



## Tawhīd: Asserting God's Unity

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Explaining the essence of Islam and its main pillars, the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "Islam has been built on five [pillars]: testifying that there is no deity but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God; performing the prayers, paying the *zakāt*; making pilgrimage to the House; and fasting in Ramadan."<sup>1</sup>

It is also related with this wording: "Islam has been built upon five [pillars]: worshiping God and rejecting all else beside Him; performing the prayers ..."<sup>2</sup>

And in another wording: "Islam has been built upon five [pillars]: *an yuwahhida' Llāb* - to single out God ..."<sup>3</sup>

As can be discerned, the above three hadiths, with their different phrasings, are synonymous with one another. In other words, they each expound the same meaning. Thus, testifying that *there is no deity but God* is the same as *worshiping God* and none other than Him, which, in turn, is the same as *singling-out God*. It is this conviction of singling-out God for worship which, above all else, lies at the heart of the Islamic faith.

### THE HEARTBEAT OF FAITH

*Worship God*, strictures the Qur'an, *and ascribe not any partner to Him*.<sup>4</sup> Another verse has it that, *We raised in every nation a messenger [saying]: "Worship God and shun false gods!"*<sup>5</sup> Yet another of its passages insists: *We sent no messenger before you except that We revealed to him: "There is no god but I, so worship Me."*<sup>6</sup>

This, then, is the doctrine to which all Muslims submit, and around which the life of the community of faithful revolves; and it is encapsulated in Islam's Declaration of

Faith: *lā ilāha illa' Llāb* - "There is no deity [deserving of worship] but God." This declaration, which - in Islam's outlook - is the central assertion of all the divinely-sent messengers, has immense significance and tremendous virtues attached to it. In one hadith, the Prophet, peace be upon him, declared: "Whoever dies whilst knowing that 'There is no deity but God' shall enter Paradise."<sup>7</sup> Another hadith proclaims: "No one testifies that 'There is no deity but God', truthfully from his heart, except that God will prohibit the Fire to him."<sup>8</sup> "The most fortunate of people," states a celebrated hadith, "who will receive my intercession on the Day of Resurrection is one who says that 'There is no deity but God' sincerely from his heart."<sup>9</sup> In fact, sincerity to, certainty in, truthfulness for, and, of course, compliance with *lā ilāha illa' Llāb* are all conditions for genuine commitment to this declaration as well as divine acceptance of it. Thus, this declaration becomes a summons, as it were, to live an attentive and pious life.

*Lā ilāha illa' Llāb* is also designated as the statement of *tawhīd* - a word that may be rendered simply as "unity" or "monotheism"; although a more accurate translation would be: "asserting the unity of God." Since the notion of *tawhīd* is the cardinal tenet of a Muslim's belief and doctrine, it deserves further exploration.

### AT THE SHORES OF THEOLOGY

Lexically, the word *tawhīd* is glossed in classical Arabic dictionaries as: "Asserting that something is one or singularly unique."<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, God is inevitably and utterly one; perfect and unique unto Himself. However, since it is in the nature of theologians (and jurists) to dot all the i's and cross all the t's, precise theological defini-

tions of the term have been proffered down the ages. Of these, Ibrāhīm al-Bayjūrī's - a thirteenth century Azhari theologian - has received widespread acceptance. He defines *tawḥīd* as:

“To single-out [God] the deity with worship, along with believing in His unity and affirming this for His Essence, Attributes and Actions.”<sup>11</sup>

A century earlier finds the Damascene scholar, Imam al-Safārīnī defining it in similar measure: “It is singling-out [God] the deity with worship, accompanied by believing in His unity [with respect to His] Essence, Attributes and Actions. Thus, His Essence does not admit of any divisibility whatsoever, neither do His Attributes resemble the attributes of others; and neither should one negate them from His Essence. Nor does anyone share in His Acts, for He is the Creator without any other.”<sup>12</sup>

Definitions like the two above reflect the dual concern of Islamic theology: to affirm the absolute transcendence or otherness of God, and to assert that He alone is to be singled-out for worship. The first concern is reflected in proof-texts such as: *There is nothing like Him; yet He is the Hearer, the Seer.*<sup>13</sup> And: *Say: “He is God, the One. God, the Eternal and Absolute. He begets not, nor was He begotten, and equal to Him there is none.”*<sup>14</sup> The second is reflected in those proof-texts that insist God is the only deity deserving of worship; instances of which have already been cited.

#### AN ANCIENT TAXONOMY

Over a thousand years have passed since Ibn Baṭṭāh al-‘Ukbarī, the exemplary Imam and Ḥanbalī jurist, spoke of faith and *tawḥīd* in the following manner:

“This is because the basis of faith in God which people are obliged to believe in requires affirming faith in three things: Firstly, to believe in His lordship (*rabbāniyyah*) so as to be distinct from the negaters; those who do not recognize a Creator. Secondly, to believe in His oneness (*waḥdāniyyah*) and hence be distinguishable from the polytheists; those who affirm a Creator, yet they ascribe others with Him in worship. Thirdly, to believe that He is qualified with [perfect] attributes (*ṣifāt*) which are not lawful to ascribe to anyone save Him: like knowledge, ability, wisdom, and whatever else He describes Himself

with in His Book. ... Thus we find God, Exalted is He, addressing His servants by summoning them to believe in each one of these three [aspects] and to affirm faith in them.”<sup>15</sup>

From here comes the theological insistence that *tawḥīd*, or Divine Unity, is of three categories: *tawḥīd* of God’s lordship (*rabbāniyyah*, *rubūbiyyah*); of His divinity and worship (*waḥdāniyyah*, *ulūbiyyah*); and of His names and attributes (*asmā’ wa’l-ṣifāt*).

#### IN A NUTSHELL

Without rehearsing a prolonged explanation of this triple division of *tawḥīd*, I shall suffice with Imam al-Safārīnī’s summary of it. He writes in the commentary to his own creedal poem, *al-Durrat al-Maḍiyyah*:

“Realize that *tawḥīd* is of three categories: (i) *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyyah*, (ii) *tawḥīd al-ilābiyyah*, (iii) *tawḥīd al-ṣifāt*. *Tawḥīd al-rubūbiyyah* is [the conviction] that there is no Creator, Sustainer, Giver of Life and Death, Bringer into Existence or Non-Existence, except for God. *Tawḥīd al-ilābiyyah* is to single-out God for worship, to deify Him, and to love; yield; surrender; be in need of; and turn to Him. *Tawḥīd al-Ṣifāt* is to describe God by whatever He has described Himself with and whatever His Prophet, peace be upon him, has described Him with; by way of negation and affirmation: affirming what He affirms for Himself, while negating what He negates from Himself. Know that the path of this nation’s Predecessors (*salaf*), and its Imams, was to affirm the Divine Attributes without inquiring into their modality (*takyīf*) or resembling them to creation (*tamthīl*), and without distorting them (*taḥrīf*) or denying them (*ta’īl*).”<sup>16</sup>

#### TEMPERING POLEMICS WITH HORLICKS

Some, in recent times, have objected to this classification of *tawḥīd* and consider it to be a reprehensible *bid‘ah* introduced into Islam by Ibn Taymiyyah. Certainly there isn’t any verse or hadith which categorically or explicitly states that “*tawḥīd* is of three categories.” Thus from this angle such a taxonomy is indeed newly-introduced. But by the same token, many of the classifications and taxonomies employed in the various sciences of the Sacred Law - in *fiqh*, legal theory, or hadith, for instance - are all equally novel. Yet, as has been shown, Ibn Taymiyyah,

rather than being the originator of this triple category of *tawḥīd*, is merely one of its expositors.<sup>17</sup>

If these categories of *tawḥīd* are not explicitly stated in the texts of the Qur'an or the hadith, where then do they come from? The answer: by way of induction (*istiqrā'*). Which is to say, scholars have examined the passages of the Qur'an and hadith that specifically relate to *tawḥīd*, and from these particulars they have inferred a general principle or conclusion that all such texts fall under one of three themes: either they speak of the names and the attributes of God (*asmā' wa'l-ṣifāt*); or His acts towards creation (*rubūbiyyah*); or about our conduct with God, in the sense of affirming His divinity and the necessity of worshipping Him alone (*ilābiyyah, ulūbiyyah*).

Shaykh al-Shanqīṭī says as part of his exegesis to the following verse, *This Qur'an indeed guides to that which is most upright*:<sup>18</sup>

“Included in this is God's *tawḥīd*, Majestic and Exalted is He. Thus the Qur'an does guide to the path which is most upright and balanced, which is that *tawḥīd* occurs in His lordship; in His worship; and in His names and attributes. Indeed, it is proven via the process of induction from the Glorious Qur'an that *tawḥīd* is divided into [these] three categories.”<sup>19</sup>

#### THE LOGIC OF LORDSHIP

The Quranic discourse brings to the fore that conviction in God as Lord, Creator and Sustainer has absolutely no salvic potential unless it is coupled with the belief that only God alone is to be deified with worship. One of the core arguments proffered by the Qur'an to expose the folly of idolatry is: reasoning through *istifbām al-taqrīr* (lit. “inquiry [by way] of affirmation”). This is where the Qur'an interrogates the idolaters about their deeply held convictions concerning who creates, sustains and nurtures them, to which they were compelled to assent to an inconvenient truth: it is God.

Having acknowledged the role of God, it then insists on the logic or lordship - the rationale of *rubūbiyyah*, as it were - by enjoining on them its implication: *ulūbiyyah*; that only God is to be worshiped. Thus when God is the sole Creator, Sustainer, Cherisher, Life-Giver and Taker,

why invoke, deify or worship others along with Him! An example of this reasoning may be seen in the following verses:

*If you were to ask them: “Who created the heavens and the earth, and subjected the sun and the moon?” they will say: “God.” Why then are they lying. God increases the provisions for whomever He wills of His servants and straitens it for whomever He wills. God has knowledge of all things. And if you were to ask them: “Who causes water to come down from the sky, thus reviving the earth after its death?” they will reply: “God.” Say: “Praise be to God!” But most of them do not understand.*<sup>20</sup>

The renowned exegetist, *al-ḥāfiẓ* Ibn Kathīr, explains: “God, Exalted is He, reiterates that there is no true God save Him. For the idolaters who worshiped others along with Him affirmed that He alone was the autonomous creator of the heavens, the earth, the sun and the moon, alternating the night and day; and that He is the Creator and Provider of His servants, meting out for them their life spans and provisions ... Yet with this being the case, why worship others, or be utterly dependent on others? Now just as dominion and sovereignty is His alone, then likewise He alone ought to be worshiped. Indeed, God frequently demonstrates His status of divinity (*ilābiyyah*) by establishing *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyyah*.”<sup>21</sup>

An even more obvious example of such an inquiry is in the following set of verses, that have again been elaborated on by the Mauritanian jurist and exegetist, Shaykh Muhammad al-Amīn al-Shanqīṭī:

“Another example of this is in God's words: *Say: “Who is it that provides for you from the sky and the earth, or who possesses hearing and sight ...” They will respond: “God.”*<sup>22</sup> Thus, when they acknowledged His lordship, God rebukes them for ascribing others along with Him, by stating: *So say: “Will you not then fear Him?”*<sup>23</sup>

“Another example is in His saying: *Say: “To whom does the earth belong and whoever is on it; [answer] if you know?” They will say: “To God.”*<sup>24</sup> So when they affirmed this, God censures them for associating others with Him, by rejoining: *Say: “Will you not then take heed?”*<sup>25</sup> He then states: *Say: “Who is the Lord of the seven heavens*

and the Lord of the formidable Throne?” They will say: “[They belong] to God.”<sup>26</sup> Having conceded to this, God then upbraids them for their associationism by saying: Say: “Will you not then fear Him.”<sup>27</sup> He then said: Say: “In whose band is the dominion over all things and He protects while none can protect against Him? [Answer that] if you know?” They will say: “God.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, having admitted this, God then chastises them for attributing to Him partners or co-equals, by asserting: Say: “How then are you deluded?”<sup>29</sup> ...

“Yet another instance of this is in His words: *And if you ask them who created them, they will say: “God.”* Thus when they soundly affirmed this, God took them to task by saying: *Why then are they diverted away?*”<sup>30</sup><sup>31</sup>

#### PUTTING TO RIGHT A PROTEST

Some have said that the idolaters didn’t really acknowledge God’s lordship; but rather they were cornered into admitting so because of the arguments they were being challenged with. In other words, they uttered with their tongues what their hearts did not truly believe.

Such people marshal as support the fact that the Qur’an informs that the idolaters denied the Resurrection; they invoked false gods; and attributed to them the power to bring benefit and harm: “*We say nothing but that one of our gods has afflicted you with some evil.*”<sup>32</sup>

But this is to utterly miss the point. Yes, the idolaters did indeed have a skewed belief. They did, nevertheless, believe in God’s overall lordship - despite a few serious theological potholes. But due to their refusal to worship only God, as well as their ascribing qualities of divinity to others besides Him, they were excluded from the fold of monotheism and faith. The preceding discussions, I hope, make this abundantly clear.

#### CONTAMINATING TAWHID

The Arabs say: “*bi dīdibā tatabayyan al-asbyā’* - by their opposites are things best clarified.” With this being the case, no discussion about *tawhīd* can be complete without discussing its antithesis: *shirk*.

Equipped as he is by his very nature for worship, man cannot but worship. So if his outlook is cut-off from the

higher spiritual plain, or sufficiently perverted, man will find a god to worship at some lower level, thus endowing created beings, or abstract forces, with qualities that belong solely to the Creator. Or to put it another way, he will ascribe a partner to God in that which is particular to Him. This is what is known in Islam as *shirk* - which is translated variously as “polytheism” or “idolatry”. In the view of Islam’s teachings, no sin is greater, or more deserving of punishment, than the sin of *shirk*.

Imam al-Qurṭubī, the Spanish exegesist and Maliki jurist of the seventh century, states in his magisterial Quranic commentary:

“If this is established, then realise that our scholars, may God be well-pleased with them, assert: *Shirk* is of three levels - all of which are forbidden. Its essence being the belief that there is a partner with God in his *ulūbiyyah*: this being the greatest form of *shirk*; the idolatry of the pre-islamic Arabs. This is what is referred to in His saying: *Surely God will not forgive those who assign partners to Him. But He forgives all save that to whomever He pleases.*<sup>31</sup> Next in degree comes the belief that God has a partner in His acts. This is the belief of those who hold that something in existence, aside God, independently originates an act or brings it into being - even if it is not taken as a deity to be worshiped ... Finally comes *shirk* in acts of worship; this is ostentation (*riyā’*). It is where an act of worship legislated by God is done for the sake of other than Him.”<sup>33</sup>

#### ENTERING THE SEA OF DIVINE UNITY

As we have seen, the central message of Islam and of the Qur’an is not that God exists, or that He is the sole Lord and Creator of all that exists, but that *He alone* deserves to be deified and worshiped. Uncluttered of all theological jargon, the Qur’an is at great pains to demonstrate that divinity is for only God; which it does by portraying a vivid picture of Him via His names, attributes and acts. This, in turn, lends itself to a more immediate awareness of His Unity and of His presence.

Mullā’ ‘Alī al-Qārī, the tenth century Ḥanafī scholar, has some inestimable words about the Quranic concept of *tawhīd*. He writes in his commentary to Abu Ḥanīfah’s doctrinal tract, *al-Fiqh al-Akbar*:

“God, Transcendent and Exalted is He, commences His Book with the *Fātiḥah*, which begins: *Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds*.<sup>34</sup> This highlights the significance of *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyyah*, out of which emerges *tawḥīd al-ulūbiyyah* - which is a prerequisite for creation to actualise servitude to God. In fact, it is the first obligation on a person with respect to knowing about God.

“In a nutshell: *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyyah* obliges *tawḥīd al-ulūbiyyah*; and not the other way around. God, Exalted is He, states: *If you should ask them: “Who created the heavens and the earth?” they would reply: “God.”*<sup>35</sup> Also, God relates that they said: *“We worship them only that they may bring us closer to God.”*<sup>36</sup>

“Most chapters and verses of the Qur’an comprise these two types of *tawḥīd*. In fact, the Qur’an, from beginning to end, expounds on them and establishes their importance. ... Thus the Qur’an, in its entirety, concerns itself with *tawḥīd*: the rights of its adherents and their praise; the censure of *shirk*, its practitioners, their chastisement and recompense.”<sup>37</sup>

#### IN CONCLUSION

We have seen in this article how *tawḥīd*, or asserting the unity of God, is the cornerstone upon which the edifice of Islam has been built. There is, as many non-Muslim writers have been quick to point out, an uncompromising monotheism lying at the heart of the Islamic project. In fact, it is not far-fetched to say that it is impossible to truly grasp the logic of Islam’s vision of life without first appreciating the principle of *tawḥīd*.

Also, the article sought to bat away the misconception that dividing *tawḥīd* into three categories - *rubūbiyyah*, *ulūbiyyah* and *asmā’ wa’l-ṣifāt* - is something culpable, baseless and newfangled; making its theological debut in the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah. Instead we have seen that this classification came well before his time, having its origins around three centuries earlier.

Long before secular humanist philosophies made their presence felt, religion concerned itself with improving the human condition. For faith is feeding the poor. Faith is aiding the needy. Faith is relieving the distressed. Faith is neighbourliness. It is aiding the oppressed against the

oppressor. It is upholding human dignity; it is courtesy towards other living creatures with whom we share this fragile planet. But above all, faith is *tawḥīd*.

As to how a person may make this awareness of *tawḥīd* a reality in their life; of how one can best come to know and worship God, this is answered in the second half of the Declaration of Faith: “Muhammad is the Messenger of God” - *muḥammadun rasūlullāb*. That is to say, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, came with a message from heaven designed to help instil a pattern of spiritual, ethical and social behaviour that fully reflects *tawḥīd* and affirms it.

20-12-07



#### END NOTES

1. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.21.
2. *ibid.*, no.20
3. *ibid.*, no.19.
4. Qur’an 4:36.
5. Qur’an 16:36.
6. Qur’an 21:25.
7. Muslim, no.26.
8. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.128.
9. Al-Bukhārī, no.99.
10. Cf. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣadr, 2000), 15:166; al-Jurjānī, *al-Ta’rīfāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2000), 73; Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 2:2927.
11. *Tuḥfat al-Murīd ‘alā Jawbarat al-Tawḥīd* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2006), 38.
12. *Lawāmi’ al-Anwār al-Babiyyah* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmi, 1991), 1:57. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, the expression that God’s Essence admits of no divisibility (*lā yanqasim wa lā yatajazza*) - as well as assertions like He is not a body (*jism*), nor does He have a direction (*jibab*), and nor do contingencies indwell in Him (*lā taḥulluhu al-ḥawādith*) - are terms that are vague and imprecise (*mujmal*). His view about employing such terminology runs as follows:  
 “Every term newly introduced by people, such that one faction affirms it while the other negates it, then we should neither categorically affirm nor negate it without first understanding what is being meant by it. If the meaning is sound; agreeing with the Prophets, the Book and the Sunnah - in respect to what it affirms or negates - we assent to it. If it is false; opposing what the Book or the Sunnah have come with - in what it affirms or negates - we reject speaking with it.” *Majmū’ al-Fatawā* (Riyadh: Dār ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1991), 6:36-7.

His concerns about using such expressions is also reflected in the following passage: “The terms *jism*, *jawbar* (substance),

or their like are not found in the Book of God, the Sunnah of His Prophet, and nor in the speech of any Companion or Successor. And none of the Imams have spoken about it in connection with God; neither by way of negation nor affirmation. Which is why [Imam] Aḥmad articulates in his epistle to al-Mutawakkil: 'I do not like speech concerning any of this, except if it is in the Book of God; in the hadith of God's Messenger, peace be upon him; or if it is related from the Companions or their Successors. Aside from this, speech about it is reprehensible.'" *Majmū' al-Fatawā*, 17:313.

Al-Qurṭubī - explaining the verse [7:54]: *Then He rose above the Throne* - likewise said: "The early *salaf*; may God be pleased with them all, never spoke in negation of a *jibab* (direction for God), nor in favour of it. Instead they spoke and sufficed with affirming for God, Exalted is He, whatever is related in His Book or by His Messenger." *Al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), 7:140-1.

13. Qur'an 42:11.

14. Qur'an 112:1-4.

15. *Al-Ibānab 'an Sbari'at al-Firqat al-Nājiyyab* (Riyadh: Dār al-Rāyah, 1993), 2:181-2.

Al-Dhahabī opens his biographical notice on Ibn Baṭṭāh by saying: "The Imam and exemplar; the devout worshipper, jurist and hadith master; shaykh of Iraq; Abu 'Abd Allah 'Ubayd Allah b. Muhammad b. Ḥamdān al-'Ukbarī al-Ḥanbalī: Ibn Baṭṭāh. He authored a book *al-Ibānab al-Kubrā* in three volumes." He was born in the year 304H. and passed away in 387H. He was someone "whose supplications were readily answered." "And never did any objectionable news [about others] reach him except that he would cast it in a better light." *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1998), 16:529-33.

16. *Lawāmi' al-Anwār al-Babiyyab*, 1:128-9.

17. Ibn Taymiyyah was born in the Islamic year 661H, and passed away in 728H; three centuries after Ibn Baṭṭāh.

18. Qur'an 17:9.

19. *Aḍwā' al-Bayān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), 3:304.

20. Qur'an 29:61-3.

21. *Tafsīr Qur'ān al-'Azīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1987), 3:431. The passage concludes: "In fact the polytheists acknowledged this, since they proclaimed as part of their paeen of praise and glorification (*talbiyyab*): 'Ever at Your service [O God]. You have no partner save the ones You have. You lord over all, while none lord over You."

22. Qur'an 10:31.

23. *ibid.*

24. Qur'an 23:84-5.

25. Qur'an 23:85

26. Qur'an 23:86-7.

27. Qur'an 23:87.

28. Qur'an 23:88-9.

29. Qur'an 23:89.

30. Qur'an 43:87.

31. *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, 3:305-6.

32. Qur'an 4:48. The verse ends: *Whosoever ascribes partners to God is guilty of a most monstrous sin.*

33. Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), 5:118.

The first two examples of *shirk* cited in the passage constitute the greater form of *shirk* - which nullifies *tauhīd* totally. The final example - *riyā'*, or showing-off - is referred to as the lesser form of *shirk*. This mars the purity and perfection of *tauhīd*, but does not completely annul it.

34. Qur'an 1:1.

35. Qur'an 31:25.

36. Qur'an 39:3.

37. *Sbarḥ Mullā' 'Alī al-Qārī 'ala'l-Fiqḥ al-Akbar* (Karachi: Qadami Kutub Khānah, n.d.), 9-10.



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