

# **Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism**

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## ***Shirk***

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## **Synonyms**

Deities ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3\\_100307](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100307)); Partnering with God ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3\\_100308](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100308)); Polytheism ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3\\_100309](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100309)); Sin ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3\\_100310](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100310)); Worshipping many gods ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3\\_100311](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100311))

## **Definition**

The term *shirk* in Islam is used to refer to idolatry or polytheism, which means deification, or worship of deity, gods, or anything other than Allāh. As opposed to polytheism, Islam preaches strict monotheism embedded in *tawhīd* (oneness of God), i.e., God is one, unique, and absolute.

The Arabic word *shirk* is derived from the root verb *sharaka*, meaning “to share with someone,” or “to include something.” From an Islamic perspective, *shirk* means attributing an equal partner unto Allāh, or associating anyone or anything with Him. The Islamic view of monotheism that Allāh is one and nothing is like Him is clearly stated in the Qur’ān: “nothing is like unto Him” (Q.XLII:11) that scripturally asserts God’s oneness and His uniqueness. The denial of this tenet is what in Arabic is called *shirk* (polytheism), which implies associating God with other gods, or deities, or idols. That worshipping anything besides Allāh is *shirk* is exemplified in the Qur’ān (X:18).

## **Antithesis of *Shirk***

As mentioned, the cornerstone of Islamic belief lies in *tawhīd* – the fundamental thesis of the attributes of Islamic God repeated in several verses of the Qur’ān, the opt-recited verse of which is “*Say: He, Allāh, is One*” (Q. CXII:1). On the metaphysical level, God in Islam is portrayed in the Qur’ānic chapter called *al-Ikhlāṣ* (sincerity) in which God is characterized as absolute, self-caused (*causa-sui*), self-subsisting, and unique without any wants or constraints. Since Allāh does not beget, nor was He begotten (Q. CXII:3), He is the ultimate reality, the supreme being, and hence, “*there is none comparable unto Him*” (Q. CXII:4), while all of His created beings including humans are contingent with constraint. Denial of this thesis means committing polytheism. Unlike a disbeliever (*kāfir*), a polytheist (*mushrik*) may accept the existence of God but in reality fail to prove it in practice.

## Historical Development

The origin of *shirk* can be traced back to the community of Prophet Noah. Islam claims that *tawhīd* (oneness of Allāh), which was introduced by Prophet Adam, the first human being created by God, continued (Q. II:213) for generations until the time of Noah [1]. However, polytheism intruded when the community of Noah was led astray by Iblīs, the Satan, instigating the followers of righteous men to erect statues of them, after their death in a bid to make them memorable. Out of sheer ignorance, these statues had been venerated and, to the extreme extent, worshipped ([2], vol 8, Ḥadīth no. 534). The Prophet Muḥammad is believed to have said in a ḥadīth al-qudsī that God said to him, “I created all my servants upon the true Religion (upon *tawhīd*, free from *shirk*). Then Satan inspired them and led them astray from their true Religion” ([3], vol 8, Ḥadīth no. 159).

From the sacred historical perspective, the monotheism established by Prophet Abraham was practiced without any disruption until ‘Amr bin Luhai, a brave warrior and a renowned religious leader, introduced idol-worship in Mecca by placing in the middle of the Ka’bah an idol (Hubal) brought from Syria [5]. This action sparked the spread of paganism across Arabia, especially Mecca, though the action of ‘Amr bin Luhai was considered an act of innovation rather than deviation from the Abrahamic religion.

## Causes of *Shirk*

Shirk is caused by several factors, such as intentional innovation, exaggeration of devotion and love, extreme forms of veneration of the Prophet or Messengers, etc. The Qur’ānic injunction enshrined in IV:171 and the Prophetic tradition warn against exaggerations that transgress the proper bounds of Islam, to the extent that humans, including Messengers and their followers, are placed in the rank and status of God. Such warnings abound in Islamic literatures. The Prophet Muḥammad himself advised his followers not to exaggerate his status as it leads to *shirk*. As he put it, “Do not praise, laud, approbate, or eulogize me the way that the Christians did to Jesus, the son of Mary. I am only the slave of Allāh, thus say, ‘The slave of Allāh and His messenger.’” ([2], vol 4, Ḥadīth no. 654).

In recent times, reformist Islamic scholars argue that excessive reverence toward community leaders, elders, or religious heads may lead to *shirk*, especially if it involves irrational and illogical whims of devotion with emotion. They also claim that visiting Sūfi shrine, or paying homage to a Pīr, offering supplication at the tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad facing his grave, even blindly following (*taqlīd*) one's culture and ancestors, and the like may prompt to *shirk*. As for any ancestral tradition, the Qur'ān forbids following such traditions without inspection, for such an act may commit *shirk* and people go astray (see Q. V:104, VII:28, X:78, XXI:53, XXVI:74, XLIII:22). In the same breath, humanization of God's attributes and deification of creatures are likely to lead to *shirk*. However, the aforesaid exposition of *shirk* attributed by Islamic modern reformists is often rejected by scholars belonging to traditional Islam. From a perspective of a Sūfi, relying upon a created being means "hidden associationism" – a form of *shirk* called *shirk khafī* as opposed to *tawhīd* that demands *tawakkul* (absolute reliance upon God) [6].

## Significance of *Shirk*

*Shirk* is an unforgivable sin in Islam. God may forgive major sins including killing, robbery, sorcery, orphan's property appropriation, and involvement in interest-based business, but not *shirk*, as the Qur'ān said: "Lo! Allāh forgiveth not that a partner should be ascribed unto Him. He forgiveth (all) save that to whom He will. Whoso ascribeth partners to Allāh, he hath indeed invented a tremendous sin" (Q. IV:48).

## Classification of *Shirk*

Based on the consequences of a person's intention or action, *shirk* can be classified into two types, namely, *shirk al-akbar* (major sin) and *shirk al-asghar* (minor sin). The major *shirk* (*shirk al-akbar*) is known as open polytheism, which can take two forms: associating anyone or anything with God, such as believing in multiplicities of god and associating His attributes with someone or something. The belief in many gods is called *shirk al-rubūbiyya* (*shirk* in the Lordship of God), and deification of God and His attributes is known in Arabic literature as *shirk al-asma wa al-ṣifāt* (*shirk* in God's names and attributes). Besides, there is another major *shirk* called *shirk al-'ibādah* (*shirk* in worship), which includes prostration, fasting, offering sacrifice, offering supplication, and the like intended to be offered to anything or anyone other than Allāh.

On the other hand, by the *shirk al-asghar* (minor *shirk*) is meant hidden polytheism that includes a wide range of human actions such as making incantations, participating in love spells, wearing turquoise beads, or charms, or amulets with the belief that these would protect them from evil, etc. It is believed that the Prophet is reported to have said that sanctimony (*al-riyā'*) with the intention of pleasing God for the purpose of reward or admiration from people is also committing minor *shirk*. Another form of such *shirk* is *tiyārah* – superstitious belief in omens practiced in some rural areas of the subcontinent associated with folk cultures.

## Shirk in Modern Context

The issue of *shirk* became a focal point of Islamic revivalism in the postmodern period with a variation of interpretation of the term in changing circumstances. The views and interpretations of *shirk* in modern times often reflect the scholarship and background of these scholars concerned [7]. Interestingly, according to some radical Muslim movements, local traditions and cultures are viewed as *shirk*, while attempting to promote Middle East culture in non-Arab countries. Consequently, they are accused, to a greater extent, of having destroyed several Islamic traditional icons and symbols. This radical approach to *shirk* especially in Muslim minority countries leads to the erasure of Muslim history and of the contributions of Muslims in sociopolitical, economic, and religious affairs in those countries. In response to such Islamic radical movements, Sūfism claims that it seeks to set humans “free from the prison of multiplicity” and cures the soul of the deadly malady of *shirk* [4]. If local traditions and cultures were labeled as *shirk*, then there would be no Islamic country that did not commit *shirk*, for Islamic tradition, particularly Islam influenced by Sūfism, as found in the subcontinent, has accommodated local cultures, to a greater extent, and as such, although many of the Sūfī practices (such as reverence for the pīr, visiting the tombs of saints, offering blessing to the Prophet, etc.) are construed as *shirk*, Sūfism does not subscribe to what has already been identified as reliance on anyone other than one Allāh. It further claims that all its “shirk-like” practices are intended toward fulfilling the goal of attaining nearness to God. Indeed, the centrality of the Sūfī practice of *zikr* (remembrance of God) expressed as *Allāh*, or *Lā ilāha*, or *Lā ilāha ill’ Allāh* (there is no god, but Allāh), which is the fountainhead of *Shahādah* – the first and foremost pillar of Islam – explicitly shows that Sūfism confesses to *tawhīd* (oneness of Allāh), and therefore, it lies at the heart of Islam.

## Cross-References

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