

# Imam Ghazali on the Relationships Between Faith (iman) and Submission (islam)

## Are Islam and Iman are the Same or Different?

Some have said that they are one and the same thing. Others say that they are two different things wholly unrelated, and still others say that although they are two different things, they are closely related to each other.

To begin with, this discussion comprises three considerations:

**First** concerning the **literal meaning** of the two terms Islam and Iman (Submission and Belief);

**Second** the **technical meaning** of the two terms in the Qur'an and Prophetic teachings;

**Third** the **functions** which they fulfill in this world and the next.

The **first** is one of language, the **second** is of interpretation, and the **third** is of jurisprudence and Religion.

## First: Literal Meaning of Islam and Iman

The first consideration concerning the literal meaning of the words.

"**Belief**" means literally "**acceptance**". Concerning the brothers of Joseph, Allah says: "They said (to Jacob): `We went racing and left Joseph with our things. The wolf devoured him. But you will not BELIEVE us, though we speak the truth'" (Ch.12:17 Qur'an), which is the same as saying that he will not accept their word.

**Islam** on the other hand means **submission**, and **surrender** to Allah through yielding and compliance; and henceforth abjuring rebellion, pride, and stubbornness.

**Acceptance** lies in the **heart** while the tongue serves as its interpreter. But **submission** is **more comprehensive** and pervades the heart, the tongue and the senses. For every acceptance with the mind is a submission and a disavowal of pride and unbelief.

The same is true of verbal confession as well as of obedience and compliance with the senses. **According to the dictates of language, Islam is the more general term, while belief is the more specific.** Therefore belief (Iman) represents the noblest part of Islam.

**Consequently, every acceptance is submission, but not every submission is acceptance.**

## **Second: Usage of Iman and Islam in the Qur'an and Sunna**

The second consideration treats the technical meaning of the two terms in the Qur'an and Prophetic teachings.

The truth of the matter is that the Religion i.e. the Qur'an and Prophetic teachings, has used the two terms:

- (1) as synonyms interchangeably;
- (2) as different terms of different meaning; and
- (3) as related terms, one being a part of the other.

### **(1) Examples of their Use as Synonyms**

**Their use synonymously** is shown in the Words of Allah when He said, "So We brought the believers out of that they were in. We found in it but one household of those who had surrendered themselves," (Ch.51:35-36 Qur'an). Yet as a matter of fact there was only one family. Allah says: "Moses said: `O my people, if you believe in Allah, in Him put your trust if you are Muslims.'" (Ch.10:84 Qur'an).

The Prophet also said, "Islam is built upon five pillars." At another time the Prophet was asked what belief was and he gave the same answers, namely the five pillars. (The bearing witness that there is no god except Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet, prayer, obligatory charity, pilgrimage, the fast of Ramadan).

### **(2) Examples of their Use Distinctly**

**The use of the terms Islam and belief to signify different meanings** is shown in the Words of Allah when He said: "The Arabs declare: `We believe.' Say: `You do not' rather say, `we submit'.." (Ch.49:14 Qur'an). This means that they have surrendered outwardly only. In this case the Prophet used belief for acceptance with the mind only and used Islam for surrender outwardly through the tongue and limbs.

(Similarly when Gabriel assumed the appearance of a stranger) and questioned the Prophet concerning belief the latter replied saying, "Belief is to believe in Allah, His Angels, Books, Prophets, the Last Day, the resurrection of the dead, the Judgement, and in the Decrees of Allah, the good and the evil." Gabriel then asked what Islam was, to which the Prophet replied by citing the five pillars. He thus used Islam for submission outwardly in word and deed.

According to a Prophetic teaching related on the authority of Sa'd the Prophet - the praise and peace be upon him - once gave a certain man a gift and to another he gave nothing whereupon Sa'd said: "O Prophet of Allah. You have given this man nothing although he is a believer." The Prophet added, "Or a Muslim." Sa'd repeated his question and again the Prophet added, "Or a Muslim."

### (3) Examples of their Use as Related Terms--One Being Part of the Other

Their **use as related terms, the one being a part of the other** is shown by what has been related concerning the Prophet of Allah - the praise and peace be upon him - when he was asked what deeds were best and he replied, "Islam"; and when he was asked which type of Islam was best he answered: "Belief".

This proves the use of Islam and belief (Iman) both as different terms and as related terms the one being a part of the other, of which latter use is the best linguistically, because belief is in reality a work - in fact the best of works.

Islam on the other hand is submission either with the mind or with the tongue, or with the senses; but the best is the submission with the mind. It is that acceptance which is called belief.

### The Arabic Basis of Such Usage

The use of the terms Islam and belief as two different words of different meanings, as related terms, the one being a part of the other, and as synonyms, does not overstep the possibilities which the language allows.

Their **use as different terms of different meanings makes belief signify acceptance with the mind only**, which signification conforms to the dictates of language; it **makes Islam signify submission outwardly**, which thing is also in harmony with the requirements of language. For the submission in part is also called submission, since the unanimous agreement of the scholars application of a term is not a necessary prerequisite for its use.

For example, he who touches another with a part of his body is nevertheless called contiguous despite the fact that the whole of his body is not in contact with that of the other.

Hence the **application of the term Islam to outward submission, although the inward submission is lacking**, is in complete harmony with the rules of language. In this sense were the Words of Allah used when He said "The Arabs declare: 'We believe.' Say: You do not', rather say, 'we submit,'... (Ch.49:14 Qur'an).

The same is true of the use of the two words Islam and Iman (belief) in the prophetic saying related by Sa'd where the Prophet - the praise and peace be upon him - added: "Or a Muslim." He did that because he preferred the one to the other. What is meant by the use of the two terms as different words of different meanings is that the terms contend for superiority and vie with each other in excellence.

**Their use as related terms, the one being a part of the other, is also in harmony with the rules of language.** It is the **use of Islam for submission with the mind as well as with word and deed; while using belief for a part of Islam, namely acceptance with the mind.** This is what we meant by the usage of Islam and belief as related terms, the one being a part of the other. It satisfies the rules of language with respect to both the specific application of belief and the general use of Islam, which is all-inclusive.

It was in this sense that the Prophet - the praise and peace be upon him - used the term belief when he replied to the question put to him as to which type of Islam is best, thereby making it a particular aspect of Islam and a part of it.

**The use of the two terms synonymously, thereby using the word Islam for both inward and outward submission, would make it all submission; the same is true of belief, which may be used freely and its particular meaning extended, thereby making it general and including under it outward submission.** This is quite possible because the outward submission through word and deed is the fruit and result of inward submission.

Thus the name of a certain tree is freely used to signify both the plant itself as well as the fruit of the plant.

Similarly the **significance of the term belief may be extended so as to become general, thereby making it synonymous with the term Islam and in exact agreement with it.** Allah said: "We found in it but one household of those who had surrendered themselves," (Ch.51:36 Qur'an).

*from The Foundations of Islamic Belief* (<http://masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/ghazali4.htm>)