

Intercession and Intermediation



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Shafa'ah and tawassul can be compared to the links, connections and networks that people use in this life to acquire what they seek. These means and intermediaries should be approved, set and introduced by God, and one should not take them as any independent source of impact, for there is no independence whatsoever for anyone other than God, whether in this world or the next.

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Abstract

Shafa'ah (intercession) and *tawassul* (intermediation, instrumentation, solicitation) are two Qur'anic concepts that pertain to the practical implications of monotheism (*tawhīd*). In both cases there is an involvement of a being other than God in the achievement of some request, the fulfilment of some need, or the endowment of some bounty. They pose a challenge to the Qur'anic and monotheistic idea that God is the only source of power, blessing and impact in the universe. As this article will show, the main problem lies in independence. Intercession and intermediation would only be extensions of monotheism, not contrary to it, given two conditions:

(1) the intermediaries should be selected and indicated by God, not based on one's opinion;

and

(2) one should refer to these means not as independent sources of impact, but only as reflections of God's power, mercy and will.

Background

Shafa'ah is from the root *shafa'a*, which is 'to join two things together.' *Shafa'ah* specifically means the addition of something or someone as an aid and assistance.¹ The Qur'an has used this term and its verbal derivatives mostly in description of the Hereafter in verses with an overall theme and context of *taw'iid* (monotheism), where God is identified as the only source of hope and help. *Tawassul* is defined as 'seeking the aid of an intermediary to achieve one's objective.'²

More technically, it is used for advancing and seeking proximity to God through some means and instrument. For instance, one's acts of worship can be a means that brings us closer to God. Resorting to these acts to advance toward God is an example of *tawassul*. Another example would be God's Names, as the Qur'an instructs us:

"To Allah belong the Best Names, so call Him by them" (7: 180).

More generally the Qur'an says,

"O Believers! Be God-wary and seek a means of approach towards Him"(5:35).

Conflict With Monotheism

The Qur'an describes God as the Creator of all things (39:62), the One Who gives life and death (9: 116), and the One Who is responsible for the provision (*rizq*) of all creatures (10:31). He is the One Who sends down the rain (42:28), Who brings day and night in sequence (10:67), and Who splits the seeds and the morning (6:95–96, 113:1).

In short, He is the Director of the entire universe and all beings. Thus we say in every prayer:

"All praise be to Allah, the Lord of all nations" (1:2).

The Qur'an categorically refutes any claim to partnership or association (*shirk*) in the lordship, worship, and authority of God, and associating partners with Him is an unpardonable crime (4:48, 4:116).

Meanwhile, the Qur'an also includes the order in creation. God invests heavily in describing various systems and processes that He has placed in the universe as signs of His power, wisdom, and mercy. The ordered occurrence and connection of events in the universe implies the involvement of certain factors and causes in the world as means and intermediaries.

A Matter of Independence

The Qur'an says:

“Have they taken intercessors besides Allah? Say, ‘What! Even though they have no control over anything and cannot apply reason?!’ Say, ‘All intercession rests with Allah. To Him belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth; then you will be brought back to Him.’” (39:43–44).

There are also many other verses that deny any intercessors but God, especially on the Day of Judgement (2:48, 2:123, 2:254, 6:51, 6:70, 6:94, 7:53, 26:100, 30:13, 32:4, 40:18). Meanwhile, there are many verses that establish and talk about some intercession by other than God (2:255, 10:3, 19:87, 20:109, 21:28, 34:23, 43:86, 53:26, 74:48). These verses bear the key to reconciliation between the two sets of verses:

“Intercession will not avail that day except from him whom the All-beneficent allows and approves of his word” (20:109);

“How many an angel there is in the heavens whose intercession is of no avail in any way except after Allah grants permission to whomever He wishes and approves of!” (53:26).

This means that God is the only Intercessor; all intercession belongs to Him primarily, essentially and independently. Then, according to His infinite wisdom and power, God may carry out His intercession through some of His creatures as means and instruments.

This is but one example of a universal Qur'anic principle that every existential perfection or quality rests exclusively with God, and if it is found anywhere else, then it is only a reflection and manifestation of God. The Qur'an claims that all might, creation, power, sustenance, kingdom and judgement belong to Him.

Yet, in other verses it has attributed the very same qualities to other beings. The solution again is that they primarily and essentially belong to God, and if they are found in any other being it is only by God's bestowal, and that being is not independent in its possession of that quality.

An Existential Reality

In fact, the entire universe is based on intercession, intermediation and the involvement of instruments. Not only is this no contradiction to monotheism, but it is actually a sign and confirmation of God's unity.

For example, God has created us and the world such that we need to drink water when we become thirsty. When we seek water to quench our thirst, through our action we are 'asking' water to satisfy our need.

This can be an illustration of both polytheism and monotheism, depending on our mentality and intention. If we resort to water as an independent source and force of quenching thirst—that is, an entity that stands on its own in the universe and has its own impact—that would be polytheism.

However, if we view water as a means that God has placed and created with this impact, and has given it the property of quenching thirst, then water becomes a mirror that reflects God's power, impact, creation and fulfilment of needs.

A key concept in understanding the necessity of means and instruments in the world is a metaphysical principle called the principle of unity (*qa'idat al-wa'id*). According to this principle, if something is absolutely one—that is, it has a pure and simple reality, without any mix or plurality in it—then what emanates from it will also be one.

It is impossible to get multiplicity and variety out of something that is absolutely one and entirely unadulterated. What emanates from it will, of course, have the same reality, except that it will also have an aspect of independence, emanation or contingency to it. What emanates from that in turn will have another aspect of plurality to it, and thus multiplicity emanates from unity.

The existence and perfection of the Necessary Being—Who is Absolutely One—is too pure, sublime and overwhelming to be tainted by the various delimitations and determinations of contingent beings. Thus, His existential effusions and perfections should be diluted through different stages, layers and levels of funnels and channels—only due to the limited receptive capacity of the recipients, like a small lamp that is incapable of receiving the high voltage that is directly generated at the power plant.

This is exactly why we need instruments, intermediaries, and intercessors in order to approach God, because our very existence entails duality, separation and difference from God. Those who deny the intercession and intermediation of some beings—such as the Imams—fail to realise that even prayer and supplications are means and instruments of seeking proximity to God.

Even if we decide to not do or say anything but to simply turn our attention toward God and connect to Him through our heart, then this very act of turning one's heart and attention to God is a means other-than-God that is being used to connect with Him.

Therefore, there is no alternative to having some means and instruments between us and God, as He has commanded us:

“Oh you who have faith! Be wary of Allah, and seek the means of recourse to Him” (5:35).

A Fine Line

The difference between monotheism and polytheism in this regard lies in two points:

1. The means and instruments adopted by the polytheists were out of their own opinion and conjecture, not something that God has set and introduced. This is while intermediation is an existential reality, and the authenticity of any intermediary in terms of having a genuine role in the universe is only and fully known to God. That is why He must show us the ways and means that bring us closer to Him; it is not up to us to decide, for it is not a conventional matter.

These are but names which you have coined—you and your fathers—for which Allah has not sent down any authority. They follow nothing but conjectures and the desires of the [lower] soul, while there has already come to them the guidance from their Lord (53:23);

They worship besides Allah that for which He has not sent down any authority, and of which they have no knowledge. And the wrongdoers shall have no helper (22:71).

The Qur'an describes the polytheists as follows:

“Those who take guardians besides Him [claiming,] ‘We only worship them so they may bring us near to Allah’” (39:3).

God then refutes their claim concisely and implicitly:

“Indeed Allah does not guide someone who is a liar and an ingrate” (39:3).

This is seen more elaborately in the following verse: “They worship besides Allah that which neither causes them any harm, nor brings them any benefit, and they say, ‘These are our intercessors with Allah’” (10:18).

Here God's answer is:

“Say, ‘Will you inform Allah about something He does not know in the heavens or on the earth?’ Immaculate is He and exalted above [having] any partners that they ascribe [to Him]!” (10:18).

In other words, intercessors with God should be appointed and approved by Him, as emphasised in several verses about intercession (2:255, 10:3, 19:87, 20:109, 21:28, 34:23, 53:26, 78:39).

2. Regardless of what or who the intermediaries are, monotheism entails that they cannot be viewed and adopted as independent entities that have any impact of their own. Rather, these intermediaries and intercessors should be viewed as God's signs, symbols and sacraments (*ayat, shaʿaʿir*).

They are valuable, desirable and sacred to the extent of their relation to God, inasmuch as they reflect God, and as long as they take us closer to God. The Qur'an honours Mounts Safa and Marwah, the sacrificial camels, and even the signs that mark sacrificial animals as God's sacraments (2:158, 5:2, 22:32, 22:36).

Yet, the same things can become idols—and thus called abominations, *rijs* (5:90, 22:30)—if they become

an ends instead of means, if they veil one from God, and if they block a servant from advancing toward His Lord. This should be an important caution to all Muslims because it is a subtle point and a common place of slip, as the Qur'an says:

“But most of them do not believe in Allah without ascribing partners to Him” (12: 106).

No Free Riding

One objection that is sometimes raised against *shafa'ah* and *tawassul* is that belief in such sources of help and deliverance in the Hereafter would promote negligence in carrying one's duty, for the person would rely on these 'shortcuts' to amend his faults.

The key thing that this objection fails to recognise is that *shafa'ah* and *tawassul* are not conventional matters. They are real connections between two beings based on an existential congruity and affinity (*sinkhiyyah*) between them. This is seen most clearly in the Qur'anic verses that emphasise that intercession will only be beneficial to those with whom God is pleased:

“They do not intercede except for someone He approves of” (21:28)³

Imam al-Ridhha' narrated from his fathers up to the Messenger of God: *“If one does not believe in my pool [in the hereafter] God will not bring him to it, and if one does not believe in my intercession God will not let him reach it.”* He then said, *“My intercession is only for the committers of major sins among my nation. As for the good-doers, there is no way [of blame] against them.”* The Imam was then asked, *“O son of God's Messenger! Then what does it mean when God, the Mighty and Majestic, says: ‘And they do not intercede except for someone He approves of (21:28)’?”* He replied: *“They do not intercede except for him whose religion God approves.”*³⁴

Therefore, to qualify for the intercession of the Prophet and the Imams, one needs to establish and maintain some level of real affinity and spiritual connection with them. Otherwise, all conventional ties will be severed on the Day of Resurrection:

When the Trumpet is blown, there will be no ties between them on that day, nor will they ask [about] each other” (23: 101)

Certainly you have come to Us alone, just as We created you the first time, and left behind whatever We had bestowed on you. We do not see your intercessors with you—those whom you claimed to be [Our] partners in [deciding] you[r] [fate]. Certainly all links between you have been cut, and what you used to claim has forsaken you! (6:94)

All their means of recourse will be cut off (2: 166).

Hence, the belief in intercession and intermediation is not only no impediment to righteousness, but it is

a propelling force towards it.

Examples From Hadith

There is a famous narration where Imam al-Sadiq says:

*“God refrains from running things except through their means. So He has set a means for everything, an elaboration [in terms of conditions and definitions] for every means, a knowledge [or an emblem] for every elaboration, and a speaking expressive gate for every knowledge [or emblem]. One who recognizes the gate has recognized the means, and one who is ignorant of the gate is ignorant of the means. That [gate] is the Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his family) and us.”*⁵

It is narrated that once a blind man went to the Prophet and said, “Ask God to heal me.” The Prophet replied, “If you are patient it will better for you, but if you want I will ask God to heal you.” The man repeated his request, and so the Prophet instructed him to make ablution (*wudhu*), pray two units of prayers and then say:

O God! I beseech Thee and turn to Thee in the name of Thy Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet of Mercy. O Muhammad! I have turned to my Lord through you to restore my eyesight. Restore it for me, O my Lord!⁶

This account is also found in other books. It shows that such intermediation was common and practiced at the time of the Prophet. The Prophet did not forbid it, but he actually taught the person how to place the Prophet between himself and God.

Similarly, it is narrated that the second caliph used to ask God by ٱAbbas to send rain: “O God! We ask you for rain by the sake of ٱAbbas ibn ٱAbd al-Muٱٱalib (the Prophet’s uncle)...”⁷ This narration shows that using someone other than the Prophet but with a legitimate connection to him was also an acceptable practice in early Islam.

These can be extensions and applications of many Qur’anic verses such as:

We did not send any messenger but to be obeyed by Allah’s leave. Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you and pleaded to Allah for forgiveness, and the Messenger had pleaded for forgiveness for them, they would have surely found Allah All-clement, All-merciful (4:64)

Take charity from their possessions to cleanse them and purify them thereby, and bless them. Indeed your blessing is a comfort to them, and Allah is all-hearing, all-knowing (9:103)

Indeed the faithful are those who have faith in Allah and His Messenger, and when they are with him in a collective affair, they do not leave until they have sought his permission. Indeed those who seek your permission – it is they who have faith in Allah and His Messenger. So when they

seek your permission for some work of theirs, give permission to whomever of them you wish and plead with Allah to forgive them. Indeed Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful (24:62).

Summary

Shafa'ah and *tawassul* can be compared to the links, connections and networks that people use in this life to acquire what they seek. The lack and ineffectiveness of such links is one of the main differences between the Hereafter and this world:

“Beware of the day when no soul shall compensate for another, neither any intercession shall be accepted from it, nor any ransom shall be received from it, nor will they be helped” (2:48)⁸

It is true that God's hands are wide open (5:64) and He can bless, forgive and show mercy to anyone that He wants.

However, He has willed, according to His infinite wisdom, that there be a system of means, causes and effects through which His blessing diffuses and descends. The need for intercessors and intermediaries is not because of any shortcoming on God's part or any limits on the breadth of His mercy, but it is to complete the receiver's deficiency and limitation in receptivity.

These means and intermediaries should be approved, set and introduced by God, and one should not take them as any independent source of impact, for there is no independence whatsoever for anyone other than God, whether in this world or the next.

Say, ‘My Lord has only forbidden indecencies...and that you should attribute to Allah what you do not know’ (7:33). We shall cast terror into the hearts of the faithless because of their ascribing to Allah partners, for which He has not sent down any authority, and their refuge shall be the Fire, and evil is the [final] abode of the wrongdoers (3: 151).

1. Raghīb, under sh-f-.
2. Raghīb, under w-s-l.
3. also see 20:109 and 53:26, quoted above.
4. Uyūn, 1/136-137, ¶ 35. Rawṭat al-Waṭi'īn, 2/500-501. A similar narration is reported from Imam al-Kā'im (A.S): Tawḥīd, 407-408, ¶ 6. ʿAbīrī, ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥasan, Mishkat al-Anwar, 328-329.
5. Kulaynī, al-Kaḥī, 1/183. ʿAḥḥar al-Qummi, Baḥḥar al-darajat, 26
6. Tirmidhi, Jamiʿ al-ʿaḥḥī, no. 5302.
7. Bukhari, Jamiʿ al-ʿaḥḥī, 1/350.
8. also see 2:123, 2:254.

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