

The Distinction between Iman and Islam

Mufti Muhammad Shafi, Maariful Qur'an (2.1-5)

Lexically, Iman signifies the acceptance and confirmation of something with one's heart, while Islam signifies obedience and submission. Iman pertains to the heart; so does Islam, but it is related to all the other parts of the human body as well.

From the point of view of the **Shariah**, however, Iman is not valid without Islam, nor Islam without Iman. In other words, it is not enough to have faith in Allah and the Prophet ﷺ in one's heart unless the tongue expresses the faith and also affirms one's allegiance and submission. Similarly, an oral declaration of faith and allegiance is not valid unless one has faith in one's heart.

In short, Iman, and Islam have **different connotations** from the lexical point of view. It is on the basis of this lexical distinction that the Holy Qur'an and Hadith refer to a **difference** between the two.

From the point of view of the Shariah, however, the two are inextricably linked together, and one cannot be valid without the other - as is borne out by the Holy Qur'an itself.

When **Islam**, or an external declaration of allegiance, is not accompanied by **Iman** or internal faith, the Holy Qur'an terms it as Nifaq (hypocrisy), and condemns it as a greater crime than an open rejection of Islam:

Surely the hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of Hell. (4:145)

In explanation of this verse let us add that so far as the physical world goes, we can only be sure of the external state of a man, and cannot know his internal state with any degree of certainty. So in the case of men who orally declare themselves to be Muslims without having faith in their heart, the Shariah requires us to deal with them as we would deal with a Muslim in worldly affairs; but in the other world their fate would be worse than that of the ordinary disbelievers. Similarly, if Iman or acknowledgment in the heart is not accompanied by external affirmation and allegiance, the Holy Qur'an regards this too as kufr or rejection and denial of the Truth - speaking of the infidels, it says:

They know him as they know their own sons (2:146);

or in another place:

Their souls knew them (the signs sent by Allah) to be true, yet they denied them in

their wickedness and their pride. (27:14)

My respected teacher, `Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Anwar Shah used to explain it thus - the expanse which Iman and Islam have to cover in the spiritual journey is the same, and the difference lies only in the beginning and the end; that is to say, Iman starts from the heart and attains perfection in external deeds, while Islam starts from external deeds and can be regarded as perfect when it reaches the heart.

To sum up, Iman is not valid, if acknowledgment in the heart does not attain to external affirmation and allegiance; similarly, Islam is not valid, if external affirmation and allegiance does not attain to confirmation by the heart. Imam Ghazzali and Imam Subki both have arrived at the same conclusion, and in Musamarah, Imam Ibn al-Humam reports the agreement of all the authentic scholars in this respect.

...who believe in what has been revealed to you and in what has been revealed before you, and do have faith in the Hereafter.

This verse speaks of some other attributes of the God-fearing, giving certain details about faith in the unseen with a special mention of faith in hereafter. Commenting on this verse, the blessed Companions `Abdullah ibn Masud and `Abdullah ibn `Abbas (Allah be pleased with him), have said that in the days of the Prophet ﷺ God-fearing Muslims were of two kinds, - those who used to be associators and disbelievers but accepted Islam, and those who used to be among the people of the Book (that is, Jews and Christians) but embraced Islam later on; the preceding verse refers to the first group, and this verse to the second. Hence this verse specifically mentions belief in the earlier Divine Books along with belief in the Holy Qur'an, for, according to the Hadith, people in the second group deserve a double recompense, firstly, for believing in and following the earlier Books before the Holy Qur'an came to replace them, and secondly, for believing in and following the Holy Qur'an when it came as the final Book of Allah.

Even today it is obligatory for every Muslim to believe in the earlier Divine Books except that now the belief has to take this form: everything that Allah has revealed in the earlier Books is true (excepting the changes and distortions introduced by selfish people), and that it was incumbent upon the people for whom those Books had been sent to act according to them, but now that all the earlier Books and Shariahs have been abrogated, one must act according to the Holy Qur'an alone.

*English - Ma'ariful Qur'an - Mufti Shafi Usmani RA - Vol - 1 - Surah Al-Baqarah - 2 :
Verses 1 - 5*