

Chapter 7: Refuting Wahhabi Contentions

The Question of Invoking the Prophet and the Imams

Question

Rational reasoning, the Qur'an, and the Sunnah all condemn invoking the Prophet and the Imams, which is practiced by the Shi'ah, as a heretical practice that amounts to polytheism. The reasons why this practice is heretical follow.

First, based on rational reasoning, God alone is the Creator and thus all causality springs from Him; the Qur'an avers,

قُلِ اللَّهُ خَالِقُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ...¹

"...God is the Creator of all things..."¹

In this light, the only real cause in the world is God. What we assume to be a cause is merely a thing that God has willed to occur prior to something else: there is no causal relationship among phenomena. When, for instance, timber burns, it is not due to a causal relation between it and fire; rather, it is the way God has willed to manage the affairs of this world. In the same vein, the Prophet and the Imams are merely creatures with no particular function, and so to invoke them would constitute polytheism.

Second, God says in His Book:

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمْ ادْعُونِي أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِي سَيَدْخُلُونَ جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ

“Your Lord has said, ‘Call Me, and I will reply to you.’ Indeed those who are disdainful of My worship will enter Hell in utter humility.”²

According to this verse, “calling” [du‘a] is an act of worship. As such, to call on a creature of God is tantamount to worshipping it and is, consequently, an instance of polytheism.

Third, we know that the Prophet fought the beliefs of idol-worshippers and Christians though they all accepted God as the Creator of the world. The Prophet opposed them as they sought help from angels and invoked the souls of prophets to fulfill their requests. In this respect, the Prophet confronted Christians as he confronted idol-worshippers; both groups held polytheistic beliefs.

Fourth, according to the following two verses, only God has knowledge of the Unseen:

لَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ الْغَيْبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ ...

“...No one in the heavens or the earth knows the Unseen except God...”³

وَعِنْدَهُ مَفَاتِحُ الْغَيْبِ

“With Him are the keys of the Unseen...”⁴

As such, no creature, not even the Prophet and the Imams, is aware of the Unseen. Obviously, for those who have died to this world and reside in the Intermediate World [barzakh], this world is “unseen,” and so they are unaware of what transpires here. Thus, invoking the Prophet and the Imams, as they are dead, is, in addition to being a form of polytheism, useless. This argument is further strengthened by considering this verse:

يَوْمَ يَجْمَعُ اللَّهُ الرُّسُلَ فَيَقُولُ مَاذَا أُجِبْتُمْ ۗ قَالُوا لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا ۗ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ عَلَّامُ
الْغُيُوبِ

“The day God will gather the prophets and say, ‘What was the response to you?’ They will say, ‘We have no knowledge. Indeed You are Knower of all that is Unseen.’”⁵

In fine, invoking the Prophet and the Imams after they have passed away by showing humility and bowing to and kissing their tombs is definitely a polytheistic practice. So how do the Shi‘ahs vindicate their practice?

Answer

The questioner first argues that there are no causes in the world, whether dependent or independent. As such, he denies the principle of causality by reserving agency exclusively for God. In addition to being contradictory to intuitive reason, two problems confront this line of reasoning.

First, it deprives us of the grounds on which we prove God's existence as the Creator. We reason to God's existence from the phenomena of this world. If we deny causality among phenomena in this world, we will be unable to argue for the dependence of this world on Divine activity. It would be ridiculous to talk about God arranging this world when we cannot prove His existence.

Second, to deny the principle of causality, one must also deny that a conclusion could follow logically from its premises. This would undermine the foundations of knowledge, leading inevitably to skepticism in every field of science.

We, however, owing to the Divine guidance imbedded in human nature, consider the principle of causality a universal principle that permits of no exception. All phenomena, being preceded by nonexistence, acquire existence from a higher cause. This higher cause may in turn have a yet higher cause, but the chain must end at a necessary existent (according to rational arguments that prove the impossibility of infinite regress and circularity).

This Necessary Existent, we call God—Exalted is He. Thus, the world is composed of causes and effects, headed by the Unique Cause who is independent in His agency. The agency of intermediate causes derives from God and as such is in effect God's agency.

That a being is a medium for conveying existence to other creatures does not imply its independence. For a better understanding of this, consider the following example. When one writes, the action of writing can be attributed to the person writing, to his arm, which holds the pen, and to the pen. Ascribing the action of writing to all three agents is correct, but the one which is independent and on which the others depend is the person.

So although the action can be attributed to the arm and the pen, but they are only secondary agents, they are merely means. In the example of fire cited by the questioner, the truth is that God has created fire with the natural quality of burning, not that fire issues from one act of creation and burning from another. God created the quality of burning by the mediation of fire, not independent of it.⁶

Hence, to affirm agency for God's creatures is not a challenge to His agency, for His is independent, whereas theirs is dependent. In fact, the Qur'an in ascribing various actions to creatures reaffirms the principle of causality but at the same time makes clear that independence in agency is solely God's. There are many verses to this effect; two examples follow:

قَاتِلُوهُمْ يُعَذِّبَهُمُ اللَّهُ بِأَيْدِيكُمْ.

“Make war on them so that God may punish them by your hands...”⁷

... تَعْجَبُكَ أَمْوَالُهُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُهُمْ ۗ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُعَذِّبَهُمْ...

“...God only desires to punish them by means of [their wealth and children]...”⁸

The questioner’s next contention is that “calling” is an act of worship and so to call upon the Prophet and the Imams for help is polytheism. But it should be pointed out, in light of the above explanation, that “calling” God’s creatures is conceivable in one of two ways.

One way is invoking a creature with the intention that it is independent in agency, and the other is invoking it as a medium. Accordingly, the verse in question

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمْ ادْعُونِي أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِي سَيَدْخُلُونَ جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ

(“Your Lord has said, ‘Call Me, and I will reply to you.’ Indeed those who are disdainful of My worship will enter Hell in utter humility.”⁹)

prohibits “calling” His creatures with the intention that they are independent in agency. Thus, monotheism condones invoking God’s creatures if it is borne in mind that they owe their existence and agency to Him.

Obviously, if the verse in question were to be understood in a strictly literal sense as prohibiting any form of seeking help from God’s creatures, we would have serious problems before us. We routinely go to the baker and ask for bread; we go to the butcher for buying meat; a strictly literal reading of the above verse would render these chores polytheistic. But we know for a fact that such cases of asking others do not constitute polytheism.

Some Wahhabi advocates have attempted to counter by pointing out that there is a difference here. In the cases cited, the people called upon are alive, whereas the Prophet and the Imams are dead. But this reply, if correct, only serves to demonstrate that calling on the Prophet and the Imams is useless, not that it is polytheistic.

Furthermore, there are verses that explicitly talk of “means”:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَابْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ وَجَاهِدُوا فِي سَبِيلِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

“O you who have faith! Be wary of God, and seek the means of recourse to Him, and struggle in His way so that you may be felicitous.”¹⁰

In this verse, God encourages believers to have recourse to the “means” that lead to Him as a way to attain felicity. In the same vein, there is a *hadith* narrated from the Prophet in which he says that faith and prayer are his means.¹¹ This *hadith* introduces these two elements (faith as a mental state in the believer and prayer as an action that the believer performs) as means for achieving nearness to God. If we were to accept a very strict reading of the verse in question (40:60), the employment of these means would be polytheism, and polytheism, obviously, does not lead to God.

The questioner’s third point is that idolatrous religions agree with Islam in that there is One, Unique God, whom is worthy of worship, and that their error is in seeking help from other beings. This account of idolatrous religion is incorrect. According to their religious texts, idolatrous religions (which have hundreds of millions of adherents in such countries as China, India, and Japan), in spite of acknowledging that there is only One Necessary Existent, consider the Necessary Existent beyond the grasp of human knowledge: we are unable to communicate with the Necessary Existent directly. Thus, we need to worship mediums (such as angels, jinns, or spiritually perfect human beings) who are able to fill this gap and to help us draw nearer to the Ultimate Existent.

Angels are the deities whom idol-worshippers most commonly associate with. Idolatrous religions portray angels as pure beings who are close to God and whom He has entrusted with the governance of the world. As such, they believe that angels have absolute authority in their domain—there is a god or goddess for the seas, the deserts, war, peace, beauty, earth, sky, etc.—and that God has relinquished all matters to them.

The following verses bring to light the error in the polytheistic conception:

لَوْ كَانَ فِيهِمَا آلِهَةٌ إِلَّا اللَّهُ لَفَسَدَتَا ۗ

“Had there been gods in [the heavens and the earth] other than God, they [i.e., the heavens and the earth] would have surely fallen apart...”¹²

وَمَا كَانَ مَعَهُ مِنْ إِلَهٍ ۗ إِذَا لَذَهَبَ كُلُّ إِلَهٍ بِمَا خَلَقَ وَلَعَلَّ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ ۗ

“...neither is there any god besides Him, for then each god would take away what he created, and some of them would surely rise up against others...”¹³

The line of reasoning in the above verses is that if there were a multiplicity of gods, they would have disagreed in matters of governance, and this disagreement would have led to chaos and destruction. Obviously, the underlying premise in this line of reasoning is that chaos would ensue if the gods had independent authority. Thus, the verses do not apply if there is one, supreme, and independent God but a multiplicity of subordinate agents who are dependent and obedient to God, functioning merely as His intermediate agents and executing solely what He desires.

The above explanation should suffice to show that idol-worshippers—whether those who worship stars or those who worship “the gods” of various creatures and phenomena—do not in any way worship God. Their rites of worship and sacrifice pertain to their pantheon of gods.

The only connection their worship has with God is that it is performed in the hope that their gods would influence God and that only in regard to mundane affairs, for they do not believe in the doctrine of Resurrection. (It is in this context that the verse,

مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عِنْدَهُ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ ۚ

“...Who is it that may intercede with Him except with His permission...”¹⁴

should be understood. This verse speaks to intercession in its broad sense, which includes worldly matters, not the prevalent sense of intercession on the Day of Judgment, in which the infidels of Arabia did not believe.)

There were, however, instances during the Age of Ignorance prior to Islam where idol-worshippers did worship God. But they did so out of ignorance of the logical implications of their belief system. One such instance was the *hajj*, the ritual pilgrimage established by Abraham. This practice endured even after ‘Amru ibn Yahya succeeded in establishing idolatry as the predominant religion in the Arabian Peninsula. But some aspects of it were distorted. Idols, for instance, were set in holy locations—Hibil was placed atop Ka‘bah, Asaf on Mount Safa, and Na‘ilah on Mount Marwah—where they were worshipped and honored with sacrifices.

(It should be noted that idol-worshipping is actually a vulgarization of polytheistic doctrine. By doctrine, idols are supposed to be symbols for the deities. Common idol-worshippers, however, worship the idols themselves, as opposed to the deities they are supposed to represent. It is in condemnation of this vulgarized polytheism that the Qur’an says,

قَالَ أَتَعْبُدُونَ مَا تَنْحِتُونَ

“...Do you worship what you have yourselves carved?”¹⁵⁾

Hence, contrary to what the questioner claims, idol-worshippers neither consider God as in charge of the affairs of the world nor worship Him. Polytheists attribute an authority to the lesser gods that is, first, independent and, second, restricted to this world. They envisage the lesser gods as architects to whom God has given absolute authority to construct their world as they will. As such, they perceive God as the prime creator, who created the world but then resigned, relinquishing all authority to the lesser gods.

The questioner’s next point is that Christians and Jews are polytheists. This, however, is incorrect. Christians and Jews are unbelievers on account of rejecting Prophet Muhammad’s ministry, not for polytheism. The following verse ascertains this:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَكْفُرُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَيُرِيدُونَ أَنْ يُفَرِّقُوا بَيْنَ اللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَيَقُولُونَ نُؤْمِنُ
بِبَعْضٍ وَنَكْفُرُ بِبَعْضٍ وَيُرِيدُونَ أَنْ يَتَّخِذُوا بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ سَبِيلًا

أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ حَقًّا ۗ

“Those who disbelieve in God and His prophets and seek to separate God from His prophets, and say, ‘We believe in some and disbelieve in some’ and seek to take a way in between—it is they who are truly faithless.”¹⁶⁾

In addition to denying Muhammad’s ministry, they were also guilty for their absolute obedience to their priests and for believing in a son for God:

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ عُزَيْرٌ ابْنُ اللَّهِ وَقَالَتِ النَّصَارَى الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ اللَّهِ ۗ ذَلِكَ قَوْلُهُمْ
بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ ۗ يُضَاهِيُونَ قَوْلَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ ۗ قَاتَلَهُمُ اللَّهُ ۗ أَنَّى يُؤْفَكُونَ

اتَّخَذُوا أَحْبَابَهُمْ وَرُهْبَانَهُمْ أَرْبَابًا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَالْمَسِيحَ ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ وَمَا

أَمْرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا ۚ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ سُبْحَانَهُ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ

“The Jews say, ‘Ezra is the son of God,’ and the Christians say, ‘Christ is the son of God.’ That is an opinion that they mouth, imitating the opinions of the faithless of former times. May God assail them, where do they stray? They have taken their scribes and their monks as lords besides God, and also Christ, Mary’s son; though they were commanded to worship only the One God, there is no god except Him...”¹⁷

(As regards Zoroastrians, the Qur’an does not give a detailed account of their religion. Historical sources, however, show that Zoroastrianism was polytheistic. Like idol-worshippers, they worshipped angels, but unlike idol-worshippers they did not carve idols to represent them.)

The above explanation makes clear that invoking the Prophet and the Imams as intermediate and dependent agents is not polytheism. Polytheism is to worship in addition to God other beings as independent agents. As such, to revere an intermediate agent while acknowledging its absolute dependence on the One God does not constitute polytheism. We know that the intermediate agent is in and of itself impotent. When, for example, a wealthy person helps a poor person through an intermediate agent, it is the wealthy person who truly deserves the credit, not the agent.

The questioner’s fourth argument is that knowledge of the Unseen is confined solely to God. To consider others possessed of this knowledge is blasphemy. As such, the belief that the Prophet and the Imams are aware of and can interfere in what happens in this world is invalid: they are dead and for the dead, this world is “unseen.” An examination of the Qur’an, however, would disprove this line of argument:

عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ فَلَا يُظْهِرُ عَلَىٰ غَيْبِهِ أَحَدًا

إِلَّا مَن ارْتَضَىٰ مِن رَّسُولٍ فَإِنَّهُ

“[God is the] Knower of the Unseen; He does not disclose His Unseen to anyone, except to an apostle He approves of...”¹⁸

According to this verse, there are beings to whom God divulges His secrets. Thus, there is no error in believing that God bestowed knowledge of the Unseen to the Prophet and the Imams. An observation that corroborates this view is that the Qur’anic verses that appear to deny the Prophet’s knowledge of the Unseen make an exception in the case of Revelation:

قُلْ مَا كُنْتُ بِدَعَا مِنْ الرُّسُلِ وَمَا أَدْرِي مَا يُفَعَلُ بِي وَلَا بِكُمْ ۚ إِنِ اتَّبَعُ إِلَّا مَا
يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ

“Say, ‘I am not an exception among the prophets, nor do I know what will be done with me or with you. I just follow whatever is revealed to me...’”¹⁹

In *Surah Ibrahim*, the Qur’an narrates the answer that some prophets gave when their people denied that they held any special status:

قَالَتْ لَهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ إِن نَحْنُ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَمُنُّ عَلَىٰ مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ
عِبَادِهِ ۚ

“The prophets said to them, ‘Indeed we are just human beings like yourselves; but God favors whomever of His servants that He wishes...’”²⁰

But the verse that very explicitly affirms knowledge of the Unseen for God’s prophets is the following, which quotes the words of Jesus addressing his people:

وَأُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا تَأْكُلُونَ وَمَا تَدَّخِرُونَ فِي بُيُوتِكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ
مُؤْمِنِينَ

“...I will tell you what you have eaten and what you have stored in your houses. There is indeed a sign in that for you...”²¹

There is another verse in which Jesus announces the coming of Prophet Muhammad:

إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِنْ
بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ أَحْمَدُ ۚ

“I am the prophet of God to you...to give the good news of a prophet who will come after me, whose name is Ahmad...”²²

In addition, in the religious corpus, there are numerous *hadiths* that foretell future events, which are

referred to as “forebodings.”

Based on the above explanation, we can conclude that where the Qur’an denies that prophets possess knowledge of the Unseen and extraordinary powers, it means that independently they are incapable of knowing the Unseen or performing miracles. They do, however, possess these capabilities by God’s will. God reveals the Unseen to His prophets and they convey it to their successors. There are many *hadiths* that substantiate this account.

There is, however, one verse that on the surface seems to pose a problem:

يَوْمَ يَجْمَعُ اللَّهُ الرُّسُلَ فَيَقُولُ مَاذَا أُجِبْتُمْ ۗ قَالُوا لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا ۗ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ عَلَّامُ
الْغُيُوبِ

“The day God will gather the prophets and say, ‘What was the response to you?’ They will say, ‘We have no knowledge. Indeed You are Knower of all that is Unseen.’”²³

The verse seems to affirm that the prophets do not possess knowledge of the Unseen. A more careful consideration, however, refutes this conception.

If the prophets really lack knowledge of the Unseen, they would be unaware of their people’s deeds. To be truly aware of a deed requires knowledge of the intentions that led to the deed in question. Accordingly, to lack such a knowledge is equivalent to lacking knowledge of the deeds. But this cannot be, for the Qur’an asserts that the prophets do possess knowledge of their people’s deeds; God’s prophets witness their people’s conduct:

كُنْتُ عَلَيْهِمْ شَهِيدًا مَا دُمْتُ فِيهِمْ ۗ

“I [Jesus] was a witness to them so long as I was among them.”²⁴

وَيَتَّخِذُ مِنْكُمْ شُهَدَاءَ

“... That He may take witnesses from among you...”²⁵

وَجِيءَ بِالنَّبِيِّينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَقُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ

“...And the prophets and the witnesses will be brought...”²⁶

وَيَقُولُ الْأَشْهَادُ هَؤُلَاءِ الَّذِينَ كَذَبُوا عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ

“...And the witnesses will say, “It is these who lied against their Lord...”²⁷

This reflection clarifies that verse 5: 109, which may be misinterpreted as meaning that prophets lack knowledge of the Unseen, actually means that of their own, they lack this knowledge, but by God’s will, they possess it. In other words, all creatures, including all holy individuals, are indebted for what they have to God: all things are bestowed by Him.

The questioner’s other claim is that showing respect to the tomb of the Prophet and the Imams is polytheism. But this, again, is incorrect. Tombs of holy personages are symbols [*sha’a’ir*] that remind us of God. Thus, to honor them is in essence to honor what they symbolize, namely God. Referring to the Prophet, the Qur’an says:

...فَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِهِ وَعَزَّرُوهُ وَنَصَرُوهُ وَاتَّبَعُوا النُّورَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ مَعَهُ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ
الْمُفْلِحُونَ

“...those who believe in him, honor him, and help him, and follow the light that has been sent down with him, they are the felicitous.”²⁸

And more generally concerning all Divine symbols, it states:

...مَنْ يُعَظِّمَ شَعَائِرَ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّهَا مِنْ تَقْوَى الْقُلُوبِ

“...whoever venerates the symbols of God—indeed that arises from the God wariness of hearts.”²⁹

Another way to vindicate the Shi’ah practice of honoring tombs of holy personages is by recourse to the following argument. Undoubtedly, loving God is a product of faith. When one loves God, one loves all those things that are in some way associated with Him. It is for this reason that all Muslims honor the Qur’an and the Ka’bah. All Muslims concur that it is an act of faith to touch and kiss the Black Stone. Can any Muslim contend that this is a polytheistic practice? Obviously, not. It is in this spirit that the Shi’ahs revere the Prophet and the Imams and show respect to their tombs.

In fine, let me conclude by saying that it is surprising that the Wahhabis, who claim to uphold pure monotheism and condemn the Shi'ahs for showing respect to God's holy slaves, espouse the doctrine of the Eight Eternal Beings. Wahhabi theologians consider the Positive Divine Attributes—life, power, knowledge, audition, vision, will, and speech—to be eternal and external to the Divine Essence. They hold that these attributes have not been brought into existence by God and do not make up God's Essence. How can they so shamefully condemn the Shi'ahs, who merely honor those whom God loves, while in effect recognizing eight deities?

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1. Surah al-Ra'd 13: 16.
 2. Surah al-Ghafir (or Mu'min) 40:60.
 3. Surah al-Naml 27:65.
 4. Surah al-An'am 6:59.
 5. Surah al-Ma'idah 5:109.
 6. Thus, fire is the causal medium through which divine agency causes things to burn. [trans.]
 7. Surah al-Tawbah (or Bara'ah) 9: 14.
 8. Surah al-Tawbah (or Bara'ah) 9:55.
 9. Surah al-Ghafir (or Mu'min) 40:60.
 10. Surah al-Ma'idah 5:35.
 11. What is the source?
 12. Surah al-Anbiya' 21:22.
 13. Surah al-Mu'minun 23:91.
 14. Surah al-Baqarah 2:255.
 15. Surah al-Saffat 37:95.
 16. Surah al-Nisa' 4:150-1.
 17. Surah al-Tawbah (or Bara'ah) 9:30-31.
 18. Surah al-Jinn 72:26-7.
 19. Surah al-Ahqaf 46:9; what this means is that the Prophet does possess knowledge of the Unseen, but he does so because God has revealed it to him. No creature is capable of knowing the Unseen (or of anything else for that matter) independently of God. [trans.]
 20. Surah Ibrahim 14: 11.
 21. Surah Al 'Imran 3:49.
 22. Surah al-Saff 61:6.
 23. Surah al-Ma'idah 5: 109.
 24. Surah al-Ma'idah 5: 117.
 25. Surah Al 'Imran 3: 140.
 26. Surah al-Zumar 39:69.
 27. Surah Hud 11:18.
 28. Surah al-A'raf 7: 157.
 29. Surah al-Hajj 22:32.

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