

IS THE PROCLAMATION “LABBAYKA YAA HUSSAIN” TANTAMOUNT TO SHIRK (POLYTHEISM)?

The recent event of making ziyarah of the flag of the holy grave and shrine of Imam Hussain (a.s), which was on display at the Ahlul Bait (a.s) Islamic Centre in Ottery, Cape Town, created much excitement and an outpouring of emotion in expressing love for the Leader of the Martyrs, Abu Abdillah al-Hussain (a.s). Subsequently a video clip of the event went viral as this was one of the first such event in Cape Town.

While many soaked up the joy of the spiritual breeze that accompanied the event, some asked a very sincere question whether our proclamation or utterance of the the saying “Labbayka Yaa Hussain” was tantamount to shirk (polytheism)?

In a society with a wide variety of views about Islam, while the origin of such a question is well known, the need to provide an answer to the very sincere seekers of clarity on this question is paramount.

What Does "Labbayk" mean?

The term “Labbayk” literally means “I am here” or “here I am”. It is a common response in Arabic speaking communities when one’s name is called. For example, if someone calls your name during an attendance check in class, you would respond “Labbayk.”

Usage by the Sahabah

The very people from whom the claim of Shirk originates, often use the practice of the sahabah (companions) of Prophet Muhammad (sawa) as a benchmark for determining the permissibility of certain practises or the use of certain religious expressions.

It is most interesting to observe that the term “Labbayk” is recorded in history to have been used by sahabah in response to a call from Prophet Muhammad (sawa) on many occasions. Look at the following example:

Abu Dharr reports that Rasulullah (sawa) called out, Oh Abu Dhar!

Abu Dharr says I replied:

“Here I am at thy service and at thy pleasure, Oh Messenger of Allah!”

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There are many such incidents recorded and thus Imam Bukhari has compiled a separate chapter under the headline “Who replies by Labbayk wa Sa'dayk”.

In this chapter he, as well as Imam Muslim in his Sahih, narrated that Ma'az ibn Jabal responded to Prophet (sawa) by saying “Labbayk wa Sa'dayk” and Prophet (sawa) didn't stop him or object to the use of such language!

Based upon various ahadith, Sunni Ulama have given Fatawa of permission to say “Labbayk” and some others like Dasuoqi and others have said it is maybe Makruh for non Allah, but did not say its haraam.

In Alshifa, Bibi Ayesha narrates that “Whenever Prophet (sawa) called his companions or people of his community, they replied by saying Labbayk Yaa Rasulallah!!”

This very clearly shows that the term “Labbayk” is not one that is exclusively reserved for calling on Allah. And thus any reference or attempt to use the analogy that since the wording “Labbayk” is part of the “Talbiyah” in Umra and Haj, that its usage for anyone other than Allah amounts to Shirk (polytheism) is clearly false and perhaps a deliberate attempt to even misguide Muslims.

But Prophet Muhammad (sawa) has passed away

The next obvious response is that the above mentioned incidents are all recorded to have occurred in the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (sawa) and the continued use of such proclamations would not be valid as the Prophet (sawa) is not alive any longer.

This question again comes from those who have a very limited view of the “Truth” and “Haqiqat” of Prophet Muhammad (sawa) as they insist only on focussing on the “human” (bashari) aspect of Prophet Muhammad (sawa) and pay very little attention to his “Haqiqat” in totality.

In our lecture on the “Haqiqati Muhammadiyya”, we have already explained that the Quran considers Prophet Muhammad (sawa) to be someone who will be a “Witness” for all mankind, past and present, including all previous Prophets. This “witnessing” involves having knowledge of everyone’s outward actions together with the hidden and unseen intention which motivates all our actions. To have access to such information, its impossible if we consider Prophet Muhammad (sawa) to be dead! So he is indeed alive and Witnessing all the secrets of the universe that Allah made known.

And consequently in our kalima shahaadah we don't say Prophet (sawa) “was” the Messenger of Allah but we say he “is” (present tense) the Messenger of Allah.

Calling on Prophet Muhammad (sawa) after he passed away

The above mentioned explanation is not a mere theoretical and intellectual exercise, but has actual historical examples to back it up.

Imam Ali (a.s) explains that three days after the burial of Prophet Muhammad (sawa), a Bedouin Sahabi came to the Holy Grave of Prophet (sawa). The Sahabi threw himself onto the Holy Grave and sprinkled it's sand over his head. He said, 'Ya Rasulullah (sawa) we have heard your talk, and I am aware of Allah and we are made aware of you. And it is (mentioned) in that which Allah has revealed to you (the Quran):

"And if upon wronging themselves they come to you (Oh Nabi) and they seek forgiveness from Allah and the Rasool seeks forgiveness on their behalf then they would find that Allah is the Acceptor of Repentance, Most Compassionate (Quran 4:64).

The Bedoin Sahaabi continued, 'and I have wronged myself and I have come to you, seek forgiveness for me.'

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Imam Ali (a.s) then says that they heard it being called out from the Holy Grave of Prophet (sawa) 'He has forgiven you.' - Imam Suyuti in his Ru'yatun Nabi (sawa), Dalaailin Nabuwwa li ibn Sum'aani, Tafseer Imam Qurtubi.

Imam Hussain (a.s) is alive

Since the Prophet (sawa) is reported to have died a natural death, those with a basic understanding of Quran required some explanation before realising that the Prophet (sawa) remains alive and has access to all the secrets of the Universe.

The case of the reality of martyrs who have died in the battle field in the path of Allah seems much easier to clarify as the Quran (3:169) emphatically declares:

“Do not think of those who are slain in the path of Allah to be dead, Nay they are alive, receiving

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sustenance with their Lord”.

Imam Hussain (a.s) who was martyred and was called “Leader of the martyrs” by Prophet (sawa) is undoubtedly alive. So when calling upon him, one is not calling a dead person!

Shirk in worship

Shirk in Worship is indeed a great sin and should never be committed. While we have agreement on this dictum, the definition of what shirk in worship means is a highly disputed one.

Those who have a literal approach to understanding Islam resign themselves to only focus on those verses which make absolute statements and do not consider all those verses which clarify “the exception” to the rule.

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So while one should generally ask Allah for forgiveness directly, the above explanation showed an exception highlighted in Quran which indicates that one can ask Prophet Muhammad (sawa) to pray for forgiveness on our behalf to Allah.

This is because Allah commands the believers in Surah 5:35 “O you who believe! Be conscious of Allah and seek a means (of nearness) to him.”

This “means of nearness” to Allah can come in different forms including our good actions but also through those who are closest to him (the Awliyaa which includes the Prophets, the Imams, the Martyrs, etc.)

So what does the proclamation “Labbayka Yaa Hussain” mean?

During the final moments of his life before martyrdom, Imam Hussain (a.s) called out on the plains of Karbala “Is there any helper to help me, is there ant rescuer to rescue me and the house of Prophet Muhammad (sawa)!”

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This call of Imam Hussain (a.s) was an eternal call for all times as Imam Hussain (a.s) was not fighting a personal battle with Yazeed but was establishing a principle that “Someone like Hussain (a.s) will never pledge allegiance to someone like Yazeed!”

Imam Hussain (a.s) is very much alive, and since his call is eternal, we all have the opportunity to respond to that call and proclaim “Labbayka Yaa Hussain”.... “Here I am Oh Hussain (a.s), at your service”.... to give my life for your ideals!

One's intention when saying Yaa Rasulallah or Yaa Hussain

In addition to everything explained above, we always need to understand what is the intention of the person who is calling Labbayka Yaa Rasulallah or Yaa Husayn. Even if the person uttering these statements does not have faith that Prophet (sawa) or martyrs are alive and witness our calls, such calls still amount to a proclamation of allegiance and commitment to the principals and values of Prophet (sawa) and Imam Hussain (a.s), irrespective of one's aqeedah and doctrinal beliefs.

In recent years in the case when the Prophet (sawa) was subject to much insult and an onslaught on his dignity through various cartoons, etc. the Ummah across the world marched in the streets proclaiming “Labbayka Yaa Rasulallah!” as a declaration of their allegiance to the personality and ideals of Prophet Muhammad (sawa) and not necessarily in their belief in “Haqiqati Muhammadiyya.”

Concluding remark: A Paradox

Puritanical Islam is practised in Saudi Arabia with much fervour and is one place where the objection to proclaiming Labbayka Yaa Rasulallah or Labbayka Yaa Hussain originates from.

Very recently after the Saudi attacks on Yemen, a famous Saudi Wahhabi orator called Ayad Al Qarani wrote and read a nasheed in praise of King Salman wherein he proclaims “Labbayka Yaa Salman!” pledging his support to King Salman for the attacks on Yemen. In response people criticised him and said you cannot say “Labbayka Yaa Salman” as it amounts to shirk!

Ayad Al Qarani responded that it is agreed upon that one can say Labbayk to someone who is alive and King Salman is alive! People further responded to say “when you read this nasheed, King Salman was not present in the room, he was absent. And since you calling on someone that is absent, that is shirk!”

That's rather paradoxical and humorous to say the least!

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