194157 - The abhorrent nature of shirk

the question

What is meant by the words of Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him): The description of being a mushrik [one who associates others with Allah] is valid and is confirmed even if the message has not reached him, because he is associating others with his Lord and regarding false gods as being equal to Allah?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

The abhorrent nature of shirk, wrongdoing and shameful deeds is something that is well-established even if one has not heard of the teachings of the Prophets, but the (divine) punishment of one who does such deeds does not become due until after the teachings reach him

What Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) meant by these words was to highlight that shirk is wrong and blameworthy, and that the one who commits shirk is to be described as a mushrik; his action is abhorrent and blameworthy, regardless of whether or not proof with evidence has been established against the mushrik, because shirk is abhorrent in all cases, before the sending of the message and afterwards.

Then he explained: The (divine) punishment of this mushrik is conditional and cannot be carried out unless matters are explained and proof is established. Therefore he does not deserve to be punished except after the Messenger has come and after the matter has been explained and made clear. If he associates others with Allah after the matter has been explained, then he deserves punishment, but if he did that before becoming aware of the teachings that were brought by the Messenger, he does not deserve punishment until proof is established against him.

So the discussion of Ibn Taymiyah is highlighting two issues:

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He points out that shirk is abhorrent and is entirely evil; that is its inherent nature and cannot be separated from it, whether that is before proof was established with the sending of the Messengers and Books, or after that. The mushrik is the one who fell into shirk and it became his practice; the fact that proof has not been established does not alter the nature or name of shirk as described in the religious texts.

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The mushrik does not deserve to be punished for his shirk except after proof is established against him. Punishment and reward cannot become due on the basis of what may be arrived at on the basis of rational thinking. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And never would We punish until We sent a messenger”

[al-Isra’ 17:15]

“And Allah would not let a people stray after He has guided them until He makes clear to them what they should avoid. Indeed, Allah is Knowing of all things”

[at-Tawbah 9:115].

By highlighting the above, Shaykh al-Islam (may Allah have mercy on him) intended to refute the arguments of two (theological) groups:

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The Mu‘tazilah and those who followed them in their view that the mushrikeen [those who associate others with Allah] are deserving of (divine) punishment on the basis of what they could have understood through rational thinking, even if proof was not established against them through the sending of the Messenger.

-2-

The Ash‘aris and those who agreed with their view that shirk and wrongdoing are not abhorrent in and of themselves; rather their abhorrent nature is only confirmed on the basis of the religious texts that highlight their abhorrent nature, after proof is established on the basis of the religious text.

Then he explained that the view of Ahl as-Sunnah is a middle path between these two. Shirk, wrongdoing and shameful deeds are all abhorrent and blameworthy matters, both before proof is established and after that. This is something that is understood by means of rational thinking and sound human nature, but Allah, may He be exalted, does not punish people except after establishing proof against them, as He made clear in His Book.

This is clearly stated by Shaykh al-Islam in several places in his books.

He said:

In some cases Allah differentiates between what came before the message was sent and what came afterwards, in terms of descriptions and rulings. In other cases, He gives the same descriptions and rulings both before and after the message was sent. This is proof against the two groups: against those who say that there is no such thing as deeds that are good or bad, and those who say that they deserve punishment regardless of whether the message reaches them or not.

With regard to the first group, Allah calls them wrongdoers, transgressors and spreaders of corruption and mischief, as He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Go to Pharaoh. Indeed, he has transgressed”

[Taa-Haa 20:24]

“And [mention] when your Lord called Moses, [saying], ‘Go to the wrongdoing people –

The people of Pharaoh. Will they not fear Allah?’”

[ash-Shu‘araa’ 26:10-11]

“Indeed, Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and made its people into factions, oppressing a sector among them, slaughtering their [newborn] sons and keeping their females alive. Indeed, he was of the corrupters”

[al-Qasas 28:4].

Thus Allah tells us that Pharaoh was a wrongdoer, a transgressor and a spreader of corruption and mischief; these descriptions are applied to him and his people, and are a criticism of their deeds, because criticism is only applicable to deeds that are evil and abhorrent. This indicates that deeds may be described as abhorrent and blameworthy before the Messenger came to them, but they did not deserve punishment except after the Messenger came to them, because Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And never would We punish until We sent a messenger”

[al-Isra’ 17:15].

Similarly, Allah tells us that Hood said to his people (interpretation of the meaning):

“O my people, worship Allah; you have no deity other than Him. You are not but inventors [of falsehood]”

[Hood 11:50].

Thus He describes them as inventors of falsehood before any ruling stated by the text that they might have gone against, because they associated another god with Allah.

The description of the mushrik is confirmed before the message is sent, because he is associating others with his Lord and is regarding false gods as being equal to Him, and he is ascribing other gods alongside Him and declaring them to be equals and rivals before the Messenger is sent.

Something similar may be said with regard to ascribing ignorance to the ignorant, and describing someone as being ignorant or behaving in an ignorant manner before the messenger comes.

As for (divine) punishment, however, there is no punishment [except after the message has been sent].

With regard to turning away and refusing to obey Allah, as in the verse (interpretation of the meaning) “And the disbeliever had not believed, nor had he prayed. But [instead], he denied and turned away” [al-Qiyaamah 75:31-32]; this can only be after the coming of the Messenger. Similar to that is what Allah says of Pharaoh (interpretation of the meaning): “But Pharaoh denied and disobeyed” [an-Naazi‘aat 79:21] – that was after the Messenger came to him, as Allah, may He be exalted, says: “And he showed him the greatest sign, But Pharaoh denied and disobeyed” [an-Naazi‘aat 79:20-21] and “But Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger” [al-Muzzammil 73:16].

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (20/37-38).

He (may Allah have mercy on him) also said:

The majority of the earlier and later generations are of the view that what they (Pharaoh and his people, etc.) did before the coming of the Messenger constituted shirk and ignorance, and was something abhorrent and evil, but they did not deserve (divine) punishment until after the coming of the Messenger.

Therefore:

With regard to shirk, wrongdoing, lying, shameful deeds and the like, there are three scholarly views:

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It was said that their abhorrent nature is known through rational thinking, and that they deserve punishment for that in the hereafter, even if no Messenger came to them, as is the view of the Mu‘tazilah and many of the companions of Abu Haneefah, who narrated it from Abu Haneefah himself, and it is also the view of Abu’l-Khattaab and others.

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It was said that there is nothing that can be regarded as abhorrent or good or evil before the sending of the message; rather what is abhorrent is that which Revelation came and said not to do it; what is good is that which revelation came and said to do it, or that for which permission was given to do it, as is the view of the Ash‘aris and those who agree with them.

-3-

And it was said that these deeds were were bad or evil or abhorrent before the Messenger came, but the (divine) punishment only becomes due when the Messenger is sent. This is the view of most of the early generations and most of the Muslims, and it is proven by the Qur’an and Sunnah, which clearly state that what the disbelievers believed in was evil, abhorrent and bad before the Messengers came, even though the punishment did not become due except after the Messenger was sent.

In as-Saheeh it is narrated that Hudhayfah said: O Messenger of Allah, we were in a state of ignorance and evil, then Allah brought this goodness to us. After this goodness, will there be any evil? He said: “Yes, there will be callers at the gates of Hell, and whoever responds to them, they will throw him into it.”

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (11/676-677).

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Lateef ibn ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan ibn Hasan Aal ash-Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The fact that proof was not yet established does not affect the shar‘i descriptions of people and actions; rather things are to be called what the Lawgiver called them, such as disbelief, shirk or evildoing, as named in the religious texts. The fact that proof is not yet established does not alter these descriptions, even if the person is not to be punished if no shar‘i proof was established against him and the message did not reach him. There is a difference between regarding a certain sin as constituting disbelief and regarding the one who did it as a disbeliever.

End quote from Minhaaj at-Ta’sees (p. 316).

For more information and further explanation, please see the answer to question no. 111362.

And Allah knows best.