

Shirk

Shirk, (Arabic: “making a partner [of someone]”), in Islam, idolatry, polytheism, and the association of God with other deities.

The Qur’ān (Islamic scripture) stresses in many verses that God does not share his powers with any partner (*sharīk*). It warns those who believe their idols will intercede for them that they, together with the idols, will become fuel for hellfire on the Day of Judgment (21:98). The great majority of *mushrikūn* (polytheists) in the Prophet’s time were those who had never become Muslims; thus, the words of the Qur’ān were addressed not to Muslims with the intention of keeping them firm in their faith but rather to non-Muslim Arabs.

In *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *shirk* became legally equivalent to *kufṛ* (unbelief). Those Muslims who profess it are considered outlaws who should be ousted from the Muslim community; all their legal rights are suspended until they denounce their polytheistic beliefs.

Shirk, however, received considerable extension of meaning throughout the dogmatic development of Islam. It did not remain simply a term for the idolatry prevailing outside Islam but came to be used as the opposite of *tawḥīd* (the oneness of God) and became synonymous with any belief or practice rejected by a particular sect.

Different grades of *shirk* have been distinguished, apart from pure and blatant polytheism. There is *shirk al-‘ādah* (“*shirk* of custom”), which includes all superstitions, such as the belief in omens and the seeking of help from soothsayers. *Shirk al-‘ibādah* (“*shirk* of worship”) is manifested in the belief in the powers of created things—e.g., the reverencing of saints, kissing holy stones, and praying at the grave of a holy man. There is *shirk al-‘ilm* (“*shirk* of knowledge”)—e.g., to credit anyone, such as astrologers or interpreters of dreams, with knowledge of the future. All these types of *shirk* are *shirk ṣaghīr* (“minor *shirk*”) in comparison with polytheism.

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