228033 - Shar‘i evidence that the one who is ignorant is excused with regard to issues of shirk and kufr

the question

Is the ignorant person excused with regard to issues of shirk and kufr? I know that you have stated on your website that such a person is excused, but I want to know in some detail the evidence which indicates that the ignorant person is excused with regard to matters of belief and shirk.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

With regard to the ignorant person who does acts of kufr or shirk, one of the following two scenarios must apply:

-1-

The first scenario is: he is not Muslim, whether he follows another religion or does not have a religion.

If that is the case, then such a person is a disbeliever, whether he knows what he is doing or is ignorant, or he is basing his disbelief on some misinterpretation. He is not subject to the same rulings as a Muslim in this world, and he is subject to the rulings on disbelievers, because he has not entered Islam in the first place, so how can we deem him to be Muslim when he has never claimed to be Muslim?

With regard to the hereafter, if he was truly ignorant, and the call of Islam never reached him at all, or it reached him in a distorted manner in such a way that proof is not established against one like him, then with regard to his fate on the Day of Resurrection, there was a lengthy debate among the scholars.

The most correct scholarly view concerning him is that he will be tested on the Day of Resurrection. Then whoever obeys Allah will enter Paradise, and whoever disobeys Him will enter Hell.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

There are numerous reports which state that in the case of a person whom with the message did not reach in this world, a messenger will be sent to him on the Day of Resurrection.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fatawa (17/308)

This has been discussed previously in the answers to questions no. 1244 and 215066

-2-

The second scenario is: he claims to be a Muslim and fulfils the conditions of being described as such, and he openly declares his complete belief in Islam and his belief in the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

In the case of such a person, if he does a deed that makes him a disbeliever out of ignorance, he is not to be deemed a disbeliever because of that, and the description of being Muslim is not to be taken away from him, unless proof that he is wrong is established and is explained to him.

Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan as-Sa‘di said:

With regard to anyone who believes in Allah and His Messenger and remains steadfast in obeying them, but denies some of that which the Messenger brought, out of ignorance or lack of knowledge that the Messenger brought it – even though that constitutes disbelief and the one who does it is a disbeliever – the fact that he was ignorant of what the Messenger brought makes it disallowed to deem that particular person a disbeliever, regardless of whether the matter has to do with a fundamental or minor issue, because disbelief means rejecting what the Messenger brought, or rejecting some of it, knowingly.

Thus you may know the difference between the disbeliever who disbelieves in the Messenger and

the believer who rejects some of what he brought out of ignorance and misguidance, not knowingly and out of stubbornness.

End quote from al-Fatawa as-Sa‘diyyah (p. 443-447)

The excuse of ignorance is something that is valid and established with regard to all issues of religion, whether they are issues of belief, tawheed and shirk, or issues of fiqhi rulings.

The fact that a Muslim may be excused for ignorance with regard to matters of belief is indicated by several points of shar‘i evidence, as follows:

1.

The shar‘i texts which indicate that the one who makes mistakes is excused, such as the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “Our Lord! Punish us not if we forget or fall into error” [al-Baqarah 2:286]. And Allah, may He be exalted, said [in a hadith qudsi]: “I have granted that”, as is narrated in Saheeh Muslim (126).

And Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “And there is no sin on you if you make a mistake therein, except in regard to what your hearts deliberately intend. And Allah is Ever Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful” [al-Ahzaab 33:5].

And the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Allah has forgiven my ummah their mistakes and forgetfulness, and what they are forced to do.” Classed as hasan by al-Albaani.

These texts indicate that whoever does something that is contrary to what he is obliged to do, because he forgot or out of ignorance, is to be pardoned. The one who is mistaken also includes the one who is ignorant, because the one who is mistaken is anyone who does something contrary to the truth without intending to.

Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan as-Sa‘di said: This is general in meaning and applies to every case in which the believers make mistakes, whether it has to do with deeds or beliefs.

End quote from al-Irshaad ila Ma‘rifat al-Ahkaam (p. 208)

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Ignorance is undoubtedly a mistake. Based on that, if a person does something that constitutes disbelief, in word or deed, not knowing that it constitutes disbelief – i.e., he is ignorant of the shar‘i evidence – then he is not to be deemed a disbeliever.

End quote from ash-Sharh al-Mumti‘ (14/449).

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah said: Allah, may He be exalted, said in the Qur’an (interpretation of the meaning): “Our Lord! Punish us not if we forget or fall into error” [al-Baqarah 2:286]. And Allah, may He be exalted, said [in a hadith qudsi]: “I have granted that”, And He did not differentiate between mistakes with regard to definitive issues or issues based on probability… So whoever says that the one who is mistaken with regard to definitive issues or issues based on probability is sinning has gone against the Qur’an, the Sunnah and the consensus of the early generations.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fatawa (19/210).

And he said: Moreover, my attitude – and those who have spent time with me know that about me – is that I am the one who most emphatically forbids deeming a specific person to be a disbeliever, evildoer or sinner, unless it is known that definitive proof has been established against him, of the kind of proof that anyone who goes against it or rejects it becomes a disbeliever, evildoer or sinner. I affirm here that Allah has forgiven this ummah for their mistakes, which includes mistakes in issues of beliefs, words and practical actions.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fatawa (3/229)

Ibn al-‘Arabi said: With regard to the ignorant and those who make mistakes among this ummah, even if they do acts that constitute disbelief and shirk, the kind of deeds that result in the doer being deemed a mushrik or a disbeliever, they are to be excused for their ignorance and mistakes until proof is established against them, of the type of proof that whoever rejects it becomes a disbeliever and it is clearly explained to the degree that a man of his calibre would not be confused after such an explanation. End quote. This was narrated from him by al-Qaasimi in

Mahaasin at-Ta’weel (3/161).

Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan al-Mu‘allimi said: Even if we sometimes say that this is calling upon someone other than Allah, may He be exalted, and it is an act of worship and shirk, we do not mean that everyone who does that is a mushrik. Rather the mushrik is the one who does that with no excuse. As for the one who does that with an excuse, then perhaps he is one of the best slaves of Allah, may He be exalted and one of the most virtuous and pious.

End quote from Athaar ash-Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan al-Mu‘allimi (3/826)

2.

The texts indicate that Allah’s proofs against people cannot be established except after they have knowledge of the proof, such as the verses in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And We never punish unless We have sent a Messenger”

[al-Isra’ 17:15]

“Messengers as bearers of good news as well as of warning in order that mankind should have no plea against Allah after the Messengers. And Allah is Ever All-Powerful, All-Wise”

[an-Nisa’ 4:165]

“And Allah will never lead a people astray after He has guided them until He makes clear to them as to what they should avoid”

[at-Tawbah 9:115]

and there are other verses which indicate that proof cannot be established except after knowledge and clear explanation.

These verses indicate that the accountable person is not required to carry out Islamic duties

except having acquired knowledge concerning them. If he does not know of them, then he is excused.

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen said, explaining what we learn from this verse, “Messengers as bearers of good news as well as of warning…” [an-Nisa’ 4:165]:

The most important thing we learn is that the excuse of ignorance is a valid excuse, even with regard to the fundamentals of religion, because the Messengers brought both fundamental and minor issues, so if a person is ignorant and no messenger came to him, then he has an excuse before Allah.

End quote from Tafseer Soorat an-Nisa’ (2/485).

Ibn al-Qayyim said:

The shar‘i rulings only become binding upon a person when he reaches puberty and when the rulings reach him. Just as the rulings are not binding upon him before he reaches puberty, by the same token they are not binding upon him before they reach him.

End quote from Badaa’i‘ al-Fawaa’id (4/168).

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said in ar-Radd ‘ala al-Ikhnaa’i, annoted by al-‘Anzi (p. 206):

Similarly, if a person calls upon someone other than Allah and performs the Hajj rituals for someone other than Allah, he is also a mushrik, and his actions constitute disbelief, but he may not be aware that this is shirk which is forbidden.

When many of the Tatars and others entered Islam, they had small idols made of felt and other things, which they sought to draw close to and venerated. They did not know that this was prohibited in the religion of Islam. They would also seek to draw close to (and worship) fire, not knowing that doing so is prohibited. There are many kinds of shirk which some of those who enter Islam may be unaware of and not realise that it is shirk. Such a person is misguided and the deed

in which he associates others with Allah is invalid, but he does not deserve to be punished unless proof is established against him. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “Then do not set up rivals unto Allah (in worship) while you know (that He Alone has the right to be worshipped)” [al-Baqarah 2:22]. End quote.

3.

The texts which tell the stories of some who fell into shirk or disbelief but were excused. They include the following:

(i) The story of the man who issued instructions that his body was to be burned and who denied the power of Allah over him

It was narrated from Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “There was a man who transgressed against his soul (by committing a great deal of sin). When he was dying he said to his sons: ‘When I die, burn me, then grind my bones, then scatter me in the wind, for by Allah, if my Lord grasps hold of me, He will punish me as He has never punished anyone else.’ When he died, that was done to him, but Allah commanded the earth: ‘Gather together whatever of him there is in you.’ So it did that, then the man was standing there. Allah said: ‘What made you do what you did?’ He said: ‘O Lord, I feared You.’ So He forgave him.”

Agreed upon.

What this man said constituted major disbelief that puts one beyond the pale of faith, because it was an implicit denial of the power of Allah to gather his scattered dust after he died. Moreover the divine attribute of power is one of the most obvious and clear of divine attributes, which is obviously connected to the Lordship and divinity of Allah. In fact it is one of the most significant attributes of the Lord. But this man was not deemed a disbeliever, because he was excused for his ignorance.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr said: The scholars differed concerning the meaning of this hadith. Some of them

said: This was a man who was ignorant of one of the attributes of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, namely His power. So he did not know that Allah has power to do whatever He wills. They said: If a person is ignorant of one of the attributes of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, but he believes in and knows all the other divine attributes, his ignorance of some of the attributes of Allah does not mean that he is to be deemed a disbeliever. And they said: rather the disbeliever is the one who stubbornly rejects the truth, not one who is ignorant of it.

This is the view of the earlier scholars and of later scholars who followed in their footsteps.

End quote from at-Tamheed lima fi'l-Muwatta' min al-Ma'aani wa'l-Asaaneed (18/42).

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah said:

This was a man who had some doubts about the power of Allah and His ability to bring him back to life if his dust was scattered. Rather he believed that Allah would not be able to resurrect him, which constitutes disbelief according to Muslim consensus. But he was ignorant and did not know that, although he was a believer who feared that Allah would punish him. Therefore Allah forgave him for that.

End quote from Majmoo' al-Fatawa (3/23 1).

He also said:

This man believed that Allah would not be able to gather his dust if he did that, or he doubted that Allah could do that, and believed that He would not resurrect him. In both cases, such beliefs constitute disbelief, and the one for whom such proof has been established is to be deemed a disbeliever. But this man was ignorant of that and no knowledge had reached him to dispel his ignorance, yet he had faith in Allah and believed in His commands and prohibitions, His promises and warnings, and therefore he feared His punishment. So Allah forgave him because of his fear of Him.

If one of those who believe in Allah and His Messenger and the Last Day, and do righteous deeds, make some mistakes in their understanding of some issues of belief, they will not be worse off

than this man. Allah may forgive their errors or He may punish them, if they fell short and do not make sufficient efforts to find out about the truth and follow it.

As for deeming a person who is known to have faith to be a disbeliever for simply making mistakes with regard to some issues of belief, that is a serious matter indeed.

End quote from al-Istiqaamah (1/164)

Imam ash-Shaafa'i said:

Allah has names and attributes that are mentioned in His Book, and of which His Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) has told his ummah. No one to whom proof has been presented clearly can reject that, because they are mentioned in the Qur'an and are mentioned in saheeh reports from the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

Therefore if a person goes against that after clear proof has been presented to him, then he is a disbeliever. However, before clear proof has been presented to him, he may be excused for his ignorance, because knowledge of such matters cannot be figured out on the basis of reasoning or on the basis of reflecting and thinking. We do not deem anyone to be a disbeliever for not knowing it, except after knowledge thereof reaches him.

End quote from Siyar A'laam an-Nubala' (10/79)

(ii) The story of the Children of Israel with Moosa

Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"And We brought the Children of Israel (with safety) across the sea, and they came upon a people devoted to some of their idols (in worship). They said: 'O Moosa (Moses)! Make for us an ilahan (a god) as they have aliha (gods).' He said: 'Verily, you are a people who know not (the Majesty and Greatness of Allah and what is obligatory upon you, i.e., to worship none but Allah Alone, the One and the Only God of all that exists).'

(Moosa (Moses) added:) 'Verily, these people will be destroyed for that which they are engaged in

(idols-worship). And all that they are doing is in vain.’

He said: ‘Shall I seek for you an Ilahan (a God) other than Allah, while He has given you superiority over the Alameen (mankind and jinns of your time)?’”

[al-A‘raaf 7:138-140].

They demanded that Moosa (peace be upon him) should make them an idol so that they could seek to draw close to Allah by worshipping it, as those mushrikeen had taken an idol for worship.

Ibn al-Jawzi said:

This shows how great their ignorance was, as they thought that it was permissible to worship something other than Allah, after they had seen the signs.

End quote from Zaad al-Maseer (2/150)

Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan al-Mu‘allimi said:

It seems from the response of Moosa (peace be upon him) that even though he denounced them for their ignorance, he did not regard their demand as apostasy from faith. This is supported by the fact that they were not taken to task at this point as they were taken to task when they took the calf for worship. It is as if in this instance – and Allah knows best – they were excused because they were new in their faith.

End quote from Majmoo‘ Rasaa’il al-Mu‘allimi (1/142)

(iii) The story of Dhaat Anwaat

It was narrated that Abu Waaqid al-Laythi said: We set out with the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) towards Hunayn, and we passed by a lote-tree. We said: O Prophet of Allah, make this into a dhaat anwaat for us as the disbelievers have a dhaat anwaat. The disbelievers used to hang (yanootoona) their weapons on a lote-tree and stay around it, showing devotion to it.

The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Allahu akbar! This is what the Children of Israel said to Moosa, ‘Make for us a god as they have gods’! You will certainly follow in the footsteps of those who came before you.”

Narrated and classed as saheeh by at-Tirmidhi (2180). It was also narrated by Imam Ahmad (21900) and classed as saheeh by Shaykh al-Albaani.

They asked the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) to do something that constituted shirk akbar (major shirk); they wanted him to prescribe for them to hang their weapons on trees, as the mushrikeen did. Hence the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) regarded their words as being akin to the words of the Children of Israel to Moosa.

Muhammad Rasheed Rida said: Those who said that to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) were new Muslims who had recently given up shirk, so they thought that if the Prophet allocated something like that for that purpose, it would be acceptable and would not be contrary to Islam.

End quote from his comment on Majmoo‘ ar-Rasaa’il wa’l-Masaa’il an-Najdiyyah (4/39)

Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Razzaaq ‘Afeefi was asked about the grave-worshippers who believe in the dead and ask of them. The shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him) said: They are apostates from Islam, if proof is established against them. Otherwise they are excused for their ignorance, like those who asked for a dhaat anwaat.

End quote from Fatawa ash-Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Razzaaq ‘Afeefi (p. 371)

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah said:

After learning what the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) brought, we inevitably learn that he did not prescribe for his ummah to call upon any of the dead, whether they were Prophets, righteous people or anyone else, whether in the sense of seeking help or otherwise, whether by way of seeking refuge or in any other way.

Similarly, he did not prescribe for his ummah to prostrate to anyone, dead or otherwise, and the like. Rather we know that he prohibited all such things, and that these things come under the heading of shirk which Allah and His Messenger forbade.

But because of the prevalence of ignorance and lack of knowledge of Islamic teachings among many of the later generations, it is not possible to deem them disbelievers because of that, until they learn and find out what the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) brought, and what contradicts it.

End quote from ar-Radd ‘ala al-Kubra (2/731)

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Muhsin al-‘Abbaad said:

As for calling upon the occupants of the graves and seeking their help, and asking them to meet one’s needs and relieve distress, this is major shirk that puts one beyond the pale of Islam.

Such actions should be described as shirk and disbelief, but it should not be said that the one who does that is a mushrik and a disbeliever, because whoever does that and is ignorant is excused because of his ignorance, unless proof is presented to him and he understands it, then he persists in that. In that case he may be deemed to be a disbeliever and an apostate.

Confusion concerning graves is something that many people have fallen into, who were raised in an environment where venerating graves and calling upon their occupants was regarded as a sign of loving the righteous, especially if there was among them one of the pseudo-scholars who are leading the people in venerating graves and seeking the help of their occupants, claiming that they are mediators who will bring people closer to Allah.

End quote from Kutub wa Rasaa’il al-‘Allaamah al-‘Abbaad (4/372)

(iv) The hadith of Hudhayfah ibn al-Yamaan (may Allah be pleased with him)

It was narrated that Hudhayfah ibn al-Yamaan (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Islam will wear out as colour

on a garment wears out, until no one will know what fasting, prayer, Hajj and charity (zakaah) are. The Book of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, will be taken away at night, and not one verse of it will be left on earth. And there will be some people left, old men and old women, who will say: We saw our fathers saying these words, Laa ilaaha ill-Allah, so we say them too."

Silah said to him: What good will (saying) Laa ilaaha ill-Allah do them, when they do not know what fasting, prayer, Hajj and charity are?

Hudhayfah turned away from him. He repeated his question three times, and Hudhayfah turned away from him each time.

Then he turned to him on the third time and said: O Silah, it will save them from Hell, three times.

Narrated by Ibn Maajah (4049), classed as saheeh by al-Buwaysiri in Misbaah az-Zujaajah (2/291); classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Silsilat al-Ahaadeeth as-Saheehah (1/171).

This hadith indicates that those people will have nothing but faith in the general sense of affirming Tawheed; they will know nothing of Islam except simply affirming what they found their fathers saying.

Ibn Taymiyah said:

Many people may grow up in places and times where a lot of the teachings of Islam are worn out, so that there is no one left to convey that with which Allah sent His Messenger of the Book and wisdom, so they do not know much of that with which Allah sent His Messenger, and there will be no one to convey to them. Such a person cannot be deemed a disbeliever, therefore the leading scholars are unanimously agreed that whoever is brought up in the wilderness, far away from people of knowledge and faith, and is new in Islam, and denies something of these obvious rulings that were established through mutawaatir texts, is not to be deemed a disbeliever until he learns what the Messenger brought.

End quote from Majmoo' al-Fatawa (11/407)

Conclusion:

The type of ignorance for which a person is excused is that whereby he does not know about the truth and no one mentions the truth to him. This may be a reason why he cannot be labelled a sinner and he cannot be labelled as his deed would dictate. Then if he claims to be a Muslim and testifies that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, then he is to be regarded as one of them. If he does not claim to be a Muslim, then in this world he is to be deemed a member of the religion to which he belongs.

As for the hereafter, his case is like that of people who lived in the period between Prophets, and he will be judged by Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, on the Day of Resurrection. The soundest scholarly opinion concerning them is that they will be tested in whatever way Allah wills; whoever among them obeys will enter Paradise, and whoever among them disobeys will enter Hell.

End quote from Majmoo‘ Fatawa wa Rasaa’il ash-Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (2/128)

See also the answers to questions no. 215338 and 111362

For more information, please see Ishkaaliyyah al-I‘dhaar bi’l-Jahl fi’l-Bahth al-‘Uqadi by Dr Sultaan al-‘Umayri.

And Allah knows best.