

111362 - The view of Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen regarding the “excuse of ignorance”

the question

What is the view of Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) concerning the “excuse of ignorance” in the case of major shirk? I have heard and read two views of his. He answered a questioner in an-Noor ‘ala ad-Darb when he asked him about Muslims worshipping graves, saying: It is ignorance on the part of the questioner to call them Muslims. And he had another view in which he said that they are still to be regarded as Muslims, because of their ignorance and because there is no one to teach them. Did the Shaykh have two views, one earlier and one later, after he realised the correct view on this issue? Which of the two views is the correct one, that is supported by shar‘i evidence?

Detailed answer

We could not find the words of Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) to which the questioner referred as being in Fataawa Noor ‘ala ad-Darb, but we found his words in most of his printed books and audio fatwas, and we did not find any contradiction in his words, or any retraction of anything he said.

We may sum up what the Shaykh said about the “excuse of ignorance” in the following points:

1.

The basic principle according to the Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him) is that ignorance is an excuse. In fact he thinks that no one can produce evidence to prove that the one who is ignorant is not excused, and he thinks that were it not for the excuse of ignorance, there would be no need to send the Messengers; people would be accountable on the basis of what is instilled in their innate nature, and there would be no need to send the Messengers!

2.

There is no differentiation, with regard to the excuse of ignorance, between issues of belief and practical issues.

3.

There is no differentiation, with regard to the excuse of ignorance, between issues that are clear and issues that are subtle and ambiguous, because clarity and ambiguity are something relative that may vary from one environment to another and from one person to another.

4.

Disbelief that puts a person beyond the pale of Islam may be connected to beliefs, words uttered, actions done, or something that one fails to do. The Shaykh does not differ concerning the fact that these things could put a person beyond the pale of Islam, but the point of the discussion here is how to apply the description of disbelief to a particular person, because he may be excused, in which case he is not to be regarded as a disbeliever.

5.

A person who does an act of disbelief is not a disbeliever if he is ignorant and unaware of the shar'i ruling concerning his action, or if he asked a scholar who gave him a fatwa saying that his action was permissible.

However he does become a disbeliever if proof is established and presented to him, and any confusion or misunderstanding on his part was dealt with.

6.

The excuse of ignorance cannot be accepted from everyone who claims to be ignorant, because he may have been negligent about learning or careless about asking and finding out, or he may be stubborn and not accept the truth or try to seek it. In all these cases, the

individual is not excused according to the Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him). An exception is made, with regard to having fallen short, if it did not occur to a person that this action could be haraam, and he had no scholar to advise him. In this case he is excused.

7.

The ignorant person among those who are originally disbelievers is to be dealt with as a disbeliever according to shar'i rulings in this world, and in the hereafter his fate will be decided by Allah. The correct view is that he will be tested (in the hereafter).

The ignorant person among those who claim to be Muslim but who fell into disbelief that puts one beyond the pale of Islam is to be treated outwardly as if he is a Muslim, according to shar'i rulings, and his fate will be decided by Allah in the hereafter.

8.

The Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him) quoted texts from the Qur'an and Sunnah, and the views of scholars, to support this view concerning this issue, and explained that this is the view of Shaykh Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhaab (may Allah have mercy on him) - contrary to those who misunderstood his views. Here we will discuss in some detail what we have summed up of the words of the Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him), and we may quote in brief some of what he said. Whoever would like to know more may consult the references we will mention below.

I.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al-'Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) was asked about the excuse of ignorance with regard to matters of belief.

He replied:

Having different views concerning the excuse of ignorance is like any other fiqhi issue that is subject to different views. The difference may be in wording sometimes, by way of applying the ruling to a particular person. In other words, all are agreed that a certain

statement (made by the person in question) constitutes disbelief, or a certain action constitutes disbelief, or a failure to do something constitutes disbelief, but is the ruling applicable to this particular person, because the reason to apply the ruling to him is valid and there is no impediment, or is it not applicable because there are some reasons to indicate that the conditions of applying it are not met in his case, or that there is some impediment to doing so?

Ignorance of that which makes one a disbeliever is of two types:

The first type is when the individual does not believe in Islam, or does not believe in anything, and it has never crossed his mind that there is a (true) religion other than that which he is following. In shar'ī terms he is to be treated as he appears to be in this world; as for the hereafter, his fate will be decided by Allah, may He be exalted. The most correct view is that he will be tested in the hereafter in whatever way Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, wills, and Allah knows best what they will do, but we know that he will not enter the Fire except for a sin that he commits, because Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “and your Lord treats no one with injustice” [al-Kahf 18:49].

Rather we said that he is to be treated as he appears to be in this world – which means that he is to be treated as a disbeliever according to shar'ī rulings – because he is not a Muslim, so he cannot be treated as a Muslim. The reason why we said that the most correct view is that he will be tested in the hereafter is that there are many reports to that effect, which were quoted by Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) in his book *Tareeq al-Hijratayn*, when he discussed the eighth view concerning the children of the mushrikeen [and their fate in the hereafter].

The second type is when there is ignorance on the part of an individual who is a Muslim, but he grew up believing in (or practising) that thing that makes one a disbeliever, and it never crossed his mind that it is contrary to Islam, and no one advised him of that. Such a person is to be treated as a Muslim, and in the hereafter his fate will be decided by Allah, may He

be glorified and exalted. That is indicated by the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the words of the scholars.

The evidence from the Qur'an includes the following:

“And We never punish until We have sent a Messenger (to give warning)”

[al-Isra' 17:15]

“And never will your Lord destroy the towns (populations) until He sends to their mother town a Messenger reciting to them Our Verses. And never would We destroy the towns unless the people thereof are Zalimoon (polytheists, wrong-doers, disbelievers in the Oneness of Allah, oppressors and tyrants)”

[al-Qasas 28:59]

“Messengers as bearers of good news as well as of warning in order that mankind should have no plea against Allah after the Messengers”

[an-Nisa' 4:165]

“And We sent not a Messenger except with the language of his people, in order that he might make (the Message) clear for them. Then Allah misleads whom He wills and guides whom He wills”

[Ibraaheem 14:4]

“And Allah will never lead a people astray after He has guided them until He makes clear to them as to what they should avoid”

[at-Tawbah 9:115]

“And this is a blessed Book (the Quran) which We have sent down, so follow it and fear Allah (i.e. do not disobey His Orders), that you may receive mercy (i.e. saved from the torment of Hell).

Lest you (pagan Arabs) should say: 'The Book was only sent down to two sects before us (the Jews and the Christians), and for our part, we were in fact unaware of what they studied.'

Or lest you (pagan Arabs) should say: 'If only the Book had been sent down to us, we would surely have been better guided than they (Jews and Christians).' So now has come unto you a clear proof (the Quran) from your Lord, and a guidance and a mercy"

[al-An'aam 6:155-157].

And there are many similar verses which indicate that proof cannot be established except after knowledge has been conveyed and explained.

With regard to the Sunnah, in Saheeh Muslim (1/134) it is narrated from Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "By the One in Whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, no one among this nation, Jew or Christian, hears of me then dies not believing in that with which I was sent, but he will be one of the people of the Fire."

With regard to the words of the scholars, it says in al-Mughni (8/131):

If he is one of those who are not aware that (a certain ruling) is obligatory, such as one who is new in Islam, or one who grew up in a non-Islamic country, or in the wilderness far away from cities and scholars, then he is not to be deemed a disbeliever. Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah said in al-Fataawa (3/229, Majmoo' Ibn Qaasim):

I am always - and those who spent time with me know it - one of those who most emphatically forbid accusing a specific individual of being a disbeliever, or of being an evildoer or of being a sinner, unless it is known that proof based on the texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah has been established against him, concerning matters which, if anyone goes against that proof, he is either a disbeliever, evildoer or sinner. I affirm that Allah, may He be exalted, has forgiven this ummah for its mistakes, which includes mistakes that have to do with beliefs or words uttered, or that have to do with actions and practices. The early

generations kept disputing concerning many issues, but none of them accused another of being a disbeliever, evildoer or sinner.

... I used to explain that what has been transmitted from the scholars and imams of the early generations, of stating in general terms that whoever says such and such becomes a disbeliever, is true and correct, but we must differentiate between general statements and a statement about a specific individual.

... Regarding someone as a disbeliever is like a threat of punishment, because a person may even say something that implies rejection of what the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said, but the person who says it may be new in Islam, or he may have grown up in the remote wilderness. Such a person cannot be accused of being a disbeliever for rejecting what he rejected, until proof is established against him. He may not have heard those texts, or he may have heard them but they were not proven to him to be sound, or the text may contradict something that is well-established in his mind, which dictated that he should interpret the text in a manner other than its apparent meaning, even though he may be mistaken.

Shaykh al-Islam Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhaab said in ad-Durr as-Saniyyah (1/56):

With regard to deeming a person to be a disbeliever, I regard as a disbeliever anyone who learns about the religion brought by the Messenger, then after learning it he reviles it and tells people not to follow it, and he opposes those who do follow it. This is the person whom I regard as a disbeliever.

On p. 66 he said: As for what they say of lies and fabrications about us, when they say that we label people as disbelievers in general terms, and we say that it is obligatory for anyone who is able to migrate to join us to do so, all of that is lies and fabrications by means of which they turn people away from the religion of Allah and His Messenger. As we do not regard as disbelievers those who worship the idol [i.e., the built-up tomb] on the grave of 'Abd al-Qadir, or the idol on the grave of Ahmad al-Badawi and the like, because of their ignorance and because there is no one to advise them, then how can we regard as a

disbeliever the one who does not associate anything with Allah, just because he does not migrate to join us and does not regard others as disbelievers and fight them?!

If (the view mentioned above, which is not to regard anyone as a disbeliever until proof is established against him) is based on the texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah and the words of the scholars, then it is also in accordance with the wisdom, kindness and mercy of Allah, may He be exalted. For He will never punish anyone until He has established proof that leaves them with no excuse. Reason could not, on its own, attain knowledge of the duties that one has towards Allah, may He be exalted. If that were possible, then proof would not depend on the sending of Messengers.

Therefore the basic principle concerning the one who claims to be a Muslim is that he is to be regarded as a Muslim unless that description becomes no longer applicable on the basis of shar'i evidence.

...

So before deeming somebody to have become a disbeliever, two things must be examined.

The first is that there should be clear evidence from the Qur'an and Sunnah that the matter in question makes a person a disbeliever, so as not to fabricate lies about Allah.

The second is that the ruling should be applicable to this specific individual, so that the conditions of deeming somebody to have become a disbeliever are met in his case, and it is established that there are no impediments to doing so.

One of the most important conditions is that he should be aware of his mistake that led to him being regarded as a disbeliever, because Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And whoever contradicts and opposes the Messenger (Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) after the right path has been shown clearly to him, and follows other

than the believers' way. We shall keep him in the path he has chosen, and burn him in Hell – what an evil destination”

[an-Nisa' 4:115].

This verse stipulates the condition that the punishment of Hell becomes due if a person opposes the Messenger after guidance has become clear to him. But is it stipulated that he should be aware of the consequences of his infraction and that it leads to him becoming a disbeliever and so on, or is it sufficient for him to know that it is an infraction, even if he is unaware of the implications of his error?

What appears to be the case is the latter, i.e., the mere fact of his being aware that it is an infraction is sufficient for the application of the ruling connected to this infraction, because the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) made it obligatory for the one who had intercourse during the day in Ramadan to offer expiation because he was aware that it was an infraction, even though he was not aware of the requirement of expiation. Moreover the previously-married zaani who is aware of the prohibition on zina is to be stoned, even if he was ignorant of the consequences of his zina, and perhaps if he had been aware of the consequences he would not have committed zina. ...

To sum up, the one who is ignorant may be excused for what he says or does of that which may constitute disbelief, just as he may be excused for that which he says or does that may be regarded as evildoing. That is based on evidence from the Qur'an and Sunnah, rational thinking, and the words of the scholars.

Majmoo' Fataawa ash-Shaykh al-'Uthaymeen (2/answer to question 224).

II.

The Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him) was asked:

We have read an answer you gave about the excuse of ignorance with regard to acts that lead to a person being deemed a disbeliever, but in the book *Kashf ash-Shubuhaat* by Shaykh Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhaab, he said there is no excuse for ignorance, and he

said something similar in his book at-Tawheed. Even though in your answer you quoted the views of Shaykh Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhaab, and those of Ibn Taymiyah in al-Fataawa and of Ibn Qudaamah in al-Mughni. We hope that you can explain.

He replied:

Shaykh al-Islam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhaab (may Allah have mercy on him) stated in his essays that no one is to be deemed a disbeliever if he is ignorant. If he is stated in Kashf ash-Shubuhaat that there is no excuse for ignorance, it is to be understood that what he was referring to was the kind of ignorance that results from a person being negligent in not making any effort to learn, such as if he knows that there is a view different to what he is following, but he is negligent and too careless to find out and learn. In that case, ignorance is not an excuse.

Duroos wa Fataawa al-Haram al-Makki (1411 AH, tape 9, side A)

III.

The Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him) was asked: Can a person be excused for ignorance regard to Tawheed?

He replied:

The excuse of ignorance is proven with regard to all issues of religion, because Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Verily, We have inspired you (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) as We inspired Nooh (Noah) and the Prophets after him...

Messengers as bearers of good news as well as of warning in order that mankind should have no plea against Allah after the Messengers””

[an-Nisa’ 163-165]

“And We never punish until We have sent a Messenger (to give warning)”

[al-Isra' 17:15]

“And Allah will never lead a people astray after He has guided them until He makes clear to them as to what they should avoid”

[at-Tawbah 9:115].

and because the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “By the One in Whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, no one among this nation, Jew or Christian, hears of me then dies not believing in that with which I was sent, but he will be one of the people of the Fire.”

And there are many texts to that effect.

Therefore the one who is ignorant will not be brought to account, because of his ignorance, with regard to any issue of religion. But we should note here that some of the ignorant are somewhat stubborn – i.e., when they are told about what is right and correct, they do not go and research the matter or follow it; rather they carry on following what their shaykhs and those whom they venerate teach them, and they follow them. In fact such an individual is not excused, because proof has reached him which at the very least should have created some doubt that would prompt him to go and search for the truth. This person who venerates whomever he venerates of his leaders is like those of whom Allah tells us that they said (interpretation of the meaning): “ ‘We found our fathers following a certain way and religion, and we will indeed follow their footsteps’ ” [az-Zukhruf 43:22], and in the following verse, He tells us that they said: “ ‘We found our fathers following a certain way and religion, and we will indeed follow their footsteps’ ” [az-Zukhruf 43:23].

Conclusion:

The ignorance for which a person may be excused is when he does not know the correct view and he has not been told about it. This is what excuses him for sin. The ruling on how this person is to be dealt with depends on his deeds. Moreover, if he claims to be a Muslim and he testifies that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of

Allah, he is to be regarded as a Muslim. If he does not claim to be a Muslim, then in this world he is to be treated like the people of the religion that he claims to follow. As for the hereafter, then he comes under the same heading as the people of the period between Prophets, and his fate will be decided by Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, on the Day of Resurrection. The most correct view concerning them is that they will be tested however Allah wills; whoever among them obeys will enter Paradise, and whoever disobeys will enter Hell. But it should be noted that we are living at a time where there is hardly any place on earth that the call of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) has not reached through various media, and through people mixing with one another, and disbelief usually stems from stubbornness.

Majmoo' Fataawa ash-Shaykh al-'Uthaymeen (2/answer to question no. 222)

IV.

The Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him) was asked:

What is the ruling on describing those who are excused for ignorance as holding the views of the Murji'ah?

He replied:

As for the excuse of ignorance, this is based on the general meanings of the texts, and no one can produce evidence to prove that the one who is ignorant is not to be excused. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And We never punish until We have sent a Messenger (to give warning)”

[al-Isra' 17:15]

“Messengers as bearers of good news as well as of warning in order that mankind should have no plea against Allah after the Messengers”

[an-Nisa' 4:165].

Were it not for the excuse of ignorance, there would be no need to send the Messengers; people would be accountable on the basis of what is instilled in their innate nature, and there would be no need to send the Messengers. The excuse of ignorance is what is indicated by the Qur'an and Sunnah, as was stated by the leading scholars such as Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him), and Shaykh al-Islam Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhaab (may Allah have mercy on him). But a person may be negligent in seeking knowledge, so he is sinning in that respect. In other words, it may be possible for him to learn, but he does not care to do so; or he may be told that something is haraam, but he does not care. In this case he is falling short in this regard and he is sinning thereby. As for a man who lives among people who commit a sin and think that it is permissible, then we say that he is accountable for his sin, when the message did not reach him, this is far-fetched. In fact we cannot issue rulings on the basis of our emotions; rather we issue rulings on the basis of what is indicated by sharee'ah. The Lord, may He be glorified and exalted, says: "My mercy prevails over My wrath." So how can we take a person to task for his ignorance when it has never crossed his mind that this is haraam? In fact Shaykh al-Islam Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhaab (may Allah have mercy on him) said: We do not regard as kaafirs those who placed an idol [i.e., a built-up tomb] on the grave of 'Abd al-Qaadir al-Jilani or on the grave of al-Badawi, because of their ignorance and the lack of anyone to advise them.

Liqaa'aat al-Baab al-Maftooh (33/question no. 12).

V.

The Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

But there remains the issue of a man who was negligent and put no effort into seeking the truth, because he was heedless and he saw what people were doing and did likewise, without researching the matter. Such a person may be sinning; in fact he may be falling short in seeking the truth, and he may not be excused in this case. Or he may be excused if it never occurred to him that this action was an infraction but he had no scholar to advise him. In this case he may be excused. Hence the most correct view is that if someone lives in the wilderness, far away from the cities, and he did not fast Ramadan because he

thought that it was not obligatory, or he used to have intercourse with his wife during the day in Ramadan, thinking that doing so was permissible, then he does not have to make up the fast, because he was ignorant, and one of the conditions of being accountable for adhering to sharee'ah is that the accountable person should have heard of the ruling and learned of it.

To sum up: a person may be excused for ignorance, but he will not be excused for falling short in seeking knowledge of the truth.

Liqaa'aat al-Baab al-Maftooh (39/question no. 3)

VI.

The Shaykh (may Allah have mercy on him) was asked:

What is your view on one who says Laa ilaaha ill-Allah Muhammad Rasoolullah, then he slaughters a sacrifice for something other than Allah? Is he a Muslim? Please note that he grew up in a Muslim country.

The Shaykh said:

The one who seeks to draw close to something other than Allah by means of offering a sacrifice to it is a mushrik in the sense of major shirk, and he will not benefit from saying Laa ilaaha ill-Allah, or from praying or any other deed, unless he grew up in a remote land, where the people did not know of this ruling. In that case he is excused for his ignorance, but he should be taught, like one who lives in a remote land where they offer sacrifices to something other than Allah, such as offering sacrifices to graves or to the awliya' ("saints"), and they do not see anything wrong with that, and they do not know that this is shirk or that it is haraam. Such a person may be excused for his ignorance. But as for a person who is told that this constitutes disbelief, but he says: No, I will not stop offering sacrifices to the "saint", in this case proof has been established against him, so he is to be deemed a disbeliever.

Questioner:

If he is given advice and told that this is shirk (but he persists in it), can I describe him as a mushrik or kaafir?

Shaykh:

Yes, he is a mushrik, kaafir and apostate. He should be asked to repent, and if he repents, all well and good; otherwise he is to be executed.

Questioner:

Is there a difference between issues that are very clear and issues that are subtle and ambiguous?

Shaykh:

That which is ambiguous needs to be discussed, such as this issue. If we assume that he says: "I live among people who slaughter sacrifices to the saints (awliya'), and I do not know that this is haraam," then this matter is ambiguous for him, because what is ambiguous or clear is something relative. That which is clear to me may be ambiguous to you, and that which is clear to you may be ambiguous to me.

Questioner:

How can I establish proof against him? What is the proof that I should present to him?

Shaykh:

The proof against him is what it says in the verses (interpretation of the meaning):

"Say (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)): 'Verily, my Salat (prayer), my sacrifice, my living, and my dying are for Allah, the Lord of the Alameen (mankind, jinns and all that exists).

'He has no partner. And of this I have been commanded...'"

Al-An'aam 6:162, 163]

“Verily, We have granted you (O Muhammad (Peace be upon him)) Al-Kauthar (a river in Paradise),

Therefore turn in prayer to your Lord and sacrifice (to Him only)”

[al-Kawthar 108:1, 2].

This indicates that offering sacrifices as a means of drawing close and veneration is an act of worship, and whoever directs worship to anything or anyone other than Allah is a mushrik.

If proof is conveyed and he is told that this act of his constitutes shirk (but he persists in it), then he no longer has any excuse for doing it.

Questioner:

Should he be told then?

Shaykh:

He has to be told.

Questioner:

There is a specious argument which says that his action is shirk but he is not a mushrik. How should we respond?

Shaykh:

This is correct. He is not a mushrik if no proof has been established against him. Didn't the one who said "O Allah, You are my slave and I am your Lord" speak words of disbelief? Yet he did not become a disbeliever thereby, because he made that mistake out of extreme joy (at finding his lost camel in the wilderness, as mentioned in a lengthy hadith). Is it not the case that the one who is forced to disbelieve may disbelieve outwardly but he does not do so in his heart, for his heart is at ease with faith? With regard to the scholars who say that a word of disbelief is distinct from the one who utters it, this applies if no proof has been

established and we do not know his situation. But if we do know his situation, then what do we do now? Do we say that he cannot be deemed a disbeliever? Does it mean that no one can be deemed a disbeliever, or that no one can become a disbeliever, and even the one who does not pray cannot be described as a disbeliever? Even Ibn Taymiyah said that if proof reached him, then proof has been established against him (and he is left with no excuse). ... It is not enough for proof to reach him, unless he also understands it, because if we assume that someone is a non-Arab and we recite the Qur'an to him morning and evening, , but he does not know what it means, can we say that proof has been established against him? Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And We sent not a Messenger except with the language of his people, in order that he might make (the Message) clear for them”

[Ibraaheem 14:4].

Liqaa'aat al-Baab al-Maftooh (48/question no. 15)

We hope that the matter has become clear, and that you understand the meaning of what Shaykh ibn 'Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said, and that his view is that ignorance is an excuse. This is applicable in the case of one who is new in Islam, or one who lives far away from places of knowledge, or who lives among people to whom it has never occurred that they are going against Islamic teachings, even though in fact their actions are causing them to fall into major shirk.

And Allah knows best.