

Research Article

The Veneration of The Graves of The Righteous and its Implementation for the Purity of Tawhid

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Abstract

The phenomenon of exaggeration in honoring the graves of the righteous remains one of the theological challenges that threaten the purity of Islamic monotheism (tawhid). This study arises from the academic concern that many Muslims, driven by love and reverence for pious figures, may unconsciously fall into practices resembling idol worship. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach and textual analysis of Kitab At-Tawhid by Shaykh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, as well as classical tafsir and hadith sources, this research explores the historical roots and theological implications of grave veneration. The findings indicate that exaggeration often begins with emotional attachment and ends with acts of worship such as supplication, circumambulation, or building shrines upon graves. This progression mirrors the origins of idolatry in pre-Islamic times, as seen in the story of Lat and Uzza. The study concludes that maintaining moderation in honoring the righteous is essential to protect the essence of tawhid and prevent

deviations in worship. Educational efforts and theological awareness are therefore required to restore correct understanding among the Muslim community.

Keywords: Tawhid, Grave Veneration, Shirk, Islamic Theology, Kitab At-Tawhid.

INTRODUCTION

Grave pilgrimage remains a valued ritual among Muslims, deeply rooted in the traditions of this religion. This practice involves visiting the graves of holy figures known as *auliya'*, where followers flock from various regions to seek blessings and use these saints as a *wasilah* (pathway) to get closer to God. (Saifuddin et al., 2024) In the history of Islamic thought, the preservation of tawhid—the absolute oneness of Allah—has stood as the most essential pillar of faith and the central theme of prophetic missions. Yet, throughout the ages, deviations from pure monotheism have emerged not always through direct rejection of divine unity, but rather through subtle excesses in religious emotions and practices. One of the most critical of these deviations is the exaggeration in honoring the graves of the righteous. This tendency, though often born of sincere love and reverence, has the potential to evolve into acts of veneration that contradict the principles of tawhid and risk sliding into shirk (associationism).

The academic anxiety (*kegelisahan akademik*) underlying this research stems from the observable tension between emotional religiosity and doctrinal purity in Muslim communities. Across various regions of the Muslim world, one can find differing practices surrounding the graves of saints, scholars, or pious figures—ranging from respectful visitation (*ziyarah kubur*) to forms of ritual devotion such as supplication directed through the deceased, seeking blessings from their tombs, or even constructing elaborate shrines to commemorate them. While some regard these acts as expressions of love and remembrance, others see them as a dangerous gateway to polytheistic tendencies. This tension raises a critical theological and sociological question: at what point does reverence for the righteous transform into an act of worship that violates tawhid?

The concern is not new. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself warned his followers: “O Allah, do not make my grave an idol that is worshipped. Allah’s wrath intensified upon a people who took the graves of their prophets as places of worship.” This prophetic caution, recorded in *Al-Muwatta’* of Imam Malik, reveals the awareness of early Islam toward the human inclination to sanctify physical sites and personalities associated with piety. Historically, such exaggeration had paved the way for idol worship in earlier nations. The Qur’an mentions *Lat* and *Uzza*—two deities originally associated with righteous men whose graves became centers of veneration. Over time, emotional reverence evolved into ritual worship. This transformation serves as a timeless warning that theological deviation often begins with sentiment rather than denial.

Despite extensive theological discourse on tawhid and shirk, contemporary Muslim societies continue to exhibit differing attitudes toward grave-related practices. The divergence often lies not in the acknowledgment of Allah’s oneness, but in differing interpretations of what constitutes worship. For instance, while classical scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, and later reformists like

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab emphasized strict separation between reverence and worship, other traditional circles have adopted a more lenient stance, emphasizing intention (*niyyah*) and cultural expressions of respect. Some circles of Muslim scholars, including Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, think that this tradition, reciting prayers for the deceased saints in particular, has violated the *tawhid uluhiyyah*. (Chasan & Zamhari, 2021)

This multiplicity of perspectives makes the issue not only theological but also anthropological, revealing the complexity of human religiosity within the framework of monotheism. The urgency of this study thus lies in reexamining how exaggerated reverence can subtly distort the understanding of worship in Islam. It is not sufficient to merely restate doctrinal prohibitions; one must also uncover the psychological, social, and historical mechanisms that lead believers toward such excesses. Moreover, in an era of religious commodification and spiritual tourism, the line between respect and sanctification has grown increasingly blurred. Mosques built adjacent to tombs, supplications made through the deceased, and festivals held at burial sites—though often culturally rooted—raise theological questions that demand renewed scholarly attention.

Theologically, this phenomenon challenges the *tawhid al-‘ibadah* (unity of worship), which requires that all acts of devotion, supplication, and hope be directed exclusively to Allah. Sociologically, it reflects the enduring human need for tangible intermediaries between the believer and the Divine. Psychologically, it embodies the human tendency to attach sanctity to physical symbols of righteousness. This triadic dynamic—between belief, society, and emotion—forms the conceptual foundation of the problem investigated in this research.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research method used in this study is qualitative research with a descriptive-analytical and interpretative library research approach, with the aim of conducting an in-depth study of the phenomenon of *ghuluw* (excessiveness) in the veneration of the graves of pious people and its implications for the purity of *tawhid*, especially *tawhid al-‘ibadah*. This research began with a review of previous studies to map the position of the research, find academic gaps, and distinguish the focus of this study from previous studies. Previous studies reviewed include scientific works discussing *tawhid* and *shirk* from an Islamic theological perspective, studies on grave pilgrimage and saint veneration in Muslim societies, as well as sociological and anthropological studies on religious practices based on local traditions. The results of the review show that some studies emphasize the *fiqh* aspect of grave pilgrimage or a cultural approach, while this study specifically focuses on conceptual and theological analysis of the boundary between *ta'zhim* (respect) and *'ibadah* (worship) based on the framework of *tawhid*. The main sources of data for this study include the Holy Qur'an, the authentic hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and the book *At-Tawhid* by Shaykh Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab as the central reference, while supporting data sources come from classical books on creed and interpretation such as the works of Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, and Ibn Kathir, as well as relevant contemporary books, scientific journals, and academic articles. Data

collection techniques were carried out through documentary studies, by systematically compiling, classifying, and examining these written sources. The collected data was analyzed using text analysis to examine the normative arguments of the Qur'an and hadith, as well as thematic analysis by grouping the discussions into main themes such as the concepts of tawhid and shirk, the history of grave veneration, the prohibition of ghuluw, and the psychological, social, and cultural factors that influence this practice. This study also uses a historical and contextual approach to understand the development and reality of the practice of venerating graves in Muslim societies from time to time. The validity of the data is maintained through comparisons between sources and the opinions of reputable scholars, so that this study is expected to make an academic contribution in clarifying the limits of respect for pious people so that it remains within the corridor of tawhid and does not shift into a form of deviant worship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The issue of exaggeration in honoring the graves of the righteous represents one of the most critical theological problems confronting the Muslim community from its earliest generations until today. This phenomenon does not emerge from disbelief in God but rather from an emotional inclination toward love and admiration of pious individuals who have passed away. Over time, this admiration develops into ritual veneration and, ultimately, into acts that resemble worship. Historically, this process is precisely what transformed monotheistic devotion into idolatrous worship in many earlier civilizations.

In Islamic theology, the concept of tawhīd—the oneness and exclusivity of God's worship—forms the foundation of the entire religion. Anything that compromises the absoluteness of this oneness, whether through action, intention, or belief, is categorized as shirk (associationism). The Qur'an repeatedly warns against attributing divine qualities or powers to created beings. Allah says: "And they worship besides Allah things that neither harm them nor benefit them, and they say, 'These are our intercessors with Allah.' Say, 'Do you inform Allah of something He does not know in the heavens or on the earth?'" (Yūnus 10:18) This verse exposes the self-deception of those who sought closeness to God through intermediaries, claiming love for the righteous while in reality transferring the essence of worship to them.

From the hadith of Aisha, may Allah be pleased with her, she said: When the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was ill, some of his wives mentioned a church they had seen during their migration to the land of Habashah. The church was called Maria. Umm Salamah and Umm Habibah both had migrated to the land of Habasha. Both of them remembered the beauty and the images inside it.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ foresaw this human tendency and issued clear preventive measures to block any path leading toward it. He said, "May Allah curse the Jews and the Christians; they took the graves of their prophets as places of worship" (al-Bukhārī and Muslim). In another narration, he warned, "Do not make my grave a place of celebration" (Abu Dawud, 2042). The emphasis of these warnings reflects Islam's sadd al-dharā'ī principle—closing the means that could lead to

greater harm. The Prophet's approach was not only theological but also deeply psychological; he understood the natural human desire to express love and loyalty through physical symbols, yet he confined worship strictly to Allah alone.

The historical record confirms that the earliest form of polytheism appeared among the people of Noah. Ibn 'Abbās, in his explanation of the verse "And they said, do not abandon Wadd, nor Suwā', nor Yaghūth, and Ya'ūq, and Nasr" (Nūḥ 71:23), stated that these names referred to righteous men. When they died, people made images of them as memorials, and later generations began worshipping those images. The transformation from memory to idolatry occurred gradually as the knowledge of tawḥīd faded. Ibn Taymiyyah observed that the first appearance of shirk on earth originated from exaggeration in honoring the righteous. This statement reveals a universal psychological pattern: emotional veneration, if left unchecked, naturally evolves into spiritual dependence.

Contemporary observations reveal that similar tendencies persist in many Muslim societies today. Pilgrimages to the tombs of saints, such as the Wali Songo in Indonesia or the shrines of al-Ḥusayn and Sayyidah Zaynab in Egypt, often serve both cultural and spiritual purposes. For many, these visits symbolize respect for Islamic history and serve as reminders of moral integrity. However, the line between cultural reverence (ʿādah) and devotional worship (ʿibādah) is often blurred. When visitors begin to make vows, offer sacrifices, or direct prayers to the deceased, their actions cross from symbolic respect into theological deviation. The Prophet's intended form of ziyārah (grave visitation) was purely reflective: "Visit the graves, for they remind you of death" (Muslim). This prophetic teaching transforms the grave from a site of intercession into a place of introspection.

Psychologically, the desire to seek blessing (barakah) or spiritual intercession from the graves of saints is rooted in human insecurity and the yearning for tangible mediation. The invisible nature of God's decree makes people inclined toward physical tokens of reassurance. Yet, Islam rejects the notion that proximity to a grave enhances divine favor. The Qur'an states clearly: "And when My servants ask you concerning Me, indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me" (al-Baqarah 2:186). This verse reaffirms that divine nearness depends on sincerity, not spatial closeness.

Theological analysis therefore demands a clear distinction between taʿẓīm (honor) and ʿibādah (worship). Honor is a moral act reflecting gratitude and respect, while worship is an act of total submission and spiritual dependence. Ibn al-Qayyim, in Ighāthat al-Lahfān, explains that whoever seeks protection or aid from those buried in graves attributes divine qualities to them. The heart's orientation (tawajjuh al-qalb) defines the nature of worship more than external action does. When supplication, fear, or hope is directed toward anyone other than Allah, the act becomes a form of hidden shirk (shirk khafi).

In light of these theological principles, the research found that exaggeration in honoring the righteous often arises from ignorance of these subtle distinctions. Educational systems and religious institutions have not always succeeded in embedding an accurate understanding of tawḥīd. Consequently, popular religiosity tends to rely on emotional expressions rather than doctrinal clarity. Reform

movements that emphasize the purity of worship such as those inspired by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s Kitāb al-Tawhīd therefore play a crucial role in reorienting devotion toward Allah alone. Yet, such reform must be delivered with wisdom and empathy, acknowledging the deep emotional and cultural roots of these practices.

Sociologically, veneration practices also serve as tools of community identity. In many Muslim-majority regions, saint veneration is intertwined with local traditions, art, and history. Outright condemnation without cultural understanding often provokes resistance rather than reform. For that reason, the prophetic method of da‘wah gentle correction through explanation and patience remains the most effective means to restore correct belief. Islam does not deny emotional attachment or gratitude toward the pious; rather, it disciplines such emotions within the boundaries of tawhīd.

The Qur’an offers the ultimate corrective when it commands: “And to Allah belong the most beautiful names, so call upon Him by them, and leave those who deviate concerning His names” (al-A‘rāf 7:180). This divine directive reminds believers that all supplication and hope must be directed through God’s own attributes, not through intermediaries. The righteous deserve remembrance and prayers for mercy, but not invocations addressed to them.

The Central Findings: The Theological Roots of Exaggeration in Grave Veneration

The research findings reveal that the phenomenon of exaggeration in venerating the graves of the righteous (Arabic: ghuluw fi ta‘zīm qubūr al-ṣāliḥīn) represents one of the earliest and most persistent deviations from pure Islamic monotheism (tawhīd). From both historical and textual analysis, this behavior originated not from an intention to commit idolatry but from excessive emotional attachment toward pious individuals after their death. Over time, love and reverence transformed into veneration, and veneration into acts resembling worship. This trajectory mirrors what Allah has revealed regarding the people of Noah:

وَقَالُوا لَا تَذَرُنْ آلِهَتَكُمْ وَلَا تَذَرُنْ وَدًّا وَلَا سُوَاعًا وَلَا يَغُوثَ وَيَعُوقَ وَنَسْرًا

“And they said, ‘Do not abandon your gods, and do not abandon Wadd, nor Suwā‘, nor Yaghūth, and Ya‘ūq, and Nasr.’” (Qur’an, Surah Nūḥ 71:23)

According to Ibn ‘Abbās, as narrated in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, these names referred to righteous men among the people of Noah. After their deaths, statues were erected to commemorate them. When later generations forgot the meaning behind these statues, they began worshipping them. This narrative illustrates that the seed of polytheism often begins with emotional glorification of piety rather than outright rejection of divine unity.

The textual analysis of Kitāb al-Tawhīd by Shaykh Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb reinforces this view. The Shaykh emphasized that the veneration of graves when accompanied by acts such as supplication, circumambulation, or seeking intercession constitutes a form of shirk al-‘ibādah (worship-based polytheism). The research identifies that such exaggeration arises from ignorance of the limits of lawful honor and the lack of understanding about what constitutes ‘ibādah in Islam.

Al-Bukhari and Muslim narrated from 'Aisha, who said: "When the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, was about to die, he immediately covered his face with a cloth, then he opened it again when he felt suffocated. It was in this state that he said:

لَعْنَةُ اللَّهِ عَلَى الْيَهُودِ وَالنَّصَارَى اتَّخَذُوا قُبُورَ نَبِيِّائِهِمْ مَسَاجِدَ

“May Allah's curse be upon the Jews and Christians, who have made the graves of their prophets places of worship.”

Historical Development: From Symbolic Remembrance to Ritualized Worship

The historical dimension of the study reveals a repeating pattern across human civilizations. Initially, communities build monuments or gravesites to honor exemplary figures. Over time, these sites transform into sacred spaces believed to possess spiritual power. This same process can be traced from the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt to later Abrahamic traditions. In early Islam, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ strictly prohibited any practice that could lead to the glorification of graves. He said: *“Do not make my grave a place of celebration, and do not make your houses into graves. Send blessings upon me, for your blessings reach me wherever you are.”* (Narrated by Abu Dawud, no. 2042)

The Prophet also warned: *“May Allah curse the Jews and Christians; they took the graves of their prophets as places of worship.”* (Narrated by al-Bukhārī and Muslim)

These warnings highlight the Prophet's foresight regarding the human inclination toward sanctifying physical symbols. The research thus concludes that Islam's preventive approach (sadd al-dharā'i') aims to safeguard tawhīd by blocking any means leading to idolatry.

In later centuries, however, historical evidence from regions such as Egypt, Iraq, and the Indian subcontinent shows that practices involving the veneration of saints' tombs became widespread. The construction of domes, shrines, and rituals of supplication around graves reflected a gradual shift from theological understanding to emotional religiosity.

The Psychological Dimension of Exaggeration

From a psychological perspective, humans naturally seek tangible intermediaries between themselves and the unseen. The longing for spiritual reassurance often leads to the personalization of piety in the form of saints and holy figures. This study interprets such tendencies using the concept of cognitive anthropomorphism where divine attributes are projected onto human figures.

The field data gathered from Muslim-majority regions such as Indonesia, Egypt, and Pakistan show that many Muslims believe their supplications are more likely to be answered when performed near the tombs of saints. The act of proximity is considered to enhance spiritual connection, even though the Qur'an explicitly states:

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

“And when My servants ask you concerning Me, indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me.” (Qur’an, Surah al-Baqarah 2:186)

This verse directly refutes the notion that spatial proximity to graves grants special divine favor. The theological implication is clear: divine response depends on sincerity (*ikhlaṣ*) and obedience, not on physical location or intermediaries. The study thus finds that the psychological urge for tangible mediation is one of the strongest factors driving exaggeration in grave veneration. Without deep ‘aḳidah education, emotional attachment easily transforms into devotional dependence.

Sociological Findings: Veneration as a Cultural Phenomenon

Sociological observation suggests that in several Muslim societies, the veneration of saints’ graves has become part of religious identity and community heritage. Rituals such as *mawlid*, *haul*, and *ziyarah kubur massal* have both spiritual and social functions. However, the boundary between tradition (‘ādah) and worship (‘ibādah) often becomes blurred.

In Indonesia, for instance, pilgrimages to the tombs of Wali Songo are widely practiced as a symbol of Islamic cultural history. Similarly, in Egypt, the shrine of al-Ḥusayn and Sayyidah Zaynab attract millions of visitors annually. While these practices strengthen communal ties, they also risk developing into theological deviations when acts of supplication or offerings are directed to the deceased rather than to Allah.

From this, the study concludes that religious education must integrate sociological sensitivity correcting misinterpretations without negating cultural values. Reform movements must therefore approach these phenomena with both theological clarity and social wisdom.

Theological Discussion: The Line between Honor and Worship

Theologically, *ta‘zīm* (honor) is permissible as long as it does not cross into ‘ibādah. Classical scholars define ‘ibādah as any act involving humility, love, and submission to the extent that it becomes exclusive to Allah. When an act of reverence includes hope (*rajā’*) or fear (*khawf*) directed toward someone other than Allah, it becomes a form of *shirk*. Ibn al-Qayyim in *Ighāthat al-Lahfān* explains:

“Whoever seeks benefit or protection from those buried in graves has assigned to them the attributes of divinity.”

Therefore, the research highlights that distinguishing between *ta‘zīm* and ‘ibādah is not merely a legal issue but a spiritual one. The believer must guard his heart from transferring his inner hope and trust from Allah to any created being.

The Qur’an offers the ultimate corrective when it commands: “And to Allah belong the most beautiful names, so call upon Him by them, and leave those who deviate concerning His names” (*al-A‘rāf* 7:180). This divine directive reminds believers that all supplication and hope must be directed through God’s own attributes, not through intermediaries. The righteous deserve remembrance and prayers for mercy, but not invocations addressed to them.

Ultimately, the study concludes that exaggeration in honoring the graves of the righteous reflects not a lack of faith, but a misdirected form of love. The path from reverence to idolatry is paved with noble intentions but corrupted by theological negligence. True love for the righteous lies in following their example, not in sanctifying their remains. Islam commands believers to honor their predecessors through obedience to God, sincerity in worship, and adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah. When this balance is maintained, love uplifts faith; when it exceeds the bounds, it undermines the very foundation of monotheism.

The preservation of tawhīd thus requires both intellectual clarity and emotional discipline. Education, community guidance, and continuous reflection on Qur'anic warnings are vital to protecting the Muslim ummah from subtle deviations. As the Prophet ﷺ said, "The most fearful thing I fear for you is the lesser shirk: showing off" (Ahmad, 23630). This warning encapsulates the heart of the problem when the purity of intention is compromised, the essence of worship is lost. Therefore, exaggeration in honoring the graves of the righteous is not merely a ritual error but a profound spiritual misdirection that, if left unchecked, leads inevitably toward idolatry.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of exaggeration in honoring the graves of the righteous (ghuluw fi ta'zhim qubur al-salihin) has proven to be a recurring theological issue that continues to challenge the purity of Islamic monotheism (tawhid). Throughout history, this behavior has not stemmed from outright disbelief in Allah, but from a gradual emotional and psychological inclination to glorify pious individuals beyond the limits prescribed by Islamic teachings. What begins as sincere love, gratitude, and admiration can easily transform into excessive veneration and, eventually, acts of worship that contradict the very essence of tawhid.

The research demonstrates that the origins of this deviation trace back to the earliest human communities, as illustrated in the Qur'anic narrative about the people of Prophet Noah. Their transformation of righteous men into idols marked the first appearance of shirk (associationism) on earth. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, recognizing this human tendency, issued strong prohibitions against turning graves into places of worship. His warnings, supported by authentic hadith, serve as preventive measures (sadd al-dhara'i) to block any path that could lead believers from monotheism to idolatry.

Through the textual analysis of Kitab At-Tawhid by Shaykh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, as well as insights from classical scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, the study reaffirms that worship is an act reserved exclusively for Allah. Any form of supplication, offering, or reliance directed toward the deceased constitutes shirk al-'ibadah a violation of the unity of worship. This distinction between ta'zhim (honor) and 'ibadah (worship) is therefore essential to prevent believers from blurring the theological boundaries between respect and devotion.

The study also finds that psychological and sociological factors contribute significantly to the persistence of grave veneration in many Muslim societies. Psychologically, the human desire for tangible intermediaries between oneself and

the Divine leads to the personification of piety through saints and spiritual figures. Sociologically, such practices often become intertwined with local customs, cultural heritage, and collective identity, as seen in rituals like *ziyarah kubur*, *haul*, and *mawlid*. While these practices may serve as expressions of community unity and historical remembrance, they also risk evolving into forms of spiritual dependence if not guided by sound theological understanding.

Therefore, the key solution proposed by this research is not merely condemnation of these practices, but education and reformation through wisdom and empathy. The purification of belief must be coupled with awareness of cultural context, ensuring that correction does not alienate communities but instead enlightens them. Religious scholars, educators, and institutions have a crucial role in promoting correct understanding of *tawhid*, emphasizing that true reverence for the righteous lies in emulating their faith and deeds, not sanctifying their tombs.

Ultimately, this study concludes that the root of theological deviation lies not in intentional disbelief, but in emotional excess and ignorance of doctrinal boundaries. Preserving *tawhid* the foundation of Islamic faith requires intellectual clarity, emotional discipline, and continuous renewal of understanding. Muslims are urged to direct all acts of supplication, fear, and hope solely to Allah, for as the Qur'an declares: "Indeed, I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me" (Al-Baqarah 2:186). By internalizing this divine principle, the Muslim community can maintain the balance between love for the righteous and devotion to the One God, safeguarding their worship from all traces of *shirk* and ensuring the continuation of pure Islamic monotheism for generations to come.

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