



Why Is *Shirk* the Greatest Sin of All?

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Author Biography

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Why beliefs matter

Humanity's enduring fascination with the same set of existential questions—life after death, the human soul, morality, ethics and the nature of God—has compelled some anthropologists to describe us as *Homo Religiosus*, distinct as a species based not on 'sapience' (wisdom, intelligence) but on shared religious activity. Even in modern times with the decline of traditional religion, human beings cannot escape these so-called religious questions.

Vehement New Atheists spend most of their time pontificating on morality, free will, the purpose of life, and the origins of the universe. New Age spiritualists attempt to invent their own practices of mysticism by haphazardly mixing various ancient traditions. Social media players enforce their fundamentalist notions of right and wrong through hashtags and cancel culture. These are just some of the modern manifestations of the religious impulse that exist within the human psyche. The modern world has not departed from religion, but has simply replaced traditional ones with others.

Such religious fixations are the primary concerns of humanity, as they should be. How an individual, community, or civilization chooses to answer these questions determines their very spirit and essence. The answers inform the very purpose of our existence, who we are accountable to, and what we are accountable for. Imagine the consequences of starting with false beliefs on these fundamental issues? Such falsehood at the root will only multiply into branches that ultimately lead to ruin and destruction.

Many assume that beliefs are amoral—that a theoretically wrong belief demonstrates a lack of intellectual competence but should not challenge one's moral integrity. The problem with this assumption is that it equates morally neutral questions with questions of ultimate moral significance. Of course, poor academic performance in school should have no bearing on one's morality. However, when the issues regard religious questions that ultimately determine what is good and evil, then of course there are moral implications to how one responds. Furthermore, coming to true beliefs about these issues is not based purely on academic aptitude

given that many of these questions lie outside the scope of science or deductive reasoning. Rather, coming to the Truth requires the authentic reflection of a pure ‘*aql* (intellect) that draws on all technologies of the mind in a unified pursuit to achieve true understanding. These technologies include spiritual, emotional, moral, and rational intelligence. Moral vices dampen and cloud this process due to the inherent biases that accompany qualities like arrogance, narcissism, negligence. These destructive qualities swerve a person from the straight path, effectively making them incapable of truly authentic reflection, rendering their hearts blind to the Truth.

Consider the example of a troubled marital relationship. A person who is arrogant, self-absorbed, and narcissistic lacks the insight to see their wrongdoings or even recognize the pain they may be inflicting on their spouse. This person’s perception, understanding, and view of his relationship has been severely clouded by his own negative moral qualities.

In the religious domain, then, believing in Truth versus Falsehood does indeed speak to a person’s moral integrity. It should be noted at this juncture that Islamic eschatology does excuse people who do not reach the Truth due to simply lacking access to clear articulations of it. Beyond this discussion, theologians have also debated whether an individual can independently come to the Truth without guidance in the form of revelation from the Ultimate Source of Truth, Allah ﷻ. Such a debate is merely theoretical as the Qur’an is clear that regardless of whether one is capable of reaching the Truth or not, out of His Mercy, the responsibility to believe in the Truth only comes if a messenger is sent to convey that Truth.¹

The modern apathy toward truth in general—captured by the coinage of the term ‘post-truth era’ in the 1990s—has resulted in a widespread embrace of salvific pluralism and lack of moral concern regarding religious beliefs. The cliché in our times is “[just be a good person](#), it doesn’t matter what you believe.” Such a statement is paradoxical, considering the conception of a ‘good person’ is based on a person’s belief in what constitutes the Ultimate Good. Therefore, religious belief

¹ Qur’an 17:15.

is the most important part of being a good person.² One does not need to look too far back in history to reflect on the results of bad beliefs in the world. In the 20th century we saw the greatest catastrophes emanating from Nazi Germany's belief in Social Darwinism and the Soviet Union's militant atheistic communism. Their conception of the Ultimate Good was materially destructive. Even other beliefs that are not materially problematic can still be spiritually, psychologically, and morally destructive. The harm of these false beliefs may not be as obvious as they work more on the individual scale than on the political scale, and even then they eventually result in catastrophic material consequences as well.

Therefore, the most important first step in the journey of life for any human being is to authentically reflect and ensure they are following the Truth. When the Truth is found, the question of ultimate evil becomes clear.

In Islam, the Truth of the universe is *tawhīd* (Islamic monotheism), which reflects the absolute oneness of the Divine Reality who governs this world and is the very purpose of our lives. By contrast, the ultimate evil is *shirk* (idolatry), where divinity is shared across multiple entities and thus there is no clear purpose to our lives. These two concepts are the most fundamental in the Islamic worldview, and all its branches trace back to this foundation that has echoed throughout history,

And We certainly sent into every nation a messenger, [saying], “Worship Allah [alone] and avoid *Ṭāghūt* (idols, false deities).” And among them were those whom Allah guided, and among them were those upon whom error was [deservedly] decreed. So proceed through the earth and observe how was the end of the deniers.³

The greatest of all good is found in the establishment of *tawhīd* and the worst of all evil is found in the establishment of *shirk*.

² Ovamir Anjum, “Being a Good Person is not Enough: Why Ethics needs Islam,” *Yaqeen*, January 27, 2022, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/being-a-good-person-is-not-enough-why-ethics-need-islam>

³ Qur'an 16:36.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was asked, “Which is the greatest sin?” He replied, “That you set up with Allah ﷻ a rival and He is the One who created you.”⁴

Many Muslims question why *shirk* is so abhorrent in Islam, such that it damns a person to Hellfire and is seen as the ultimate evil. How is it that such a seemingly harmless belief or practice can be worse than horrendous crimes against humanity? Failure to come to terms with this reality may contribute to doubts surrounding salvation and the afterlife for Muslims young and old.

This paper investigates this question through a combined approach that integrates Western ethical paradigms with reflections from the Islamic tradition. We will demonstrate that *shirk* represents the greatest evil from deontological, virtue-ethical, and consequentialist frameworks within the paradigm of Islamic theology. This paper will also explore the psychological factors that produce the discordance between a Muslim’s *belief* that idolatry is the ultimate evil and their moral *feeling* that it is not.

Separating emotions from reality

Whilst the designation of *shirk* as the ultimate evil may be clearly justified from a scriptural standpoint, it is less so from an intuitive, emotional one. If *shirk* is the greatest evil, why do I feel more outraged by a serial killer’s crime of murder than his personal religious beliefs and practices? My friend or neighbor who has shown me nothing but kindness is worse than a criminal who happens to be a monotheist? Why does a harmless action in this world have such severe consequences in the next?

These are questions that plague the minds of many Muslims, especially those who live as minorities in the West. But we must make a distinction between moral outrage⁵ and moral magnitude. Moral outrage is a person’s emotional response to a

⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nos. 4477, 4761, 6001, 6811, 6861, 7520, and 7532; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, nos. 86a and 86b;

⁵ Erin M. O’Mara, Lydia E. Jackson, C. Daniel Batson, and Lowell Gaertner, “Will Moral Outrage Stand Up? Distinguishing among Emotional Reactions to a Moral Violation,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 41, no. 2 (2011): 173–79.

moral crime, which is relative to a range of contextual factors and not an objective evaluation of the magnitude of the crime. Hence, our feelings and emotions in reaction to certain immoralities are not necessarily indicative of their magnitude relative to others.

For instance, a serial killer who has killed five people will generally evoke a stronger emotional response than a politician commissioning drone strikes that kill thousands in unnecessary and foreseeable ‘collateral damage.’ Though both have caused death and destruction, one is responsible for the death of five and the other for 5,000. There is no question that the magnitude of the politician’s crime is much greater, at least from a consequentialist⁶ perspective. However, the intuitive emotional response to the serial killer’s crime is greater because it challenges society’s sense of security. It’s harder to identify with nameless drone strike victims in a foreign country than with serial killer victims who could be your neighbors. Hence, **feelings of personal vulnerability** often determine the intensity of the emotional response. Such feelings are essentially self-preserving rather than an unbiased assessment of how evil an action is. It does not make sense to evaluate the reality of morality based on what is more likely to harm us personally. Yet, our feelings of moral outrage are strongly tied to feelings of personal vulnerability.

Another factor is **personal trauma**. People may respond more strongly to crimes akin to those they have experienced themselves. Contrary to this, a person’s committing of certain crimes may seriously dampen their emotional response to similar crimes. For example, a person who has committed adultery may harbor greater sympathy for an adulterer than a person who has been the victim of cheating in the past. Here we have two vastly different reactions to the exact same crime. Feeling more outrage about adultery because of personal trauma doesn’t make the crime any worse and conversely feeling less outrage due to sympathy doesn’t make the crime any better.

Furthermore, recent psychometric studies into the emotion of ‘moral outrage’ have found it difficult to distinguish between **personal anger** and moral anger.⁷ This

⁶ Consequentialism will be discussed later in greater detail.

⁷ O’Mara et al., “Will Moral Outrage Stand Up?”

lends support to the notion that the emotions we experience in response to a crime are not reliable indicators of the objective magnitude of that crime.

Lastly, a person's worldview will majorly determine their reaction to moral crimes. Crimes that challenge **personal values** will elicit strong emotional responses. American patriots who have lost their children in military service will be more outraged at someone disrespecting the American flag than someone overseas who had lost their family and property due to unjust American invasions. In the case of disrespecting the flag, it is technically a 'victimless' crime, with no harm directly perpetrated against another individual, yet moral outrage is high. This also informs us that emotional reactions to immoralities are not only based on harm committed against others, but on how strongly a person believes in their values. Hence, a person who does not have a sense of moral outrage against *shirk* has betrayed their own lack of connection with the value of *tawhīd*. The stronger a person's love for Allah, the angrier they will feel when people associate partners with Him.

As Allah says,

And they said *Ar-Raḥmān* (The Most Merciful) has taken a son. You have come with an atrocious thing. The heavens almost rupture therefrom and the earth almost splits open and the mountains almost collapse in devastation. That they attribute a son to *Ar-Raḥmān*.⁸

Why does God care about *shirk*?

Given that Allah is Self-Sufficient and free of need, why does He emphasize the worship of Him alone and condemn the practice of *shirk*? Before responding to this question, it is important to establish a few theological principles about Allah that will help us eliminate certain answers that people may assume.

The first principle is that Allah is completely self-sufficient.⁹ Therefore, His commands and prohibitions are based on *our* needs, since Allah has no needs. The

⁸ Qur'an, 19:88-90

⁹ Qur'an 35:15 and 47:38.

second principle is that Allah cannot be harmed or benefited from the actions of His creation,¹⁰ so anything that He commands or prohibits is based on what is beneficial and harmful to *us*. This is why the Qur'an describes revelation as a cure,¹¹ guidance,¹² light,¹³ and mercy¹⁴ to humanity. The third principle is that Allah is *Al-Haqq* (The Truth or The Real),¹⁵ and therefore the magnitude of good and evil is based on what violates His nature. The greatest violation of the Nature of God is to multiply divine entities and thereby deny the ontological reality of God's oneness. This is the worst violation because God's oneness is ontologically connected to all of [His attributes](#). The fourth principle, connected to the third, is that Allah is *Al-Muqsit* (The Just)¹⁶ and leaving evil unpunished would compromise His justice. Hence *shirk* must be prohibited and punished if Allah is truly Just. Given that it is the worst of crimes, it should also have the severest of consequences. Universally equal treatment of all of humanity in the next life despite the vast disparity in virtue would be unjustifiable: "Should we treat those who submit (to God) just like we treat the criminals? What is wrong with you? How do you judge?"¹⁷

A person may ask why won't Allah simply forgive *shirk* like He does other sins? To understand this question we must look to the metaphor of the tree given for *shirk* in the Qur'an:

And the example of a bad word is like a bad tree, uprooted from the surface of the earth, not having any stability.¹⁸

Since *shirk* violates the entire Divine Reality, it is a tree with no roots or fruits. Any of its perceived good cannot be categorized as such because the necessary foundation of the Divine is missing. The Qur'an references such fruitless

¹⁰ Qur'an 3:144, 3:176–77, and 47:32.

¹¹ Qur'an 17:82.

¹² Qur'an 2:2.

¹³ Qur'an 4:174.

¹⁴ Qur'an 17:82.

¹⁵ Qur'an 10:32.

¹⁶ Qur'an 7:29.

¹⁷ Qur'an 68:35–36.

¹⁸ Qur'an 14:26.

endeavors: “Say, shall I inform you of the biggest losers? Those who toil misguidedly in this world and think they are doing something good.”¹⁹

On the contrary, if a tree is based on *tawhīd*, then it will always be properly rooted and bear valuable fruit. No matter the crime or the evil, there will be sparks of goodness that can be magnified by *Ash-Shakūr* (The Most Appreciative)²⁰ and be the means through which Allah’s forgiveness and mercy is reached. All such decisions are based on the Justice and Mercy of Allah without violation of any of these perfect attributes, “The day in which every soul will be recompensed for what it earned. No injustice today! Indeed, Allah is swift in account.”²¹ And it was reported by Abu Hurayra that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said that Allah said, “My Mercy prevails over My Anger.”²²

Based on the above, we can appreciate that Allah’s condemnation of *shirk* is based on His Love, Care, and Mercy toward us. He does not want us to fall into the multitude of harms that come in this world and the next with the practice of *shirk*. He does not want our souls to fall into the abyss of nihilism or submit to narcissism and self-deification. Rather than self-interest, as anti-theists like to assert, it is out of His care for humanity that He warns against *shirk*. He does not want His creation to be punished by His Justice and Wrath and therefore warns us against Himself!

The day that every soul will find what it has done of good present and what it has done of evil, it will wish that between itself and that was a great distance. *And Allah warns you of Himself*, and Allah is Kind to His servants.²³

This is also connected to the prophetic invocation that seeks protection from Allah in Allah.

‘Ā’isha (rA) reported, One night I missed the Messenger of Allah ﷺ from the bed, and when I sought him my hand touched the soles of his feet while

¹⁹ Qur’an 18:103.

²⁰ Qur’an 17:19 and 76:22

²¹ Qur’an 40:17.

²² *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2751; *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, nos. 7422 and 7453;

²³ Qur’an 3:30.

he ﷺ was in the state of prostration; they (his feet) were raised and he ﷺ was saying: “O Allah, I seek refuge in Your pleasure from Your anger, and in Your forgiveness from Your punishment, and I seek refuge in You from You. I cannot enumerate Your praises. You are as You have praised Yourself.”²⁴

Allah invites us all to the abode of serenity and security (*dār as-salām*) for our own sakes²⁵ so we can live eternally in His paradise, immersed in endless bliss, gazing upon His Face.

Immorality and the afterlife

Many people assume that crimes with immediate consequences are worse than those with long-term effects. Furthermore, people focus on physical harm to the exclusion of spiritual or psychological damage. Reflecting on the reality of the afterlife helps give us a wider and more complete perspective on the morality of our actions. The consequences in the afterlife are what truly determine the magnitude of evil. This is because the afterlife is the place of ultimate justice, where deeds are recompensed according to their true worth, for better or worse. Allah describes the Day of Judgment,

This Day every soul will be recompensed for what it earned. No injustice today! Indeed, Allah is swift in account.²⁶

Every soul will taste death, and you will only be given your [full] compensation on the Day of Resurrection.²⁷

The Day of Judgment is a time when all crimes are taken to account. If a person evades detection in this world, they will meet their deserved end in the next. If a person committed a wrong that was not considered criminal in society, they will reap the consequences in the court of Allah. Even in Islamic law, there are many immoralities that are grave but carry no legal punishments in this world at all.

²⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 486.

²⁵ Qur'an 10:25.

²⁶ Qur'an, 40:17.

²⁷ Qur'an, 3:185.

Lying, backbiting, and mistreatment of parents are all major sins in Islam, but no worldly punishments are legislated for them. The sin of *ribā* (interest) is described as ‘waging war against Allah and His messenger,’ yet has no associated worldly punishment. Public drunkenness, on the other hand, has a prescribed punishment even though *ribā* is worse from a moral perspective. This is even the case with *shirk* itself, which is considered the ultimate evil yet does not have a worldly punishment prescribed for it in Islamic law.

It is clear we cannot use legal punishments in this world as a gauge for the magnitude of a crime, even within Islamic law. Islamic law focuses on protecting the most important features of societies, religion, life, property, family, and intellect.²⁸ It is not designed to punish every single immorality in this world, nor is any man-made system of law designed to do this. For Muslims, some immoralities are too grave to be handled by human beings and must be escalated to the Supreme Court of the Most High in the next life.

What makes *shirk* so evil?

Hundreds of theories have been posited by philosophers, theologians, and thinkers throughout the millennia regarding the nature of good and evil. Some equate good and evil with pleasure and pain.²⁹ Others deny any objective existence of good and evil, claiming they are products of human imagination.³⁰ Still others claim good is what leads to the collective flourishing of human civilization,³¹ or assert it is what maximizes individual well-being.³² This philosophical variance is attributable to competing notions of human purpose. That is to say, good and bad are categorizations of reality that necessarily assume an ultimate cosmic purpose. Ayn Rand, the famous 20th-century philosopher, describes values (that which one acts

²⁸ These are known as the five *maqāṣid ash-sharī’ah* (objectives of Islamic law).

²⁹ A philosophical school called Hedonism. Refer to Ruut Veenhoven, “Hedonism and Happiness,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 4, no. 4 (2003): 437–57.

³⁰ A position referred to as “moral abolitionism.” Refer to: Richard Garner, “Abolishing Morality,” in *A World Without Values*, ed. Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 217–33.

³¹ This has been popularized by new atheist Sam Harris. Refer to Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

³² A philosophical school called “Eudaimonism” inspired by Aristotle. Refer to Lorraine Besser-Jones, “Eudaimonism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 203–12.

to gain and/or keep) as a necessary precondition for any system of ethics.³³ Isidor Chein, a 20th-century American psychologist influenced by the psychodynamic school, explains the importance of identifying an individual's purpose in order to develop a 'science of morality.'³⁴

To understand this point, consider how these terms are used in non-moral settings. In sports, *good* and *bad* are adjectives frequently used to describe the actions of the players. A 'good' move is what facilitates the individual or the team fulfilling the *purpose* of the game, while a 'bad' move hinders them from it. It would be nonsensical to describe an action as good if there was no point to the game. These words only carry meaning if there is a shared purpose that the players are aiming toward. Similarly, we can only apply the terms *good* and *bad* to life as a whole if it possesses some inherent purpose. If there is no purpose to life, then it would be incoherent to describe anything as good or bad. If life is random, then by definition anything that occurs is valueless.

If we assume the purpose of life to be maximizing happiness or pleasure, then good will be anything that leads to this, and bad anything that prevents it. If a person believes that the purpose of life is to achieve a state of *tawhīd* (Islamic monotheism) by following the path of the prophets,³⁵ then the opposite of this—falling into *shirk* (idolatry) by following the demonic path—would be the ultimate evil. While this is a sufficient explanation on its own, there are other perspectives that can help us appreciate the evil of *shirk*.

Any theory of ethics attempts to understand the factors essential to something being good or evil. Deontological ethics focuses on the motivation behind an action (intention) and its connection to universal moral principles, but not necessarily its consequences.³⁶ It focuses on certain moral principles expressed in the form of rules and laws inviolable under any circumstances regardless of

³³ Allan Gotthelf, "The Morality of Life," in *A Companion to Ayn Rand*, ed. Allan Gotthelf and Gregory Salmieri (Chicester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 76.

³⁴ Isidor Chein, "Towards a Science of Morality," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 25, no. 2 (1947): 235–38.

³⁵ The interested reader can refer to a previous article that intellectually justifies this as humanity's purpose in life: Zohair Abdul-Rahman and Nazir Khan, "Proving God's Existence | In Pursuit of Conviction II," *Yaqeen*, October 11, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/in-pursuit-of-conviction-ii-proving-gods-existence>.

³⁶ David McNaughton and Piers Rawling, "Deontology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195325911.003.0016>.

consequences. Historically these moral principles came from religious instruction. As secularism took hold post-Enlightenment, Kant introduced the categorical imperative³⁷ as the ultimate moral principle people ought to act by.³⁸ The categorical imperative states that moral agents should act as if their actions would become universally applicable.

Consequentialism focuses on the consequent benefit or harm an action causes to the individual and society, traditionally in the form of pleasure or pain.³⁹ While utilitarianism, which embodies consequentialist ideals to organize socio-political agents, is a relatively recent phenomenon, consequentialism as an idea has been connected to the larger, more ancient tradition of hedonism.⁴⁰ This school focuses on establishing maximum benefit or averting maximum harm for the largest number of people.

Virtue ethics, which finds its roots with Aristotle, focuses on the virtue or vice displayed with each behavior,⁴¹ and what the behavior indicates regarding the overall character of the person.

From an Islamic perspective none of the three schools has an accurate or complete philosophy of ethics due to their separation from the Divine foundation.⁴² However, each does speak to a dimension of ethical reasoning supported by Islamic texts. Regarding the categorical imperative, we see the Prophet ﷺ using this form of moral reasoning when asked by a young companion for permission to commit *zinā*.⁴³

Abū Umāma reported: A young man came to the Prophet ﷺ and he said, “O Messenger of Allah, give me permission to commit *zinā*.” The people

³⁷ The categorical imperative states that moral agents should act as if that action would become universally applicable.

³⁸ For a more accessible work on Kantian ethics, the reader can refer to: Herbert James Paton, *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971). The more interested reader can refer directly to Kant's original work: Immanuel Kant, *Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³⁹ Anthony Quinton, *Utilitarian Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973), 1.

⁴⁰ Quinton, *Utilitarian Ethics*.

⁴¹ Peter Simpson, “Contemporary Virtue Ethics and Aristotle,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 45, no. 3 (1992): 503–24.

⁴² For an overview of the Islamic theology of moral ontology, the interested reader can refer to the section on morality in this previous article: Abdul-Rahman and Khan, “Proving God's Existence.”

⁴³ A general term that can refer to any unlawful extramarital affair.

turned to rebuke him, saying, “Quiet! Quiet!” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Come here.” The young man came close and he told him to sit down. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Would you like that for your mother?” The man said, “No, by Allah, may I be sacrificed for you.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Neither would people like it for their mothers. Would you like that for your daughter?” The man said, “No, by Allah, may I be sacrificed for you.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Neither would people like it for their daughters. Would you like that for your sister?” The man said, “No, by Allah, may I be sacrificed for you.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Neither would people like it for their sisters. Would you like that for your aunts?” The man said, “No, by Allah, may I be sacrificed for you.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Neither would people like it for their aunts.” Then, the Prophet ﷺ placed his hand on him and said, “O Allah, forgive his sins, purify his heart, and guard his chastity.” After that, the young man never again inclined to anything sinful.⁴⁴

This young man did not see how *zinā* was evil. Although not explicitly stated in the hadith, we can appreciate how some people can be blind to why consensual *zinā* is a major sin, given no one seems to be ‘harmed.’ Rather than giving a ‘consequentialist’ justification, the Prophet ﷺ implored the young man to think outside of himself and imagine how he would feel if the same act he desired involved his female relatives. In other words, how would he feel if such an action was universally applicable to the extent of necessarily involving his own family? If a person believes it is wrong for someone to commit such an act with their own family, then how can they justify it as permissible for themselves?⁴⁵

Though it comes from a consequentialist paradigm, the harm principle is a recognized tool in ethical decision-making within Islam. A well-known prophetic tradition establishes a legal maxim: “There is to be no harm and no reciprocation of

⁴⁴ *Musnad Imām Ahmad*, no. 22211. Shu‘ayb al-Arnā‘ūt considered its chain to be *ṣaḥīḥ* in *Takhreej al-musnad*.

⁴⁵ This “golden rule” of reciprocity has been explored in an article by Justin Parrott, “Al-Ghazali and the Golden Rule: Ethics of Reciprocity in the Works of a Muslim Sage,” *Yaqeen*, March 20, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/al-ghazali-and-the-golden-rule-ethics-of-reciprocity-in-the-works-of-a-muslim-sage>.

harm.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, *al-maṣlaḥa al-mursala* (public interest)⁴⁷ and *sadd ad-dharāʾiʿ* (preventing the means to harm)⁴⁸ are recognized legal maxims, from which secondary legislations can be derived according to the Mālikī and Ḥanbalī schools of law. The Ḥanafīs are known for *istiḥsān* (juristic preference)⁴⁹ that also involves consideration of the benefit and harm that would result from a legal ruling. Here we see the consequentialist paradigm given consideration within Islamic legal frameworks.

Lastly, we find that virtue ethics is consistent with the mission of the Prophet ﷺ and the connection of ethics to the Divine Names and Attributes. “I have only been sent to perfect noble character.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, there is a great emphasis placed on using one’s heart and intuition to solve ethical dilemmas,

Wābiṣa bin Maʿbad reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Have you come to ask about good and evil, Wābiṣa?” I said, “Yes,” so he ﷺ joined his fingers and hit his chest and said “Seek judgment from your *nafs* (self), seek judgment from your *heart*” three times. (Then he ﷺ said), “Good is what the self is comfortable with and what makes the heart at peace. Evil is what arouses discomfort in the self and hesitancy in the heart despite the opinions of others.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ *Muwaṭṭāʾ Imām Mālik*, no. 1435; *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, nos. 2341 and 2340. Whilst the individual chains have been criticized, the scholars of hadith considered it fair (*ḥasan*) based on corroborating reports from multiple companions, including ʿAbdullah ibn ʿAbbas, Abu Saʿīd al-Khudrī, and ʿUbādah ibn as-Ṣāmit. The scholars who made this judgment include an-Nawawī in his *Arbaʿūn* (hadith 32) and al-Albānī in his *Huqūq an-nisāʾ fī al-Islām* (N.p.: Maktab al-Islāmī, 1984), 67n1.

⁴⁷ A principle that considers the benefit and harms of a legal ruling as an independent source of legislation, as long as it does not contradict the revealed sources. For an introduction to the topic, refer to: Muḥammad Mustafa az-Zuhaylī, *Kitāb al-wajīz fī uṣūl al-fiqh al-Islāmī* (Qatar: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa Ash-Shuʿūn al-Islāmī, 2006), 1:255.

⁴⁸ A principle that gives prohibitive weight to something that may lead to a known prohibition. Refer to: az-Zuhaylī, *Kitāb al-wajīz*, 1:279.

⁴⁹ This refers to a process where a jurist prefers a weaker evidence to a stronger evidence due to a benefit that is to be achieved or a harm to be averted. This can be done by preferring a weaker analogy to a stronger analogy or making an exception to a general principle for a benefit or to avert a harm. Refer to: az-Zuhaylī, *Kitāb al-wajīz*, 1:247.

⁵⁰ *Musnad Imam Ahmad*, no. 8952; *Adab al-mufrad*, no. 273. Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 476 AH) declared it *ṣaḥīḥ* in *at-Tamhīd* (N.p.: Wazārat al-Awqāf wa Ash-Shuʿūn al-Islāmiyyah, 1412 AH), 24:333 along with al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Adab al-Mufrad*, no. 207.

⁵¹ *Musnad Ahmad*, nos. 17545, 17999, and 18006; *Sunan ad-Dārimī*, no. 2533; *Musnad Abu Yaʿlā*, no. 1587. There are minor variations between these narrations. Imām Nawawī has graded it as fair (*ḥasan*) in his *Arbaʿūn* (forty) collection.

The Names and Attributes of God represent lofty qualities we are meant to act in accordance with. Divine attributes of love, kindness, mercy, and gentleness are meant to be embodied in this life,

‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Amr narrates that the Prophet ﷺ said, “The merciful are shown mercy by *ar-Raḥmān* (The Most Merciful). Be merciful to those on earth and the One above the heavens will show mercy to you.”⁵²

If you judge, then judge between them with justice, verily Allah ﷻ loves those who are just.⁵³

Forgive and overlook; wouldn’t you love for Allah ﷻ to forgive you?⁵⁴

Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH), the great medieval polymath, reflects on this connection between ethics and theology,

Allah ﷻ loves His Names and Attributes, and He loves the consequences of His Attributes and their manifestations upon the servants. Just as He is Beautiful, so He loves beauty. As He is the Most Forgiving, He loves forgiveness; as He is the Most Generous, He loves generosity: as He is All-Knowing, he loves the people of knowledge... So because Allah ﷻ loves those who emulate His Attributes, He is with them according to how much of these qualities they reflect, and this is a special and unique type of companionship.⁵⁵

Hence, we see that the virtue-ethics paradigm only makes sense if it is rooted in the Divine Names and Attributes. Otherwise, the qualities of virtue are mere social constructions or imaginations of the mind. The connection between moral virtue and the Divine Names and Attributes forms the basis of Islamic morality.

Now that we have briefly surveyed the three main ethical paradigms we find in the West, and identified their presence in the Islamic tradition, we will examine the

⁵² *Musnad Imām Aḥmad*, no. 6494; *Jāmi’ at-Tirmidhī*, no. 1924; *Sunan Abī Dawūd*, no. 4941. Al-Albānī declared it strong (*ṣaḥīḥ*) in *Ṣaḥīḥ Abī Dawūd*, no. 4941. Shu‘ayb al-Arnā‘ūt declared it strong due to corroborating evidence (*ṣaḥīḥ li-ghayrihi*).

⁵³ Qur’an 5:42.

⁵⁴ Qur’an 24:22.

⁵⁵ Ibn al-Qayyim, *‘Uddat us-ṣābirīn wa dhakhīrat ash-shakīrīn* (Jeddah: Dār ‘Ālam al-Fawā’id, 2008), 85.

concept of *shirk* from their perspectives. We are not attempting to prove that *shirk* is evil through secular ethical paradigms, but we are using various universal methods of ethical reasoning substantiated from our sources to aid our investigation.⁵⁶ As the Islamic axiom states, there is no need for dispute over terms once we understand the concepts behind them.⁵⁷

***Shirk* from a deontological perspective: Purpose of life**

Deontological ethics focuses on universal moral principles that should never be violated under any circumstances. *Tawhīd* is one such commitment, as established through revelation. Hence, *shirk* becomes the ultimate crime. Even if someone is coerced to violate their *tawhīd* with a genuine threat to life or limb, they must hold *tawhīd* in their hearts in secret.

Ibn al-Qayyim uses this justification when answering this exact question, “Why is *shirk* the most hated thing to Allah?” Part of his response is that when a person commits *shirk*, “he is acting in direct contradiction to what he has been created for.”⁵⁸

***Shirk* from a virtue-ethics perspective**

Virtue ethics focuses on what a behavior indicates about the character of a person. An action should be judged in part by the quality it demonstrates. When we examine the underlying qualities embodied in an act of *shirk*, we can better appreciate its evil.

⁵⁶ The rational justification of the evil of *shirk* is a project that exists within an Atharī paradigm of theology. As Ibn al-Qayyim stated, “What thing could the intellect verify if it does not know the intrinsic evilness of *shirk*? Knowing that it is evil is intuitive and known by necessity by the intellect.” Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij as-sālikīn* (Mansourah, Egypt: Fayḍ al-Maktabah, 2013), 203. This is in contrast to the Ash‘arī school, which denies that the intellect can grasp what is “good” or “evil” independent of revelation [Ar-Razi, M. (1905) *Muhassal Afkaar al-Mutaqaddimeen wa al-Mutakhirin*. Cairo, Egypt: Al-Matba‘ah Al-Husayniya, p. 148].

⁵⁷ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madārij al-sālikīn bayna manāzil ṭyyāka na ‘budu wa ṭyyāka nasta ‘īn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabi, 1973), 3:306.

⁵⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Tarīq al-hijratayn* (Mecca: Dār ‘Ālim al-Fawā‘id, 2008), 524.

Betrayal

At the root of *shirk* and its evil is betrayal. It involves betraying one's purpose in life and betraying one's Benefactor, given that the person was endowed with the gift of existence and all of the blessings of life and yet refuses to show love and gratitude to that Benefactor. In fact, the word for disbelief in Islam, *kufr*, can also be used to refer to ingratitude.⁵⁹

Indeed an argument can be made that betrayal is the root of all sin and the worst of all crimes. For instance, the worst crime in the eyes of the state is treason, betrayal of the nation.⁶⁰ This is why the harshest punishments are reserved for the crime of treason. The rationale is that the state had provided the citizen with protection, public resources, and dwelling in exchange for loyalty. By choosing to conspire against the state, one has betrayed the entire state.

Furthermore, the major sins and crimes people recognize can be reduced to a common theme: betrayal. Adultery, the worst crime in a romantic relationship, is a betrayal of marital trust. The generic social contract that allows human beings to coexist within a society is betrayed by murder and theft.⁶¹ We find the Sunnah reflects these concepts when the Prophet ﷺ was asked about the greatest evils human beings can commit.

‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd said, “I asked Prophet Muhammad ﷺ which crime is the greatest according to Allah ﷻ. He ﷺ replied, ‘That you make a rival alongside Allah ﷻ while He created you.’ I said that is definitely a great sin then asked what is next. He ﷺ said, ‘That you kill your own child fearing that he will share your food with you.’ I said what is next? He ﷺ said, ‘That you commit adultery with your neighbor’s wife.’”⁶²

⁵⁹ Qur’an 2:152.

⁶⁰ J. H. Leek, “Treason and the Constitution,” *The Journal of Politics* 13, no. 4 (1951): 604–22.

⁶¹ There is an interesting story found in the books of *tafsīr* regarding the first generation of humans. It is said that when Adam intended to take a religious pilgrimage, he asked the sky to protect his children as an *amānah* (responsibility, trust), and it refused. He then asked the earth, and it refused. He asked the mountain, and it refused. Then Cain (Qābīl, Adam’s son) said, yes, you may go and find your family just how you would like it. This indicates that human beings rely on each other for collective protection, whereas the natural elements have no such trust [Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr ilā ‘ilm at-tafsīr* (Cairo: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002), 1141].

⁶² *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nos. 4477, 4761, 6001, 6811, 6861, 7520, and 7532; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, nos. 86a and 86b;

Reflecting on this anecdote, we notice that each crime mentioned is described in its most egregious form. *Shirk* is a betrayal of the One who created you, infanticide is the ultimate betrayal of the parental duty of providing, and the worst form of adultery is betraying the trust of one's own neighbor. The concept of betrayal is also part of Ibn al-Qayyim's explanation of why *shirk* is the greatest evil,

And for this reason, *shirk* is the most despised thing to Him (Allah) because it diminishes one's love (for Allah) and transfers it to whoever he associated with Him (Allah). For this reason Allah does not forgive *shirk*... And no doubt this is the greatest crime a lover can commit toward his beloved.⁶³

This is a profound point that Ibn al-Qayyim raises. When we recognize our entire life is based on this one relationship we have with our Creator, then the acts that threaten this relationship are the worst that a person can commit in this world. The most destructive action that a spouse can commit is acquiring a secret lover. Any number of actions can terminate a romantic relationship, from divorce to abuse, but the most devastating of them is an affair. To Allah belongs the highest example, but similarly when one betrays their *tawhīd* and elevates an idol to the position of God, Lord, or Divine, they have committed the greatest act of betrayal in the most important relationship of their lives.

The degree of betrayal is determined by (1) the degree of benevolence granted to a person and (2) the degree of trust given to a person.

Degree of benevolence

The more benevolence granted to a person, the greater level of loyalty expected—and therefore the greater the betrayal. From this equation we can see how breaking one's covenant with God would be the greatest act of betrayal, regarded as *shirk*. Every single blessing, including the very gift of existence, comes from the Most Benevolent, the Most Compassionate. Betraying the loyalty demanded by such a reality is worse than any crime we can fathom. We find this reasoning consistent with the way *shirk* is described in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

⁶³ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Tarīq al-hijratayn*, 523.

O Humanity, what has deluded you from your Gracious Lord? The One who created you, fashioned you, and balanced you in whatever form He willed, assembling you.⁶⁴

And out of what We have provided them, they take a portion aside for those (idols) they have no knowledge about. Certainly, by Allah, they will be questioned regarding what they used to invent.⁶⁵

And as mentioned, when the Prophet ﷺ was asked which is the greatest sin, he said, “That you set up with Allah جلّ جلاله a rival and He is the One who created you.”⁶⁶

Betraying the covenant takes multiple forms. Even if there are no external idols, overlooking or choosing not to care about this relationship with Allah to the point of denying or ignoring it is a form of betrayal. This betrayal is still *shirk*. In a word, you set yourself as a peer or superior to God when you feel that you can overlook this covenant, and that your commitment to it is a trivial matter. Through your actions you demonstrate your belief that your ego is in a position to decide on what should be worshiped in your life, what is valued, what matters, and what you should devote your life to. As Allah says, “Have you seen the one who takes his desires as his god?”⁶⁷

Degree of trust

The magnitude of a betrayal is also based on the degree of vulnerability and trust that another person shows to you. This demands a higher degree of loyalty. For example, a husband or wife leaving their spouse at home alone indicates their great trust in their neighbors. A child’s complete dependency on its parent makes infanticide an especially horrific form of murder. The greater the trust violated, the greater the crime. While God is not dependent on anyone or vulnerable at all, He granted human beings a great trust (*amāna*) that is described in the Qur’an,

⁶⁴ Qur’an 82:6–8.

⁶⁵ Qur’an 16:56.

⁶⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nos. 4477, 4761, 6001, 6811, 6861, 7520, and 7532; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, nos. 86a and 86b.

⁶⁷ Qur’an 45:23.

Indeed, we offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant.⁶⁸

The ‘Trust’ (*amāna*) here is all encompassing and is the responsibility Allah ﷻ has placed on human beings—including the trust between one another. At-Ṭabarī provides multiple early reports on the concept of *amāna*, such as the obligations due to Allah in this life, the trust of private acts of devotion, *ḥudūd* (law), *dīn* (religion), *wadā’i* (security deposits between people), human faculties of sight and speaking, and the sanctity of life. He concludes by stating, “The correct view is those who say that what is meant by *amāna* in this verse is every single trust and duty found in the religion (i.e., toward God) and every trust and duty between human beings.”⁶⁹

What we learn from this is that the trusts that are violated in crimes between people are actually connected to the ultimate trust bestowed upon human beings by Allah ﷻ. Therefore betrayal between human beings is ultimately a betrayal of God’s gifts to humanity of consciousness, choice, movement, and ability. The worst form of this type of betrayal is to use what God has entrusted to us to violate the very purpose of our existence by committing *shirk*.

Narcissism and self-worship

When a person turns away from the worship of Allah, he will inevitably worship the deities that are, in reality, a reflection of his own vain desires. The Qur’an describes such a person: “Have you seen the one who makes his own desires as his god? Then would you be responsible for him?”⁷⁰

In fact, man prefers to worship what is constructed from his imagination in this world rather than submitting to an Authority greater than his ego. Allah says, “Will you argue with me concerning names that you have invented yourselves and your ancestors, of which there was no authority sent down by Allah?”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Qur’an 33:72.

⁶⁹ At-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasat ar-Risālah, 2014), vol 6, 204.

⁷⁰ Qur’an 25:43.

⁷¹ Qur’an 7:71.

The worshiping of idols is in reality the worshiping of one's ego. It is an ego that subconsciously or consciously perceives itself as the creator of gods and deities, the creator of values and morals, the creator of right and wrong. Allah uses the word 'create' when describing their false ideologies: "You only worship, besides Allah ﷻ, idols, and you create such falsehood."⁷²

There is no greater inflation of the ego than having the audacity to think one is qualified to create one's own religion from whatever the ego fancies. Allah says, "They are only names you have invented yourselves and your ancestors, of which there was no authority sent down by Allah. They are only following their whims and what their self desires, even though guidance has certainly come to them from their (true) Lord."⁷³

While one may think the creation of idols is a bygone practice from thousands of years ago, we are witnessing in the new generation a modern form of idolatry known as 'moralistic therapeutic deism,' the default religion of the average Westerner in the 21st century.⁷⁴ Subscribers to this self-serving ideology cherry-pick the virtues found in other religions that make them happy. No authority, scripture, or guidance informs how they live their lives. Instead, these people show the same audacity of the idol-carvers in creating their own way of life based on their own desires. Here, we find the deification of the self manifested in the guise of self-serving moral attitudes and beliefs.

Furthermore, the extreme cancel culture perpetuated by social media users reflects a lack of humility when it comes to complex moral issues. Their obsessive focus on others' faults, as if they hold the Divine right to pass ultimate judgment, is telling of a clear underlying narcissism. The invention of new ideals, norms, boundaries, rights, and wrongs is what the Qur'an describes as lying against God.

⁷² Qur'an 29:17.

⁷³ Qur'an 53:23.

⁷⁴ Christian Smith, "Is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism the New Religion of American Youth? Implications for the Challenge of Religious Socialization and Reproduction," in *Passing on the Faith*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 55–74.

And do not say “This is permitted and this is prohibited” based on what your tongues assert as untruth in order to invent falsehood about Allah.⁷⁵

Without a doubt, there are some people who may not realize the true reality of idolatry. They may practice an idolatrous religion or culture because they enjoy being part of a community, the comfort of social cohesion, and the desire to conform. Perhaps they have simply inherited it without giving due consideration of their mind or heart. So their example is like the Qur’an describes, a mere “statement that emerges from their mouth.”⁷⁶ However, when the ugly truth of idolatry becomes clear to them, they must make a decision to depart from these practices, or close their eyes and continue despite recognizing the great wrong and betrayal that idolatry represents. Allah ﷻ says,

Those who disbelieved among the People of the Scripture, and the Polytheists, were not apart, until the Clear Evidence came to them.⁷⁷

Consequentialism: The harm principle

In most liberal societies, the harm principle is the only legitimate standard for right or wrong. An act, in the absence of any clear harm perpetrated against a victim, is often exonerated of any immorality. This is an amputated form of morality due to its disposal of the religious tradition used to inform virtues, vices, and duties toward one’s self, toward one’s society, and toward God Himself.

Due to the shortsightedness of this approach, many immoralities without obvious harms are not recognized as evil. We must expand the notion of harm beyond the material, to encompass the effects of an action on the mind, the soul, the community, and of course harms that will be experienced in the afterlife. This section will explore the various harms that emerge from idolatry—psychological, intellectual, and social. Before discussing those harms, though, we must discuss the ultimate harm: that found in the afterlife.

⁷⁵ Qur’an 16:116.

⁷⁶ Qur’an 18:5.

⁷⁷ Qur’an 98:1

Afterlife

It is important to note that people who engage in idolatry may not experience all its harmful consequences in this world, just as not everyone who drinks alcohol will become addicted, intoxicated, and abusive, or get liver cirrhosis, neuropathy, encephalopathy, and so on. Likewise, not everyone who smokes cigarettes will suffer from lung cancer, emphysema, or a heart attack. It is illegal in many countries to smoke in public places because of the known harmful effects of secondhand smoke exposure. However, not everyone who receives secondhand smoke will suffer the consequences. Similarly, idolatry threatens harm that has a high probability of occurring in this life, and will certainly come in the next life. Allah says,

It has been inspired to you and those before you, if you commit *shirk* your actions will be nullified and you will surely be of the losers.⁷⁸

And it will be said, “Invoke your ‘partners’” and they will invoke them; but they will not respond to them, and they will see the punishment. If only they had followed guidance.⁷⁹

This harm is greater than anyone can fathom in this world and so even on the grounds of the ‘harm principle’ should be considered the ultimate evil. Allah says, “And Allah wronged them not, but they had been wronging themselves.”⁸⁰ The oppression of idolatry may have not directly harmed anyone else, but it harmed its practitioners, so this crime is considered an example of an individual oppressing themselves.

Ibn al-Qayyim also describes the great oppression idolatry brings upon a person in the next life.

When Allah said He purchased our souls, we have to realize that the value of the commodity is correlated to both the status of the buyer and the price. You are the commodity, and you are so valuable that Allah is purchasing you, and

⁷⁸ Qur'an 39:65.

⁷⁹ Qur'an 28:64.

⁸⁰ Qur'an, 16:33

the price is Paradise, which you receive along with seeing Allah, and hearing His speech, in the abode of complete peace and tranquility. Allah chose you and only chooses that which is honored and blessed—and built for you a dwelling place close to Him and made the angels as servants for you, making sure you are taken care of in this world when you are awake and when you are sleeping, when you are alive and when you will die. When a person commits *shirk*, he sells himself to the other gods (he worships), and so he is deprived of paradise, the mercy, love, and care of Allah.⁸¹

Psychological harms

Beyond this, when we analyze the effects of *shirk* on the individual in this world, we can appreciate that the harms of *shirk* are not exclusive to the next life. The Qur'an compares idolatry to being co-owned by two quarreling partners:

Allah presents an example: A slave⁸² owned by quarreling partners and another belonging exclusively to one man—are they equal in comparison? Praise be to Allah! But most of them do not know.⁸³

This analogy demonstrates that idolatry is the greatest threat to one's sense of meaning and fulfillment in the world. Al-Rāzī comments, “So then he is left confused, not knowing which of them is most deserving of being pleased and which of them he should seek for his needs. For this reason he is in continuous punishment and endless misery.”⁸⁴

Having a coherent purpose in life is essential to psychological well being. Dr. Viktor Frankl, the holocaust-surviving psychiatrist, famously coined the phrase ‘will to meaning’ when describing the most important asset to the human psyche. He commented that a student of his performed a study on 60 university students who had attempted suicide. Of those students, 85% said they had done so because

⁸¹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Tarīq al-hijratayn*, 527.

⁸² This passage references the historical institution of slavery. For a more thorough understanding of the Islamic perspective on slavery, please refer to a previous article: Jonathan Brown and Abdullah Hamid Ali, “Slavery and Islam: What is Slavery?,” *Yaqeen*, February 7, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/slavery-and-islam-what-is-slavery>.

⁸³ Qur'an 39:29.

⁸⁴ Ar-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 26:277.

‘life seemed meaningless.’ Around 93% of the respondents were socially engaged, academically successful, and had a family circle. Frankl remarks, “If a person has found the meaning sought for, he is prepared to suffer, to offer sacrifices, even, if need be, to give his life for the sake of it. Contrariwise, if there is no meaning he is inclined to take his life, and he is prepared to do so even if all his needs, to all appearances, have been satisfied.”⁸⁵

Multiple studies have quantitatively corroborated Frankl’s analysis by demonstrating the strong correlation between meaning and wellbeing.⁸⁶ In fact, purpose in life is a mediator between religiosity and happiness.⁸⁷ This means that [religiosity correlates with happiness](#) because it endows its practitioner with a purpose in life. Those who simply affirm a religious identity out of culture, for instance, without internalizing it as a way of life will not find happiness in their superficial religious attachment.

A person may object by pointing to polytheistic religions, which seem to challenge the notion that idolatry negates a meaningful worldview. While it is true there are polytheistic religions, they often contain an element or trace of monotheism. Often there is an ‘ultimate’ or ‘supreme’ God that reigns over the other gods. This is why Allah says in the Qur’an, “Most of them don’t believe in Allah except that they associate partners with him.”⁸⁸

The polytheistic element, if taken seriously and to its logical conclusion, can only result in the destruction of meaning. Meaning is defined as ‘making sense, order, or coherence out of one’s existence.’⁸⁹ Purpose is defined as ‘intention, some function to be fulfilled, or goals to be achieved.’⁹⁰ There is no greater threat to these

⁸⁵ Viktor E. Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy and Humanism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 2.

⁸⁶ Monika Ardelt, “Effects of Religion and Purpose in Life on Elders’ Subjective Well-Being and Attitudes toward Death,” *Journal of Religious Gerontology* 14, no. 4 (2003): 55–77; Patrick E. McKnight Todd B. Kashdan, “Purpose in Life as a System that Creates and Sustains Health and Well-Being: An Integrative, Testable Theory,” *Review of General Psychology* 13, no. 3 (2009): 242–51; Gary T. Reker, Edward J. Peacock, and Paul T. P. Wong, “Meaning and Purpose in Life and Well-Being: A Life-Span Perspective,” *Journal of Gerontology* 42, no. 1 (1987): 44–49.

⁸⁷ Naser Aghababaei and Agata Błachnio, “Purpose in Life Mediates the Relationship between Religiosity and Happiness: Evidence from Poland,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 17, no. 8 (2014): 827–31.

⁸⁸ Qur’an 12:106.

⁸⁹ Gary T. Reker, Edward J. Peacock, and Paul T. P. Wong, “Meaning and Purpose in Life and Well-Being: A Life-Span Perspective,” *Journal of Gerontology* 42, no. 1 (1987): 44–49.

⁹⁰ Reker, Peacock, and Wong, “Meaning and Purpose in Life and Well-Being,” 44–49.

concepts than *shirk*. As Allah ﷻ says, “Had there been within the heavens and earth gods besides Allah ﷻ, they would have been ruined.”⁹¹ This ontological challenge to idolatry states that competing divine wills would inevitably result in constant struggle and resistance, compromising the very fabric of reality. People recognize the global destruction that would ensue if the nuclear powers of the world were to engage in war. If there were competing Divine Wills, the collateral damage would be reality itself.

Hence, it is impossible to maintain a meaningful belief about the world through idolatry. Furthermore, believing in multiple idols entails divergent and contradictory aims in life, resulting in dysfunctional goals. The human being is left lost in this world with no coherent understanding of who they are, where they came from, and where they are going. They can only live in a constant state of fear and anxiety from the wrath of their gods without any clear guidance. One god may be happy with an offering but another one may be spiteful. There will be no clarity in one’s value system, belief system, or life purpose. *Shirk* thus makes life meaningless.

Someone may respond by positing a form of idolatry where all gods have the same will without any resistance against each other. The problem is that if we claim they all have the same will, then they are no longer multiple entities since a distinct agent is known by its distinct will and agency.

A genuine belief in idolatrous ideology, albeit a rarity in the Western world, is thus the most debilitating idea that can infiltrate the human mind. Just as alcohol, drugs, and any other neurotoxins can seriously damage the brain, the presence of *shirk* in the mind seriously damages the soul. It suffocates its only source of life, which is meaning and purpose in life through *tawhīd*.

Atheism is a modern form of *shirk* that endows natural entities or concepts with Divine attributes. The creation of reality is ascribed to ‘nothingness,’ ‘singularity,’ ‘the unknown,’ and a set of arbitrary mathematical constants found in the universe.

⁹¹ Qur’an 21:22.

This worldview is technically a form of *shirk*, even if it does not affirm any gods. Certainly, nihilism is more obviously a consequence of atheism than polytheism.

We discussed earlier how people have carved idols by inventing their own morals and beliefs without deference to any authority other than their own egos. There is another kind of idol, absolute in its psychological destruction—carved not from stone, but from the vain desires of humanity, manifesting as social media celebrities and the rise of the ‘influencer.’

Chris Hedges, a famous contemporary writer, has diagnosed various cultural maladies that pervade the American conscience, including the problem of ‘celebrity worship’:

“We all have gods,” Martin Luther said, “it is just a question of which ones.” And in American society our gods are celebrities. Religious belief and practices are commonly transferred to the adoration of celebrities. Our culture builds temples to celebrities the way the Romans did for divine emperors, ancestors, and household gods. We are a de facto polytheistic society. We engage in the same kind of primitive beliefs as older polytheistic cultures. In celebrity culture, the object is to get as close as possible to the celebrity. Relics of celebrities are coveted as magical talismans. Those who can touch the celebrity or own a relic of the celebrity hope for a transference of celebrity power. They hope for magic.⁹²

These idols, although people themselves, are carved by their ‘worshiper’s’ desires and whims. They would never be idols unless people recognized them, and they would never be recognized unless they conformed (or are carved) to what the people desire. The influencer is actually the one being influenced, and they become the projection of the most superficial and darkest parts of humanity.

Ralph Emerson, a 19th-century American philosopher from the Transcendentalist school, is reported to have said,

A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will come

⁹² Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2010), 17.

out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.⁹³

Vanity, narcissism, sensuality, idleness, wealth, gluttony, and entertainment are just some of the tainted materials by which these idols are created and subsequently worshiped.

Have you seen the one who makes his own desires as his god? Then would you be responsible for him?⁹⁴

Intellectual harms

Pagan ideologies are known for their focus on bad omens, luck, astrology, and other superstitious ideas that influence people's behaviors. The Prophet ﷺ clearly disavowed the use of any irrational superstitions, thereby establishing rationality as the main tool for making worldly decisions about life.

‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd reported, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Spells, amulets, and charms are certainly *shirk*.”⁹⁵

‘Uqba ibn ‘Āmir reported that the Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever hangs an amulet around his neck, then Allah will not fulfill his wishes. Whoever hangs a seashell as a charm, then Allah will not grant him security.”⁹⁶

This also extends to medicine based on superstitions without any rational or empirical evidence. ‘Imrān ibn Ḥusayn reported the Messenger of Allah ﷺ saw a man wearing a brass ring, so he was asked what it was. The man said, “It is protection from my shoulder ailment.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Remove it, for it

⁹³ “Introduction,” Signs of Our Faith: A Program about Being UU Every Day for Grades 2–3, Unitarian Universalist Association, <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/signs/session11/287903.shtml>.

⁹⁴ Qur’an 25:43.

⁹⁵ *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, no. 3883. Al-Albānī declared this narration *ṣaḥīḥ* (sound) [*Ṣaḥīḥ Abū Dawūd*, no. 3883].

⁹⁶ *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 16951. Al-Arnā’ūt declared this narration *ḥasan* (fair) [*Musnad Imām Aḥmad*, no. 16951] and As-Suyūṭī declared it *ṣaḥīḥ* (sound) [*Al-Jamī’ As-Saghīr*, no. 8839].

will only increase your ailment and if you were to die wearing it you would never be successful.”⁹⁷

The Qur’an makes it clear that even the Prophet ﷺ did not have supernatural power to influence events for benefit or harm: “Say: I have no power at all for myself to harm or benefit except as Allah wills.”⁹⁸

Continuing on the intellectual front, *shirk* contradicts the scientific discoveries of natural order and balance in the cosmos. The Qur’an explains how the logical consequence of *shirk* is a world of chaos. As quoted earlier,

Had there been in the heavens and earth gods beside Allah, they would have been ruined. So exalted is Allah, Lord of the Throne, above what they describe.⁹⁹

Tawhīd, on the other hand, provides the basis for the ordered world we constantly witness around us. A singular Divine Will is the only way to reasonably account for the signs of intricate design in life and the universe. Allah ﷻ says, “Indeed, within the heavens and earth are signs for the believers. And in the creation of yourselves and what He disperses of moving creatures are signs for people who are certain.”¹⁰⁰ Idolatry challenges the very foundations of an intelligible universe and hence, if taken to its logical end, would result in the destruction of knowledge.

Social harms

Pagan societies are notoriously hierarchical with class-systems in place that oppress the marginalized, vulnerable, and disadvantaged. This is because the structure of a society reflects its beliefs and values. A pagan society that believes in a hierarchy of gods will organize itself as a hierarchy of people. We have seen

⁹⁷ *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, no. 3531; *Musnad Ahmad*, no. 19498. The scholars have differed on the authenticity of this report. Al-Albānī declared it *ḍaʿīf* (weak) [*Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Mājah*, no 3531]. Bin Bāz declared the chain as good (*jayyid*) [*Fatāwā Nūr ʿalaa ad-Darb li-Ibn Bāz*, (Riyād: Ar-Riʿāsat al-ʿĀmmah lil-Buḥūth wa al-Iftāʾ, 2007), vol. 1, 383]. Regardless of the chain, the content is consistent with other authentic narrations that speak about the prohibition of charms and amulets as quoted above.

⁹⁸ Qur’an 10:49.

⁹⁹ Qur’an 21:22.

¹⁰⁰ Qur’an 45:3–4.

similar problems with atheists who adopt Social Darwinism as an ideology, categorizing human beings according to their race and privileging some over others. It was precisely this ideology that led to the horrors committed by Nazi Germany.¹⁰¹ Nationalism and populism in the 21st century also divide the world based on race and have strong supremacist overtones. The notion of human ‘equality’ in countries like the United States is explicitly based on the idea of One God, where the Constitution states, “All men are created equal under God.”

Tawhīd provides a basis for the equality of all mankind since they were all created by the same singular Divine Entity and can be traced back to the same two parents. Abu Nadrah reported: The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said during the middle of the day at the end of the pilgrimage, “O people, your Lord is One and your father Adam is one. There is no favor of an Arab over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab over an Arab, and neither white skin over black skin, nor black skin over white skin, except by righteousness.”¹⁰²

Dr. Craig Considine, a non-Muslim professor of Islamic studies, argues that this is the first record of any historical figure explicitly advocating for racial equality.¹⁰³ *Tawhīd* is a great **unifying** force, granting all people a chance to reach their full spiritual potential without any arbitrary ceiling placed upon them because of the family they happened to be born into. Islam is undeniably the purest expression of monotheism historically and today. This is why we find that the first generations of Islam were unique, in their time, for their egalitarian attitudes. Freed slaves occupied high positions in Islamic scholarship, as did many women. Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ, an African man, became the official *mu’adhdhin* for the Muslims of Madīnah. Sālim, a freed slave, became one of the greatest scholars of the Qur’an among the companions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr (rA), a woman, became one of the most prolific narrators of hadith, as well as a scholar of law who many men would travel to learn from. Masrūq reported: It was said, “Did ‘Ā’isha (rA) have knowledge of the (laws of) inheritance?” Masrūq said,

¹⁰¹ Richard Dawkins admits that Hitler drew inspiration from Social Darwinism, but argues it was not a faithful representation of Darwin’s ideas. [Dawkins, R. (2009). *The greatest show on earth: The evidence for evolution*. Simon and Schuster, ch. 3].

¹⁰² *Musnad Imam Ahmad*, no. 23489; declared *ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Arnā’ūt.

¹⁰³ “Who is the First Anti-Racist?| Dr. Craig Considine” Emir-Stein Center, YouTube video, June 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTwft2KX9xE>

“By the one in whose hand is my soul, I saw the learned elders among the companions of Muhammad ﷺ ask her about the (laws of) inheritance.”¹⁰⁴

In the generations that followed, we find freed slaves becoming the most significant scholars, and a continuity of female scholarship. An iconic figure that illustrates how egalitarian early Muslim societies were is ‘Aṭā’ ibn Abī Rabāḥ, a blind man of African descent born with congenital defects that left him with a limp, who became the chief judge and scholar of the most sacred city in Islam, Makkah.¹⁰⁵

We are not trying to prove that Muslim societies have always been egalitarian, as there are many historical instances of obvious discrimination or racism. But the shift that occurred in those societies due to the egalitarian consequences of the message of *tawḥīd* is best witnessed in the earliest generations tracing back to the Prophet ﷺ himself. Whenever Muslim societies deviated from this egalitarian ethos, it was in contradiction of Islamic principles and not because of them. In fact, Dr. Akram Nadwi has pointed out that the intellectual schools in Muslim history that were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, such as the Mu‘tazila or the philosophers, did not have female inclusion. He argues this is because Greek philosophy historically viewed women as inferior to men. In his 52-volume encyclopedia¹⁰⁶ that documents the names and short biographies of female scholars in Islam, Dr. Nadwi found none among the Mu‘tazila or Muslim philosophers, but thousands amongst the scholars of hadith. He concluded that the field of hadith was more inclusive of women because it more strongly embodied the pious culture of the Prophet ﷺ and the earliest generations.¹⁰⁷

In more recent times, we find the testimony of Malcolm X on his return from the Hajj pilgrimage very telling of the egalitarian culture among Muslims as compared to the mid-20th century United States. In an interview he stated,

¹⁰⁴ *Muṣannaf Ibn Abī Shaybah*, no. 30387; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Ibn Ḥajr al-Haythamī in *Majmā’ al-Zawā’id* (Beirut: Dār ul-Kutub ‘Ilmīyyah, 2001), 9:285.

¹⁰⁵ Adh-Dhahabī, *Sīyar a ‘lām an-nubalā’* (Beirut: Mu’assasa Ar-Risālah, 1982), 5:81.

¹⁰⁶ Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars in Islam* (N.p.: Interface Publications, 2007).

¹⁰⁷ “Ask Shaykh YQ Special With Dr. Akram Nadwi,” Yasir Qadhi, YouTube video, July 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjFCF2QsMO8>.

While I was at Mecca making the pilgrimage I spoke about the brotherhood that existed at all levels and among all people who were there on that Hajj who had accepted the religion of Islam and I pointed out that for what it had done—what the religion of Islam had done—for those people over there despite their complexion differences that it would probably do America well to study the religion of Islam and perhaps it could drive some of the racism from this society as it has driven the racism of the Muslim society.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Throughout this article we have conducted a moral inquiry into the action of idolatry. We have demonstrated through multiple ethical paradigms that idolatry is not only immoral but that idolatry represents the highest category of evil in each paradigm. Emotional reactions to immoralities cannot be confused with their actual magnitude. Human beings are biased by their own subjectivities. Recognizing that there may be a tension between one's emotions and one's theological commitments is an important step in resolving any doubts that may emerge regarding the immorality of idolatry. The next step is to be critical of one's biases, recognizing that one's emotions are not the criterion of truth. The final step is to continue on the path toward Allah and the closer one connects with Him, the more concordance there will be between one's emotions and theological commitment.

And those who strive for Us—We will surely guide them to Our ways. And indeed, Allah is with the doers of good.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ “Malcolm X: America Needs Islam,” OnePath Network, YouTube video, February 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvvTYJVZu3A>.

¹⁰⁹ Qur'an 29:69.