34817 - What Is Shirk and its types?

the question

I often read that “this action is major shirk” and “this is minor shirk”. Could you explain to me the difference between the two?

Summary of answer

Shirk means ascribing a partner or rival to Allah in Lordship (rububiyyah), worship or in His names and attributes. See the detailed answer to know more about the difference between major and minor shirk.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

What is shirk?

One of the most important obligations is to know the meaning of shirk, its seriousness and its different types, so that our Tawheed (belief in the Oneness of Allah) and our Islam may be complete, and our faith may be sound. We say – And Allah is the Source of strength and true guidance comes from Him:

Lexical meaning of shirk

Know – may Allah guide you – that the word shirk in Arabic means taking a partner, i.e., regarding someone as the partner of another. It is said [in Arabic]: ashraka baynahuma (he joined them together) when he regarded them as two of equal status; or ashraka fi amrihi ghayrahu (he introduced another into his affair) when he made two people involved in it.

Meaning of shirk in Shari`ah teminology

In terms of shari'ah or Islamic terminology, shirk means ascribing a partner or rival to Allah in Lordship (rububiyyah), worship or in His names and attributes.

A rival is a peer or counterpart. Hence Allah forbids setting up rivals with Him and He condemns those who take them (rivals) as gods instead of or besides Allah in many verses of the Quran. Allah 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]

"And they set up rivals to Allah, to mislead (men) from His path! Say: 'Enjoy (your brief life)! But certainly, your destination is the (Hell) Fire!'" [Ibrahim 14:30]

In the hadith, it is narrated that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "Whoever dies claiming that Allah has a rival, will enter Hell." Narrated by al-Bukhari, 4497; Muslim, 92.

Types of shirk

The texts of the Quran and Sunnah indicate that shirk and the ascribing of rivals to Allah sometimes puts a person beyond the pale of Islam and sometimes does not. Hence the scholars divided shirk into two types which they call shirk akbar (major shirk) and shirk asghar (minor shirk). There follows a brief description of each type:

Major shirk

This means ascribing to someone other than Allah something that belongs only to Allah, such as Lordship (rububiyyah), divinity (uluhiyyah) and the divine names and attributes (al-asma' wa'l-sifat).

This kind of shirk may sometimes be outward, such as the shirk of those who worship idols and

graves, or the dead or absent.

Or it may sometimes be hidden, such as those who put their trust in other gods besides Allah, or the shirk and kufr of the hypocrites. For even though their (hypocrites') shirk puts them beyond the pale of Islam and means that they will abide forever in Hell, it is a hidden shirk, because they make an outward display of Islam and conceal their kufr and shirk, so they are inwardly mushriks but not outwardly.

Types of major shirk

Shirk may sometimes take the form of beliefs

Such as the belief that there is someone else who creates, gives life and death, reigns or controls the affairs of the universe along with Allah.

Or the belief that there is someone else who must be obeyed absolutely besides Allah, so they follow him in regarding as permissible or forbidden whatever he wants, even if that goes against the religion of the Messengers.

Or they may associate others with Allah in love and veneration, by loving a created being as they love Allah. This is the kind of shirk that Allah does not forgive, and it is the shirk of which Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

"And of mankind are some who take (for worship) others besides Allah as rivals(to Allah). They love them as they love Allah" [al-Baqarah 2:165]

Or the belief that there are those who know the Unseen as well as Allah. This is very common among some of the deviant sects such as the Rafidis (Shi'ah), extreme Sufis, and Batinis (esoteric sects) in general. The Rafidis believe that their imams have knowledge of the unseen, and the Batinis and Sufis believe similar things about their awliya ("saints"), and so on. It is also shirk to believe that there is someone who bestows mercy in a manner that is befitting only for Allah, so he shows mercy as Allah does and forgives sins and overlooks the bad deeds of his worshippers.

Shirk may sometimes take the form of words

Such as those who make du’a or pray to someone other than Allah, or seek his help or seek refuge with him with regard to matters over which no one has control except Allah, whether the person called upon is a prophet, a wali (“saint”), an angel or a jinn, or some other created being. This is a kind of major shirk which puts one beyond the pale of Islam.

Or such as those who make fun of religion or who liken Allah to His creation, or say that there is another creator, provider or controller besides Allah. All of these are major shirk and a grave sin that is not forgiven.

Shirk may sometimes take the form of actions

Such as one who sacrifices, prays or prostrates to something other than Allah, or who promulgates laws to replace the rulings of Allah and makes that the law to which people are obliged to refer for judgement; or one who supports the kafirs and helps them against the believers, and other acts that go against the basic meaning of faith and put the one who does them beyond the pale of Islam. We ask Allah to keep us safe and sound.

Minor shirk

This includes everything that may lead to major shirk, or which is described in the texts as being shirk, but does not reach the extent of being major shirk.

This is usually of two types:

1 – Being emotionally attached to some means which have no basis and for which Allah has not given permission, such as hanging up “hands”, turquoise beads etc on the grounds that they offer protection or that they ward off the evil eye. But Allah has not made them the means of such protection, either according to shari’ah or according to the laws of the universe.

[Translator’s note: the “hands” referred to are objects made of metal, pottery etc, usually blue or turquoise in colour, that some people hang up to ward off the evil eye, according to their mistaken

belief]

2 – Venerating some people or things in a way that does not go so far as ascribing lordship to them, such as swearing by something other than Allah, or saying, “Were it not for Allah and So and So,” etc.

Guidelines to distinguish major shirk from minor shirk

The scholars have stipulated guidelines to distinguish major shirk from minor shirk when shirk is mentioned in the texts of shari’ah. These guidelines include the following:

1 – When the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) states clearly that this action is minor shirk, such as in al-Musnad (27742) where it is narrated that Mahmud ibn Labid said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “The thing that I fear most for you is minor shirk.” They said: “O Messenger of Allah, what is minor shirk?” He said: “Showing off, for Allah will say on the Day when people are recompensed for their actions: ‘Go to those for whom you were showing off with your deeds in the world, and see what reward you find with them.’” (Classed as sahih by al-Albani in al-Silsilah al-Sahihah, 951)

2 – When the word shirk is used in the texts of the Quran and Sunnah in the indefinite form [without the definite article al-]. This usually refers to minor shirk, and there are many examples of this, such as when the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Incantations, amulets and love spells are shirk.” (Narrated by Abu Dawud, 3883; classed as sahih by al-Albani in al-Silsilah al-Sahihah, 331)

What is meant by shirk here is minor shirk, not major shirk.

Amulets are things that are hung on children such as turquoise beads and the like, which they claim will protect them from the evil eye.

Love spells are something that they do, claiming that it will make a woman beloved to her husband and a man beloved to his wife.

3 – If the Sahabah understood from the texts of Shari'ah that what was meant by shirk here was minor shirk, not major. Undoubtedly the understanding of the Sahabah carries weight, because they are the most knowledgeable of the people concerning the religion of Allah, and the most knowledgeable as to the intent of the Lawgiver.

For example, Abu Dawud (3910) narrated from Ibn Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "Tiyarah (superstitious belief in omens) is shirk, tiyarah is shirk," three times, and there is no one among us but (will have some of that) but Allah will rid him of it by means of tawakkul (putting his trust in Allah). The words "there is no one among us…" are the words of Ibn Mas'ud, as was explained by the prominent scholars of hadith. This indicates that Ibn Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with him) understood that this was minor shirk, because he could not have said, "There is no one among us…" referring to major shirk. Moreover, major shirk cannot be eliminated by means of tawakkul, rather it is essential to repent therefrom.

4 – If the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) interpreted the words shirk or kufr in a manner which indicates that what is meant is a minor form thereof and not the major form.

For example al-Bukhari (1038) and Muslim (74) narrated from Zayd ibn Khalid al-Juhani that he said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) led the morning prayer for us at al-Hudaybiyah following rainfall during the night. When the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) finished, he turned to face the people and said to them: "Do you know what your Lord has said?" They said: "Allah and his Messenger know best." He said: "This morning one of My slaves became a believer in Me and one a disbeliever. As for him who said: 'We have been given rain by the grace of Allah and His mercy,' that one is a believer in Me, a disbeliever in the stars; and as for him who said: 'We have been given rain by such-and-such a star, that one is a disbeliever in Me, a believer in the stars.'"

The interpretation of the word *kufr* here is given in another report narrated from Abu Hurayrah who said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "Do you not know what your Lord said? 'I do not send any blessing upon My slaves but a group among them

become kafirs thereby because they refer to the stars and attribute things to the stars.'" This explains that if a person attributes rainfall to the stars by believing that they caused it to fall – when in fact Allah has not made the stars a means of causing rainfall – his kufr is a kind of ingratitude for the blessing of Allah. It is well known that ingratitude for the blessing of Allah is minor kufr. But if a person believes that the stars are controlling the universe and they are the ones that cause the rain to fall, then this is major shirk.

Types of minor shirk

Minor shirk may sometimes take the form of outward actions, such as wearing talismans, strings, amulets and the like, and other words and deeds. And sometimes it may be hidden, like a little bit of showing off.

It may also take the form of beliefs:

Such as the belief that something may be a cause of bringing benefit or warding off harm, when Allah has not made it so; or believing that there is barakah (blessing) in a thing, when Allah has not made it so.

It sometimes takes the form of words:

Such as when they said, “We have been given rain by such and such a star,” without believing that the stars could independently cause rain to fall; or swearing by something other than Allah, without believing in venerating the thing sworn by or regarding it as equal with Allah; or saying, “Whatever Allah wills and you will,” and so on.

It sometimes takes the form of actions:

Such as hanging up amulets or wearing a talisman or string to dispel or ward off calamity, because everyone who attributes powers to a thing when Allah has not made it so either according to shari’ah or according to the laws of the universe, has associated something with Allah. This also applies to one who touches a thing seeking its barakah (blessing), when Allah has not created any barakah in it, such as kissing the doors of the mosques, touching their thresholds, seeking healing

from their dust, and other such actions.

This is a brief look at the division of shirk into major and minor. We cannot go into great detail in this short answer.

Tips for Muslims to avoid shirk

What the Muslim must do is to avoid shirk in both its minor and major forms. The greatest sin is shirk and transgression against the unique rights of Allah, which are (for Him) to be worshipped and obeyed Alone, with no partner or associate.

Hence Allah has decreed that the mushrikin will abide forever in Hell and has told us that He will not forgive them, and He has forbidden Paradise to them, as He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Verily, Allah forgives not that partners should be set up with Him (in worship), but He forgives except that (anything else) to whom He wills; and whoever sets up partners with Allah in worship, he has indeed invented a tremendous sin” [al-Nisa 4:48]

“Verily, whosoever sets up partners (in worship) with Allah, then Allah has forbidden Paradise to him, and the Fire will be his abode. And for the Zalimun (polytheists and wrongdoers) there are no helpers” [al-Maidah 5:72]

Every wise and religiously-committed person should fear shirk for himself and should turn to his Lord, asking Him to help him avoid shirk, as al-Khalil [Ibrahim – peace be upon him] said:

“and keep me and my sons away from worshipping idols”

[Ibrahim 14:35 – interpretation of the meaning]

One of the salaf said: “Who can claim to be safe from this after Ibrahim?”

So the sincere believer’s fear of shirk should increase as should his desire for his Lord to keep him away from it, and he should say the great du’a which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be

upon him) taught to his Companions when he said to them: “Shirk among you will be more subtle than the footsteps of an ant, but I will teach you something which, if you do it, both minor and major shirk will be kept away from you. Say: Allahumma inni a'udhu bika an ushrika bika wa ana a’lam wa astaghfiruka lima la a’lam (O Allah, I seek refuge with You from associating anything with You knowingly, and I seek Your forgiveness for that of which I am unaware).” (Classed as sahih by al-Albani in Sahih al-Jami’, 3731)

Difference between major and minor shirk in terms of ruling

The above refers to the difference between major and minor shirk, defining each and describing its types.

With regard to the difference between them as far as the ruling is concerned:

Major shirk puts a person beyond the pale of Islam, so the one who does that is judged to be out of Islam and to have apostatized therefrom, so he is a kafir and an apostate.

Minor shirk does not put a person beyond the pale of Islam, rather it may be done by a Muslim but he still remains in Islam; but the one who does that is in great danger because minor shirk is a major sin. Ibn Mas’ud (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “If I were to swear by Allah falsely, that is better for me than if I were to swear by something other than Him sincerely.” So he regarded swearing by something other than Allah (which is minor shirk) as being worse than swearing by Allah falsely, and it is well known that swearing by Allah falsely is a major sin.

We ask Allah to make our hearts steadfast in adhering to His religion until we meet Him, and we seek refuge in His Might – may He be glorified – from going astray, for He is the Ever-Living Who never dies, but the jinn and mankind will die. And Allah knows best and is most wise, and to Him is the final return of all.

And Allah knows best.