

# Islam vs. Īmān Muslim vs. Mo'min

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**W**hat is the definition of Islam? One person, referring to a hadith, may say that the Prophet said: “You will be Muslim if you say the *shahada* – *Ashhadoo allā- ilāha illa-Allah wa-ashhadoo anna Muhammad-ar-rasoolul-lah.*<sup>1</sup> That’s it. Even if you don’t do anything after uttering that declaration, you are Muslim. This is a beginner’s definition of Islam and is for *appearance* only (‘outwardly surrendered’).

Another person may say that the Prophet said: “The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people will be safe.” Looking at this from another aspect, does this mean that, if the people are not safe from his tongue and his hand, then he is not Muslim?

A third person may define and analyze Islam linguistically. Islam is taken from the Arabic infinitive *silim*. “Silim” means peace. Peace with what? It means peace with God, peace with oneself, and peace with our fellow human beings. Peace with God means being obedient to Him and obeying the rules and laws He has revealed for human beings to live by. Peace with oneself means to honor and respect oneself. We have a lot of people who do not respect

themselves and are aggressing on their own lives. Peace with our fellow human beings means not aggressing on the lives and rights of others.

Looking at it from yet another aspect, Islam is a bundle of relationships: what should be your relationship with your children, your neighbors, with the Christians, the Jews, and with humanity as a whole? Islam organized and ordered all these relationships for us, and showed us how we are supposed to act. Islam is a universal religion which organizes the relationships, not only among human beings, but also our relationships with the animals, the cats in your house, the dogs, the donkey that you ride to travel from one place to another, the car that you drive, the environment that we live in, the air, and the ocean which is the source of water, and so on. These are bundles of relationships which Islam organized. We take Islam in a very, very narrow sense because, as soon as we pray a few rak‘ats,<sup>2</sup> we think that we have practiced Islam. It is not so! We have a very, very long way to go. And we have to understand the depth of what the term “Islam” represents. In

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<sup>1</sup> ‘God is one and Muhammad is his Prophet’

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<sup>2</sup> Obligatory prayer, or *salah*, is a total of 20 rakats, and each rak‘at takes a minute or less to complete. Anything over and above that is considered voluntary or supererogatory.

the Qur'an, we find general rules for what man should do with everything that he utilizes or comes in contact with. The Qur'an is a Constitution containing general rules from which you can derive many laws and by-laws for every sphere of life: a penal code, a family law, a civil law, and a financial law.

We can also define Islam as being a way of life, and, if it is a way of life, then, it means that one ought to practice Islam *every second of one's life*. You have to deal with people according to Islam; you have to walk in the street according to Islam; you have to sleep according to Islam; and you have to apply Islam to everything in your life. That is the totality of Islam.

We have a lot of people, nowadays, who come to the mosque for *i'tikāf*. *I'tikāf* means staying all night in a mosque – praying 1000 rak'ats. But if you test such a one by asking him to pay five dollars to the poor or needy people, he will not be willing. Prayer is cheap. As long as he is not paying – he prays all night in the mosque at the expense of those who pay for the utilities and upkeep of the mosque, but when it comes to *his* pocket, that is the real test for his Islam. Prayer and zakah<sup>3</sup> are two of the fundamental pillars of Islam and are always mentioned in the Qur'an side by side. Why observe one and ignore the other? [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The translation is:]

“The Bedouins say, آمَنَّا<sup>4</sup> ‘We have attained to faith’.

Say unto them O Muhammad: ‘You have not yet attained to faith; you should rather say, اسَلَّمْنَا<sup>5</sup> ‘We have outwardly surrendered’ – for true faith has not yet entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed unto God and His Messenger, He will not let the least of your deeds go to waste: for, behold, God is much forgiving, a dispenser of grace” [49:14].

We learn from that verse that there is a difference between Islam and *īmān*. One who professes Islam is termed Muslim, and one who engenders *īmān* in his heart is termed *mo'min*. From one's utterances, we judge a person as a Muslim, but we cannot judge him or her as *mo'min*, because *īmān* is in the heart and no one knows the heart except Allah. That is why the One who can see inside the hearts commanded His Prophet to tell those Bedouins that they are not believers, but

that they are just Muslims. Islam is appearance: someone with a long beard and *masbaha*,<sup>6</sup> and reciting *subhanallah*<sup>7</sup> can pass for a Muslim, or, as soon as someone says, *Ashhaddo allā- ilāha illa-llah wa-ashhaddo anna Muhammad-ar- rasoolul-lah* I say, this person is a Muslim, because that is as far as I know, since I hear him saying that; but Īman is belief, and it is in the heart, and I cannot enter his heart to know what is in there. Maybe a person is only saying that with his mouth and not from his heart, and we have a lot of those. You know that, in Saudi Arabia, if a Filipino or a Korean converts to Islam, he is given 10,000 riyals as a prize, because the number of Muslims increased by one! So the Filipinos are coming to Islam in waves. They utter “*Ashhaddo allā- ilāha illa-llah wa-ashhaddo anna Muhammad-ar- rasoolul-lah*” for 10,000 riyals.

So, there is a distinction between Islam and Īman: Islam is an utterance by the tongue, while Īman is a belief in the heart. That is the difference between appearance and reality. That is why the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “God will not consider your shapes and looks, but He will consider your hearts and actions.” This hadith is based upon that verse [49:14 quoted above].

Here is a case in point. Last year,<sup>8</sup> a Kuwaiti lady from California called me with a problem. What was her problem? She said there was a Hindu man working in Kuwait who converted to Islam. He received the prize,<sup>9</sup> he married her, and when his contract expired, he brought her with him to the United States, because he had gone to Kuwait from the United States. Once here, she found out that he had a wife and four children – all Hindus. He told her she could just go back where she came from, and that he never had converted to Islam. It was just to have a good job.

Many people uttered the *shahada* at the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and he believed them, because that is what he heard. He could not enter their hearts to see if they were true Muslims or not. And, as a result, we find, in the Qur'an, a whole chapter called *Al Munafiqīn* (The Hypocrites). These people would come before the Prophet showing themselves as one thing – heartfelt Muslims – but deep down in their hearts they were something else. And the Qur'an put it this way: [Imam quotes Arabic. The translation

<sup>3</sup> The obligatory poor-due (2.5 % of net income)

<sup>4</sup> آمَنَّا = Īmān = “belief in the heart”

<sup>5</sup> اسَلَّمْنَا = Islam = “outwardly surrendered”

<sup>6</sup> Prayer beads

<sup>7</sup> “Glory be to God”

<sup>8</sup> 1992

<sup>9</sup> The 10,000.00 riyals

is:]

“When the hypocrites come to you, Muhammad, they say, ‘We bear witness that thou art the messenger of God.’ But God *knows* that thou art truly His messenger; and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed false in their declaration of faith” [63:1].

*Īmān* is deeper than Islam. *Īmān* means pronouncing *Ashhaddo allā- ilāha illa-llah wa-ashhaddo anna Muhammad-ar-rasoolul-lah*, internalizing it in your heart, and then, *acting* accordingly.

Nowadays, when someone converts to Islam, we urge him: Right away stop liquor! Stop eating pork! Pray five times a day! Fast! Give zakah! Go to pilgrimage! And if he will not do all these in 24 hours, we do not consider him a good Muslim. But this is not the history of Islam. The history of Islam is that it took Muhammad, *‘alayhi-s-salato wa-s-salaam*, with Divine support, 23 years to instill into the minds and hearts of the people first to be Muslim, then to be *mo'min*, and, finally, to become that *Ummah* which the Qur'an described as "... the best nation created for mankind."

When we want someone to be Muslim we want him to be *mo'min*, nay, we want him to be *mohsin*<sup>10</sup> in ten minutes. It does not happen that way. When Muhammad came to the Arabs, he started by preaching *Al-Wahdāniyyah* – the oneness of God. That alone took him years. It took him years just to instill in the hearts of those people that God is one, because they were worshipping multiple gods – 360 idols – and worshipping a different one every day. So it took him years to transform the people from the state of *kufri*,<sup>11</sup> to the state of Islam, to the state of *Īmān*.

In the spectrum of belief, there is a degree even higher than *Īmān*, which is called *Ihsān*. The angel Jibreel, *alayhi-s-salām*,<sup>12</sup> visited the Prophet in the form of a man one day, attired like an Arab Bedouin. He came and sat in front of Muhammad and tapped his open hands – palms down – on his thighs, and said to him: “Muhammad, what is Islam?” He replied: “to say *La ilāha illa-llah, Muhammad-ur Rasoolul-lah*.”<sup>13</sup> Tapping his hands again on his thighs, he asked: “And what is *Īmān*?” Muhammad replied: “To believe in God, His Angels, His Books, the Day of Judgment and to believe in the Destiny

– *wal qadr wa khayri-hi wa sharri-hi*.”<sup>14</sup> Then he tapped him for the third time on his thighs and asked: “What is *Ihsān*?” The Prophet replied: “To worship God as if you see Him, and if you don't see Him, to know that He is seeing you.” So these are what we call *darajaat*<sup>15</sup> or categories one above the other: Islam is the lowest category, *Īmān* is the middle, and *Ihsān* is the highest degree of faith.

If we consider Islam as representing a bundle of relationships, as I said to you earlier, then, there are certain rules that must be followed in all these relationships, based upon the directives of the Qur'an; we don't ever talk about that. To us Islam is the prayer (*salah*) and that's it. How to treat your father, how to treat your mother, how to treat your wife, how to treat your husband, how to treat the environment – all these constitute the relationships. The utterance of *Ashhaddo allā- ilāha illa-llah wa-ashhaddo anna Muhammad-ar-rasoolul-lah* can be turned into *Īmān* if the person will manifest that saying in his actions. What are those actions?

In many of the books of tafsir<sup>16</sup> the actions are to pray, to fast, to pay the zakat, and go to pilgrimage. If one will do these four things, then he is manifesting *Ashhaddo allā- ilāha illa-llah wa-ashhaddo anna Muhammad-ar-rasoolul-lah* in action. Personally speaking, I say, this is not enough. There are a lot of people, some who live and do business around the Ka'bah, who do these four, but when you go and buy a piece of cloth from them, they will cheat you, lie to you, overcharge you, and, yet, as soon as they hear the *adhan*,<sup>17</sup> they go very fast to the Ka'bah for prayer. So this means that this is not enough. [Imam quotes Arabic verses, and then stresses the following:]

<sup>14</sup> This is a hadith in which the Prophet has quoted a verse of the Qur'an: “To believe in God, His Angels, His Books, the Day of Judgment” then added “and to believe in the Destiny – *wal qadr wa khayri-hi wa sharri-hi*.” *Qadr* may be translated into English as “Destiny”. *Wal qadr wa khayri-hi wa sharri-hi* means to believe in the vicissitudes of life: everything that we, as human beings, perceive to be “good” or “bad”. *Qadr* is the power of God that brings about everything “good” or “bad” as we perceive it. For the believers the “good” is a blessing and a trial, while the “bad” is a trial and “a blessing in disguise”; it could, also, be a punishment. For the unbeliever the “good” is a blessing and the “bad” could be a punishment although he does not perceive it that way since he does not believe in God at all.

<sup>15</sup> Degrees

<sup>16</sup> Qur'anic exegesis

<sup>17</sup> The call for prayer

<sup>10</sup> The person who practices *Ihsān* is called *mohsin*.

<sup>11</sup> Denial of God

<sup>12</sup> Gabriel, upon whom be peace

<sup>13</sup> There is no God but One God and Muhammad is His messenger

“إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَامُوا” Those who say our Sustainer is God, *then* they steadfastly pursue the right way...” The first part “Those who say our Sustainer is God – رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ” will put a person in the category of Islam or Muslim, the second part “*then* they steadfastly pursue the right way – ثُمَّ اسْتَقَامُوا” puts him in the category of Īman or mo'min. The first part is a pronouncement, a declaration, something oral only, but the second part is *action* (*isthaqāma*). [The translation of the verses quoted above is:]

“But, behold, as for those who say, ‘Our Sustainer is God’, (رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ) and then (ثُمَّ = *thumma*) steadfastly pursue the right way (*isthaqāma*) – upon them do angels often descend saying: ‘Fear not and grieve not, but receive the glad tiding of that paradise which has been promised to you! We are your supporters (*nahnu awliyā*) in the life of this world and will be so in the life to come; and in that life to come you shall have all that your souls may desire, and in it you shall have all that you ever prayed for, as a ready welcome from Him who is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace” [41:30-32].

“For, behold, all who say, ‘Our Sustainer is God’, and thereafter stand firm in their faith (ثُمَّ اسْتَقَامُوا) – no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve: it is they who are destined for paradise, therein to abide as a reward for all that they have done” [46:13-14].

This divides the people into two kinds. Every Muslim says “*Allahu Rabbi*” meaning “Allah is my God, my Creator, my Sustainer.” But the second part of the verse – *isthaqāma* – which means following the Straight Way is ignored by the majority. Action is necessary to complete the command. And note the Arabic expression *thumma* here: *Rabbu-nallah thummas-thaqamu* it did not say: *Rabbu-nallah waisthaqamu* it says *thummas-thaqamu*. It means that those who say God is our God, and *next* to that, or, *following* upon that, or, in serial order they will steadfastly pursue the right way.... “Acting straight” or “steadfastly pursuing the right way” means, to abide by the rules revealed by God.

What are those rules? Hundreds! You know, in Christianity, and in Judaism, they talk about the Ten Commandments. In Islam they are not ten, but they are in the hundreds. Wherever you look into the Qur'an, you find

orders – orders that are either prescriptions or proscriptions. Prescriptions like: Establish prayer! Give alms! Or proscriptions: Don't kill the Soul which God prohibited to be killed. Don't kill your children for fear of poverty. Going through the Qur'an, we find commandments in the hundreds, not tens.

Those who abide by these commandments are, what we call, *muttaqeen* – straight people or pious people. Part of our prayer which we recite in every rak'at is: “Show us the Straight Way.” What is the Straight Way? The next verse of the same prayer explains: “The way of those upon whom You have bestowed your Grace, not the way of those with whom You are angry, or the way of those who go astray.” So the meaning of *isthaqāma* is to follow this Straight Way without which there will be no Īman. That is the distinction between Īman and Islam, and mo'min and Muslim. So, the Qur'anic verse which gives Man the assurance of safety and a good end in the Hereafter, is based upon two things: 1) The declaration that Allah is our God and Creator and 2) The following of the rules of God as they were revealed to the Prophet. Such people, having fulfilled the two conditions, will be addressed by the angels thus: “We are your supporters (*nahnu awliyā*) in this life and in the Hereafter.”

In Islamic jurisprudence there is a whole section known as *Al-Muwālāh*. *Al-Muwālāh* means a sort of a pact, or an agreement, or a treaty between two people, two groups, two tribes, or two nations to support each other: I support you when you need me, and you support me when I need you. That is called *muwālāh*. It is confined to the believers. You cannot have *muwālāh* with unbelievers; it is supposed to be between the people of the same faith. You cannot have people from another faith for *muwālāh*. Those people who say ‘Our Sustainer is God’, and then they follow the rules of God, they enter into the *highest* type of *muwālāh*: this *muwālāh* or treaty is between these people and the angels. Who are the *awliyā*' (supporters) of these people? Their *awliyā*' will be the angels.

The concept of *muwālāh* also influences adoption. In this country,<sup>18</sup> when someone adopts a child, that child will carry the name of the adoptive father and will be considered exactly like his natural child. In Islam, it is not like that. In Islam, adoption is possible, but the child must continue to carry the name of the biological father. The Qur'anic verse says: [Imam quotes Arabic. The translation is:]

<sup>18</sup> USA

“As for your adopted children, call them by their real father’s names: this is more equitable in the sight of God; and if you know not who their fathers were, call them your *brethren in faith* (*Mawaleekum* = مَوَالِيكُمْ)…” [33:5].

*Mawaleekum* means the people who have a treaty with you to support them when they need you, and they will support you when you need them. Why does Islam insist that a child carry

the biological father’s name? Because, otherwise, a lot of unwanted things might take place. A boy may end up marrying his sister, if siblings are adopted by different sets of parents. There is a chance that those two will meet, and a brother and sister will end up marrying each other unknowingly. When it comes to inheritance, the adopted boy will inherit a share, which does not rightfully belong to him, and that is injustice.