

Intercession & Tawassul to the divine saints



Grand Ayatollah Hosseini Nassab



Intercession

Intercession is one of the evident principles of Islam, accepted by all the Islamic sects due to its presentation in the holy Quran and the traditions, though they have diversity of opinions on the result of it. Intercession specifies that the holy men, who enjoy a special status before God, ask Him for the forgiveness of other men's transgressions or their soul elevation.

The holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) in this regard said,

اعطيت خمساً ... و اعطيت الشفاعة فادخرتها لامتي *

(I was granted with five qualities.... Intercession was granted to me, and I stored it for my nation.)

The limitation of intercession scope:

The holy Quran rejects the idea of the absolute and unconditional intercession. According to the holy Quran, the intercession works when:

Firstly, the intercessor has been permitted to intercede by Allah. Only a special group of human beings who, in addition to their spiritual connection with Allah, have been permitted by

* Masnad Ahmad, vol.1, p. 301; Sahih, Bokhari, vol. 1, p.91, Eqtypt edition.

Him are able to intercede. The holy Quran in this regard says:

لا يملكون الشفاعة الا من اتخذ عند الرحمن عهدا*

(No one has the power of intercession save those who have a covenant with Allah.)

And somewhere else, it says:

يؤمئذ لا تنفع الشفاعة الا من اذن له الرحمن و رضي له قولا**

(On that Day, no intercession is accepted save of him who has Allah's permission and whose word he is pleased with.)

Secondly, he who is interceded must deserve to enjoy the Divine grace. In other words, he should

* Maryam Sura, verse no.87

** Maryam Sura, verse no.87

have not cut his spiritual connection with Allah and the intercessors. Therefore, the unbelievers, having no belief in Divinity, as well as some of the Muslim sinners, such as those performing not their prayers, and the murderers, who do not hold any spiritual connection with the Divine intercessors, do not deserve the intercession.

With regard to this fact, the holy Quran says,

فما تنفعهم شفاعة الشافعين*

(No intercession of any intercessor will benefit them.)

And concerning the transgressors, it says,

ما للظالمين من حميم و لا شفيع يطاع**

* Moddassir Sura, verse no.48

** Momen Sura, verse no.18

(The disbelievers swallow their anger since there is no intimate friend to talk to about their distress and no intercessor to help them by listening to their complaint.)

The philosophy of intercession

Like repentance, intercession is considered as the ray of hope for those who can forsake their own sins and turn back to the straight direction after they have been deviated. And thereafter, they really change to become Allah's obedient servants. Due to this fact, whenever the sinner feels that he can attain this opportunity in some special conditions (and not in every condition), he endeavors to adjust himself to the conditions.

The result of intercession:

The commentators have diversity of opinion on the result of intercession, whether it causes the

forgiveness of one's sins, or brings about the elevation of one's rank; however, according to the Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants), the former is approved. The Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) said,

ان شفاعتي يوم القيامة لاهل الكبائر من امتي*

(My intercession on the Day of Resurrection will even include those who have committed the mortal sins.)

* Sonan Ibn Majah, vol.2, p.583; Mosnad Ahmad, vol.3,p.213, Sonan Ibn Davood, vol.2, p.537

Intercession and Monotheism

The question that arises here is: Is it polytheism to ask the real intercessors for intercession?

To answer the question, it should be stated that intercession belongs only to Allah; as stated in the holy Quran:

قل لله الشفاعة جميعاً*

(Say: “to Allah belongs all of the intercessions”.)

Therefore, begging intercession, which is no more than His due, of others is indeed an act of worshipping none-gods and totally incompatible with monotheism.

* Zomar Sura, verse no. 44

The term ‘polytheism’ is not to attribute polytheism in Allah’s Essence, His Creative Power, or His Will but polytheism in worshipping Him.

It is evident that the elaboration of this issue needs a precise interpretation on the concept of worship and servitude, and every one of us clearly knows that any kind of submission or request from the people is not deemed as servitude.

As stated explicitly in the holy Quran, the angels prostrated to Adam:

فاذا سويته و نفخت فيه من روعي فقعوا له ساجدين. فسجد

الملائكة كلهم اجمعون*

* Sad Sura, verses no. 72 & 73

** Yousef Sura, verse no. 100

(After I fashioned him and breathed a spirit from My Presence into him, then you all bow to him. The angels all bowed down to him.)

But the essence of this prostration was not an act of worship; otherwise, Allah would never order the angels to do that.

Also, we all know that Jacob and his sons prostrated to Joseph:

ورفع ابويه علي العرش و خروا له سجدا**

(Joseph placed his father and mother on the throne and they all bowed to him.)

If such a state of prostration was really an act of worship to Joseph, neither Jacob, the Divine and

infallible prophet, would do it, nor he would be contented with his sons' act of prostration. Therefore, we must draw a clear distinction between the concept of worship and humility. The reality of worship signifies that man conceives One as God and then worships Him, because He has the strongest Will-power and is Omnipotent to forgive the sins. But, on the contrary, the homage to other men is a sign of reverence when we conceive them neither as God, nor as the Omnipotent.

To answer the question, if we believe that the right of intercession has been submitted to the real intercessors, and they can intercede unconditionally and, as a consequence, forgive our transgressions, such a belief is, no doubt,

accounted as polytheism, because we have begged none-gods what only and only God can do. But if we believe that God has permitted a number of His infallible servants the right of intercession in a certain frame without having the sole possession or control of it, we have never thought of those pious as God, but we have begged them for what they deserve to do.

In the Prophet's lifetime, the sinners frequently begged him for forgiveness, but he never accused them of polytheism.

As quoted from the Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants):

اتدرون ما خيرني ربي الليلة؟ قلنا الله و رسوله اعلم. قال فانه
 خيرني بين ان يدخل نصف امتي الجنة و بين الشفاعة فاخترت
 الشفاعة، قلنا يا رسول الله ادع الله ان يجعلنا من اهلها قال هي
 لكل مسلم*

(Do you know what Allah bestowed upon me tonight? We replied, “Allah and His Messenger know the best”. He went on, “He empowered me to choose between two options: whether half on my nation enter the heaven, or the right of intercession; and I chose the latter”. Then, we said, “O, Messenger! Ask Him for our intercession”, and he said, “Intercession will be for every Muslim”.)

* Sonan, Ibn Majah, vol.2, section Zekr Ul-Shafaa, p.586

** Nesa Sura, verse no.64

In this hadith, the Prophet's disciples begged him clearly for intercession as they say, ... ادع الله

(Ask Allah...)

The holy Quran in this regard says,

ولو انهم اذ ظلموا انفسهم جاؤك فاستغفروا الله و استغفرلهم
الرسول لوجدوا الله تواباً رحيماً*

(If they had come to you when they have wronged themselves and had begged Allah's forgiveness, and the Messenger had begged forgiveness for them, indeed, they would have found that Allah is the Merciful Repentance Acceptor.)

And somewhere else, it says as quoting Jacob's sons,

قالوا يا ابانا استغفر لنا ذنوبنا انا كنا خاطئين*

(They said, “O, our father! Ask for us, forgiveness from Allah against our sins; verily, we have been sinful”.)

And Jacob (a.s) promised them the Divine forgiveness and never accused them of polytheism.

قال سوف استغفر لكم ربي انه هو الغفور الرحيم**

* Yousef Sura, verse no.97

**Ibid, verse no 98

(Jacob said, “I will soon ask my Creator and Nurturer’s forgiveness for you; verily, Allah is the Merciful Forgiving”.)

Tawassul and Invoke the Divine Saints

Another question that arises here is that: Is it polytheism or heresy to invoke the Divine guardians (for assistance)?

By Tawassul we mean to resort to an intermediary to act between man and God in order to elevate his soul.

In his book, entitled ‘Lesan Ul-Arab’, Ibn Manzur writes:

توسل اليه بكذا، تقرب اليه بحرمة أصره تعطفه عليه¹

1- Lesan Ul-Arab, vol, 11,p.724

(To supplicate him through so and do means he managed to hold one close to him through respect and what could attract his attention.)

The holy Quran in this regard says:

يا ايها الذين آمنوا اتقوا الله وابتعوا اليه الوسيله وجاهدوا في
سبيل الله لعلكم تفلحون

(O you who have belief! Be in awe of Allah and seek the means of nearness to him, and strive hard in His way so that you may be prosperous.)²

Juhari in his book, ‘Sahah Ul-Loggah’ defines the term ‘means’ as such:

الوسيله ما يتقرب به الي الغير

2- Maedeh Sura, verse no, 34

(The term 'means' signifies what we hold ourselves close to the other one through it.)

Thus, the worthy means through which we can hold ourselves close to God is whether our own good deeds and sincere worship or the reverend individuals who are held in high esteem and great honor before God, the Almighty.

The Kinds of Supplication:

The Supplication falls into three categories:

1- Supplication to good deeds; as Jalal Ul-Din Suyuti writes in the commentary of the above-mentioned verse:

عن قتاده في قوله تعالى: (و ابتغوا اليه الوسيله) قال: تقربوا الي
الله بطاعته و العمل بما يرضيه

*(With regard to the verse و ابتغوا اليه الوسيله
Ghatadeh says, it means to hold one close to the
Lord through obeying Him and performing the
deeds that pleases Him.)³*

2- Supplication to the sincere prayers of the pious
men of God; as the holy Quran with regard to
Joseph's brothers states:

قالوا يا ابانا استغفر لنا ذنوبنا انا كنا خاطئين قال سأستغفر لكم ربي
انه هو الغفور الرحيم⁴

*(Jacob's sons said to their father, "O father!
Ask forgiveness for us for the sins we have*

3- Dor Ul-Manthur, vol.2. p.280, Beirut edition, below the verse.

4-Yousef Sura, verses no.7-8

committed, because we were surely sinners”. He answered, “Nearly, I shall ask forgiveness for you from my Lord; verily, He is the Merciful, the Forgiving”.)

The above-mentioned verse clarifies that Jacob’s sons supplicated their father for forgiveness and knew it as the best means for their forgiveness. In this condition, Jacob not only did not object to their supplication, but also vowed that he would ask for their forgiveness.

3- Supplication to the reverend nobilities who are held in high esteem by Allah in order to achieve the Divine nearness.

It is noteworthy to say that the Prophet's disciples had adopted this kind of supplication at the advent of Islam. Now, let us study the reasons of this fact under the auspices of the traditions, the Prophet and the Islam nobilities' practice as follows:

Ahmad Ibn Hanbal quotes Othman Ibn Hanif as such:

ان رجلا ضرير البصر اتي النبي صلي الله عليه { و آله } و سلم فقال ادع الله ان يعافيني، قال: ان شئت دعوت لك و ان شئت اخرت ذاك فهو خير، فقال: ادعه.

فامرہ يتوضا فيحسن وضوءه فيصلي ركعتين و يدعو بهذا الدعاء، اللهم اني اسئلك و اتوجه اليك بنبيك محمد نبي الرحمه يا محمد اني توجهت بك الي ربي في حاجتي هذه، فتقضي لي اللهم شفعه في .

(Once, a blind man came to the Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) and implored him as saying, “ask God to cure me”.

The Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) replied, “I pray for you right now if you want. But if I postpone it to some other time that is better for you”.

He asked the Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) to do it now.

The Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) ordered him to take ablution carefully and then perform a two-Rakat prayer and then pray as such: “O, my God! I ask you and resort to you under the auspices of Mohammed, the Prophet of lenience. O, Mohammed, I supplicate God through you to

*grant my need. O God, make him my intercessor.)*⁵

The narrators have all agreed on the authenticity of this hadith so that Hakem Neishaburi in his ‘Mostadrak’ describes it as a sound hadith, and Ibn Majeh quotes Abu Ishaq as saying, “this is an authentic hadith”. Also, Tirmizi in his book, ‘Abvab Ul- Asiyeh’, believes that the authenticity of this hadith is beyond doubt. In this regard, Mohammed Nasib Refaee in ‘Al-Tavasulel Haghight Ul-Tavasul’ writes as such:

5- Mosnad, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, vol, 4, p.138, section of Othman Ibn Hanif’s narrations.

6- Ibid, p. 158, first edition, Beriut

لا شك ان هذا الحديث صحيح و مشهور... و قد ثبت فيه بلا شك
 و لاريب ارتداد بصر الاعمي بدعاء رسول الله صلي الله عليه {و
 آله} و سلم له

*(No doubt, this is a sound and famous
 tradition... and in it, it has been proven that a
 blind man regained his eyesight by the
 Prophet's prayer.)⁶*

The mentioned tradition clearly proves the
 permissibility of supplication to the holy Prophet
 (peace be upon him and his descendants) in order
 to grant our needs. Moreover, the Prophet (peace
 be upon him and his descendants) obliged the
 blind man to pray and implore God's blessing
 through putting the Prophet (peace be upon him

and his descendants) as an intermediary between him and God. This is considered as the real meaning of supplication to the Divine guardians.

2- Abu Abdollah Bokhari also writes:

ان عمر بن الخطاب رضي الله عنه كان اذا قحطوا استسقى
بالعباس بن عبدالمطلب فقال: اللهم انا كنا نتوسل اليك بنبينا
فتسقينا و انا نتوسل اليك بعم نبينا فاسقنا قال فيسقون

(Whenever there occurred a draught, Omar Ibn Khatab asked Abas Ibn Abdul Motaleb, the Prophet's uncle, to supplicate to God for rain. He then said, "O, God! We used to supplicate to God through the Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) in his lifetime, and You always sent us the rain of mercy. Now we

*supplicate to the Prophet's uncle for your blessings.)*⁷

3- The issue of supplication to the Divine guardians at the advent of Islam was so prevalent that the Muslims even in their poems introduced the Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) as an intermediary between their selves and God.

Sawad Ibn Ghareb has composed an ode to the Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) wherein he says,

و اشهد ان لا رب غيره و انك مامون علي كل غالب
و انك ادني المرسلين وسيله الي الله يا بن الاكرمين الاطائب

7- Sahih, Bokhari , Section 20, a book on Friday, chapter Estesgha , p.27 Egypt edition.

(I bear witness that there is no god save Allah, and you are trustworthy to all secrets and hidden, and I bear witness that you- O, the son of the pure- are the closest means to Allah amongst the other Divine prophets.)⁸

Although the Prophet (peace be upon him and his descendants) heard this poem from Savad Ibn Ghareb, he neither criticized him, nor accused him of polytheism or heresy.

Shafei also points to this fact in the following couplet as saying:

ال النبي ذريعتي هم اليه وسيلتي
ارجوهم اعطي غدا بيدي اليمين صحيفتي

8- Aldorar Ul-Saninah,, Seyed Ahmad Ibn Zeini Dahlan, p.29,quoted by Tabarani

*(The Prophet's descendants are my means toward Allah, and I hope to receive my book of deeds in my right hand on behalf of them.)*⁹

Although there exist an abundant number of traditions on the permissibility of supplication to the Divine guardians, this issue has been also specified in the Prophet and his disciples' practice as well as the great Islamic scholars, and there is no need for further discussion.

As a consequence, the baselessness of this claim, i.e., supplicating to the Divine guardians is polytheism and heresy, is proven.

⁹-Al-Savaeq Ul-Moharagah, Ibn Hejr Asghalani) , p.178, Cairo edition.

