metaphysical. He is with everything and sustains everything. If a thing has any metaphysical aspect, that does mean that it has an aspect of Godship. As we said earlier, in accordance with Islamic conception of it, the world has the nature of being "from Him". The Holy Qur'an in a number of verses ascribes to the Prophets such miraculous acts as bringing the dead to life and restoring the sight of the born blind. Anyhow, it always adds the phrase: "With His will". This phrase indicates the nature of these acts and shows that they were from Him. Nobody should have the notion that the Prophets were self-dependent. A belief in any existence that is not "from Him" is polytheistic. Similarly a belief in the effectiveness of an existing thing, if that effectiveness is not "from Him" is again an act of polytheism. It is immaterial whether its effect is supernatural like creating the earth and the heavens or is so trivial as overturning a leaf.

In the case of practical monotheism the line of demarcation between monotheism and polytheism is 'to Him'. 'We shall return to Him', as the Holy Quran says. A heed, whether spiritual or otherwise, made to an existing thing with a view to proceed towards Allah and not as a goal in itself, is a heed to Allah. The existing things are to be regarded only as signs and milestones on the way towards Him, Who alone is the goal and destination.

The Prophets and the Imams have been described as 'the main routes and the straight path, the sign-posts for the people, the light houses in the land, the guides to the way of Allah, the preachers of His message and the proclaimers of what He likes'. (Ziyarat Jamiah)

Hence the question is not that to seek the intercession of the Imams, to invoke them or to expect them to perform supernatural deeds is polytheistic. The real question is something else. First we should be certain whether or not the Prophets and the Imams have actually gained such a proximity to Allah that they have been blessed with supernatural powers and qualities.

The Holy Qur'an indicates that Allah has favoured some people with such a position. Another question is whether the people who seek the intercession of the Imams and the saints, visit their tombs and make supplication to them, have or have not from monotheistic point of

view a correct understanding of what they do. Do they have the idea of 'to Him', in their mind, when they go to the shrines? Or are they oblivious of Him and think that the Imam or the saint whose shrine they visit is himself the goal. There is no doubt that most of the people instinctively have Allah in their mind.

Some people, may be totally devoid of the monotheistic view. They should be reminded of it.

Anyhow, there is no reason why visiting the shrines should be declared polytheistic. The third point is that it is a form of polytheism to glorify and praise any being other than Allah in a manner that is worthy of the absolutely perfect and self-existing being. Allah alone is far above every defect and deficiency. It is He alone to Him all praise is due. He alone is All-powerful. To ascribe such attributes by means of words or action to anyone other than Allah is .polytheistic. We have already discussed earlier what actions constitute worship and adoration