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Differences between Islam and Iman

Extracted from the Tafsir of Surah al `Asr [Volume 3]. Written by Ayatullah al- Uzma al-Hajj ash-Shaykh Ya'sub ad-Din Rastgar Juebari

Translated (with additions) by Saleem Bhimji

قَالَتِ الْأَعْرَابُ آمَنَّا قُلْ لَمْ تُؤْمِنُوا وَلَكِنْ قُولُوا أَسْلَمْنَا وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ الْإِيمَانُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ وَإِنْ تُطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ لَا يَلِتْكُمْ مِنْ أَعْمَالِكُمْ شَيْئًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَرْتَابُوا وَجَاهَدُوا بِأَمْوَالِهِمْ وَأَنْفُسِهِمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الصَّادِقُونَ

The Desert Arabs (come to you O Muhammad) and say ‘We have true belief!’ Say to them (O Muhammad) that, You are not true believers, rather (say that) you have submitted (to Allah) since true faith has not yet entered into your hearts. However if you were to obey Allah and His Messenger (Muhammad) then nothing would be reduced from your good deeds. Surely Allah is the all-Forgiving, all-Merciful. Without doubt the true believers are only those who have faith in Allah and His Messenger (Muhammad) and then do not change their belief into doubt and (the believers are those) who struggle with their wealth and their lives in the way of Allah. Surely it is these people alone who are the truthful ones. (Holy Qur’an, 49: 14–15)

Introduction

Before we can discuss the differences between Islam and Iman or being a Muslim and being a Mo`min, we must first define these two words in the Islamic context so as to get a better picture of our discussion and from there, look at the differences that have been mentioned in both the Quran – the Divine source of wisdom from Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) to humanity and the ahadith – the noble words and deeds of the Prophet of Islam Muhammad (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) and his twelve immediate successors who were expressly appointed by him through the commandment of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) in many ahadith.

- Islam = Submission in the presence of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He). Islam is the “simple” verbal

declaration that is accomplished by the Shahadatain (I bear witness that there is no creature or entity worthy of worship except for Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is His slave and messenger). By a person saying these two short lines, his entire presence is made pure and any relationship or formal agreement that is permitted between two people who are Muslims (such as marriage, eating the meat slaughtered by such a person, etc...) are all made lawful for other Muslims.

- Iman = Voluntary submission and complete obedience to Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) and those things which are connected to Him such as the prophetic mission of the Prophet, the Day of Judgment, the Heavenly books and other (such) things. Not only does the person testify to the oneness of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) and the Prophethood of His final emissary, Muhammad ibn Abdullah (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) – rather, he does this out of his own free will and not through any force or coercion. In addition, he also acts according to all of the injunctions that Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) has commanded him to observe – whether he likes them or not. This, in a nutshell, is the definition of the true believer – a Mo`min.

It should be noted that although there is a specific meaning and definition for both Islam and Iman, however they also have a general meaning and thus, we must keep this in mind before we proceed to mention the differences between these two levels.

Sometimes these words can and are used interchangeably both in the Quran and the noble ahadith and even in day to day talk and this is permissible, however it should be noted that they also have their own specific meaning and this should not be confused with the common day to day meaning that is in place.

It should also be noted that the differences and contrasts between the Muslim and Mo`min that we discuss here are not limited to these eighteen examples – there are much more than these however to keep this discussion brief and to open the hearts of the readers to do more research on this topic, we suffice with the points mentioned below.

Eighteen differences between Islam and Iman

1. The first difference between Islam and Iman is that “Islam” is simply the “outer” submission and does not necessarily entail action (according to ones’ beliefs) nor having a firm conviction deep down inside the heart (no internal submission). By this, we mean that a person who is a Muslim openly submits to the will of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him), however that is all – nothing more – his heart is still empty of true submission to the One and he may simply be accepting “Islam” for convenience or for material benefit in this world. However “Iman” covers both the internal and external submission to all the commandments of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) through the heart, tongue and actions that a person performs he shows that he has truly submitted to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him).

In a Hadith narrated from the Prophet of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him), he has said that

Al-Islam is the apparent (declaration) and al-Iman is the hidden (belief).

2. As a continuation of the first difference, we see that the contrast between Islam and Iman is that “Islam” is accomplished by saying the Shahadatain. By a person saying, “I bear witness that there is no creature or entity worthy of worship except for Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is the (final) Messenger of Allah.” However “Iman”, in addition to the testimony to the Oneness of Allah and the Prophethood of Muhammad ibn Abdullah (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) also entails true belief in the heart and action according to belief and accepting and following the Wilayah of the twelve immediate and direct successors of the Prophet Muhammad (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) which he himself named on many occasions in many ahadith that have come to us.

In a Hadith narrated from either Imam Muhammad ibn Ali al-Baqir (prayers be upon him) or Imam Ja`far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq (prayers be upon him) it is narrated that:

الأيمن إقرار وعمل والإسلام إقرار بلا عمل

Iman is the confession (by the tongue) and acting (according to one's responsibility) and Islam is confession (by the tongue) without acting.[1](#)

الإيمان معرفة هذا الأمر مع هذا فإن أقر بها ولم يعرف هذا الأمر كان مُسلماً وكان ضالاً

Iman (means) to recognize and believe in this issue (Wilayah of us, the Ahl al-Bait) and if he testifies to this and does not recognize this issue (the Wilayah of the Ahl al-Bait), then he is a Muslim and he is misguided.[2](#)

3. The third difference between Islam and Iman is that “Islam” is related to actions between the creation and other human beings such as marriage, animals that are slaughtered for food, etc... meaning that through Islam, one can eat the meat that other Muslims slaughter and he may marry another person who is a Muslim and can also marry into another Muslim family – thus, Islam is limited to the interactions of this material world. However the higher stage is that of “Iman” and this is the relationship of the actions between the creation (Mo`min) and the Creator (Allah, Glory and Greatness be to Him) and other creations. Those who have Islam are only related to one another on physical, material incidents that occur in this world where as those who possess Iman have a much deeper, spiritual relationship with Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) and one another – the true believers.

Imam Ja`far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) has said:

الإسلام يُحقق به الدم وتُؤدى به الأمانة ويستحل به الفرج والثواب على الإيمان

“Anyone who accepts Islam, his blood will be sanctified (he cannot be killed), anytime he gives you a trust, it must be returned and (sexual) relations are made permissible (after marriage) however the reward (from Allah) is limited to Iman (true faith).”³

4. The forth difference between Islam and Iman is that by accepting “Islam”, relations with others in the material sphere such as business dealings, social interaction with others, etc... are permitted. However, the next level which is “Iman” is in relation to the spiritual relations (beliefs in Usul ad-Din) in addition to material interaction.

The best way to describe this difference is to quote the words of our Ulama that state that: A Muslim will give up his beliefs for money (sell out his faith), however a Mo`min will give up his money for his beliefs (will not compromise).

5. The fifth difference between Islam and Iman is that “Islam” has no special effect on the heart and soul of a person and his outward appearance – meaning he may look like any other Muslim or even any other person in the society (through his facial appearance, clothing, etc.) however “Iman” is related to the heart, soul and the outward appearance of the true believer and thus through his beard, hijab, etc., he or she will show their Iman.

The one who has only accepted Islam may dress and look like those around them – Jews, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, etc. in their clothing and even facial appearance – they may or may not keep a beard, they may or may not have a mustache, they may or may not wear the hijab, etc. However the one who has Iman would make his true faith manifest in the way he dresses and his physical appearance and would try not to emulate or copy the disbelievers.

6. The sixth difference between Islam and Iman is that whereas “Islam” can live together in a society with “Iman”, however the two can best be described if we compare it to the natural life around us. We believe that using the parable of the ground and that which grows from it, Islam or the Muslim is comparable to ground and the dirt whereas the wheat, fruit or whatever grows from the earth is equivalent to Iman or the Mo`min. Thus, both can live side by side with one another however one of them, the one with Iman actually grows and comes forth from the earth – the Muslim and he uses the Muslims around him to grow spiritually while living around those who profess Islam.

7. The seventh difference between Islam and Iman is that for the one professing “Islam”, there is no reward of Jannah (Paradise) – and thus, Paradise is limited only to the Mo`min or one who has “Iman”. In this regards, we have many verses of the Quran and ahadith including the below quote from our 6th Imam, Ja`far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) where he has said:

الإسلام يُحقق به الدم وتُؤدى به الأمانة ويستحل به الفرج والثواب على الإيمان

“Anyone who accepts Islam, his blood will be sanctified (he cannot be killed), anytime he gives you a trust, it must be returned and (sexual) relations are made permissible (after marriage) however the reward (from Allah) is limited to Iman (true faith).”⁴

8. The eighth difference between Islam and Iman can be drawn from this comparison that “Islam” is likened to the skin or peel of a fruit – just like the coconut which is covered by a hard shell. However “Iman” is equivalent to the actual fruit (along with the skin) – thus, it is the complete product. When we go grocery shopping, sometimes we see the stores selling pre-cut and cleaned fruit such as watermelon, pineapple, coconut and other such fruits – they sell the thing that has worth – the actual fruit whereas the throw away the skin or the peels. So is the comparison between Islam and Iman.

9. The ninth difference between Islam and Iman is that even if one has false beliefs, his “Islam” will not fall at risk – by this we mean that he is a marginal Muslim and he will not leave his apparent state of submission to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him). However, if one has “Iman” and starts to entertain false beliefs or is corrupted by deviant thoughts, his ‘Iman’ will drag him to complete disbelief (Kufr) and loss in this world and more importantly – the next world. There is a verse in the Noble Quran that states:

قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ شَهِيدًا ۖ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِالْبَاطِلِ وَكَفَرُوا بِاللَّهِ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ

“And as for those who believe in falsehood in disbelieve in Allah – for these people is the greatest loss.” (The Holy Quran, Surah al- Ankabut, 29:52)

10. The tenth difference between Islam and Iman is that “Islam” is similar to a body with no spirit (spiritually dead person). However on the other hand, “Iman” is comparable to a body with a soul (a person who is alive – both physically and spiritually). This point is clear from many ahadith and verses of the Quran such as the following verse of Surah Yasin:

لِيُنذَرَ مَنْ كَانَ حَيًّا وَيَحِقَّ الْقَوْلُ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ

“That it (the Quran) may warn him who would have life, and (that) the word may prove true against the unbelievers.” [Remember that the opposite of being a Mo`min is being a Kafir]. (*The Holy Quran, Surah Yasin, 36:70*)

11. The eleventh difference between Islam and Iman is that whereas “Islam” only gives protection to the person in this world and there will be no protection for him in the next world, “Iman” and the one who is a Mo`min, will never enter the hell fire. This point is clear from the verses of the Quran such as the following:

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا إِيمَانَهُمْ بِظُلْمٍ أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمُ الْأَمْنُ وَهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ

“Those who believe (have Iman) and do not mix up their faith with iniquity, those are they who shall have the security (in this world and the next) and they are those who go aright.” (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Aa’raaf, 7:27)

12. The twelfth difference between Islam and Iman is that those who profess “Islam” will not be covered with the Wilayah (Guardianship or Protection) of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) – rather, the Muslim or one who only has Islam can be covered and taken over by the Guardianship of Shaitan. As for the one who has “Iman”, he can never be under the Wilayah of Shaitan – Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) alone is His Guardian and Wali. The following verses of the Quran clearly describe this:

اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا

“Allah is the guardian of those who believe”. (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:257)

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا الشَّيَاطِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

“Surely We have made the Shaitans to be the guardians of those who do not believe (no Iman).” (The Holy Quran, Surah al-An’am, 6:27)

إِنَّهُ لَيْسَ لَهُ سُلْطَانٌ عَلَى الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ إِنَّمَا سُلْطَانُهُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ يَتَوَلَّوْنَهُ وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ بِهِ مُشْرِكُونَ

“so then seek refuge with Allah from the stoned Shaitan. Surely he (Shaitan) has no authority (Wilayah) over those who believe and rely on their Lord. His authority is only over those who befriend (take him as their Wali) him and those who associate others with Him (Allah).” (The Holy Quran, Surah an-Nahl, 16:99–100)

13. As it is commonly known, Ali ibn Abi Talib (prayers be upon him) is the Amir (Commander and final authority) of the Mo`minin (those who have Iman) – he is not the Amir of the Muslimin (those who are Muslims). Thus, there is a big difference between the leadership of the Ahl al-Bait (prayers be upon all of them) and specifically the first Imam of the Ummah – he is the leader of those who have Islam and Iman, however he is specifically the Amir or the Commander and final authority for those who possess Iman.

14. The fourteenth difference between Islam and Iman is that it is possible that a Muslim or one who has only “Islam” can and will take enemies of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) as their close friends and protectors over Allah and the believers. (See most of the “Muslim” world including Saudi Arabia,

Dubai, Qatar, Kuwait, Pakistan, etc. who all bow down to their master(s) and take all their orders directly from that colorless ‘House’ – not the House of Allah nor the House of the Prophet – the Ahl al-Bait). However, the one who has “Iman” or is a Mo`min will never take his enemies or the enemies of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) as his friend or protector. This point is clear from the verses of the Quran as in the following:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَتَّخِذُوا عَدُوِّي وَعَدُوَّكُمْ أَوْلِيَاءَ تُلْقُونَ إِلَيْهِم بِالْمَوَدَّةِ

“O ye who believe! Take not my enemies and yours as friends (or protectors),– offering them (your) love.” (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Mumtahinah, 60: 1)

15. The fifteenth difference between Islam and Iman is that the Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) has a greater right over the believers or those who have “Iman” than their own selves as is testified by the Quran itself. The Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) does not have such an authority, nor does he exercise authority above the Muslims or those of marginal Islam:

النَّبِيُّ أَوْلَىٰ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ مِنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ

“The Prophet has a greater claim on the faithful than they have on themselves.” (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Ahzab, 33:6)

16. The sixteenth difference between Islam and Iman is that Muslims or those who have “Islam” can be destroyed and annihilated by the Kuffar (disbelievers). However in contrast to this, the Mo`minin or those who possess true “Iman” can never be destroyed by the Kuffar. Again, Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) mentions this point in clear words in His Book:

وَلَنْ يَجْعَلَ اللَّهُ لِلْكَافِرِينَ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ سَبِيلًا

“and Allah will by no means give the unbelievers (Kuffar) a way against the believers (Mo`minin).” (The Holy Quran, Surah al Nisa, 4: 141)

17. The seventeenth difference between Islam and Iman is that those who have “Iman” are of the Hizbullah or the Party of Allah however those who are Muslims or have “Islam” are not a part of the Hizbullah. Again this point is mentioned in a beautiful verse of the Quran where Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) states with all clarity:

لَا تَجِدُ قَوْمًا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ يُوَادُّونَ مَنْ حَادَّ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَوْ كَانُوا آبَاءَهُمْ أَوْ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ أَوْ إِخْوَانَهُمْ أَوْ عَشِيرَتَهُمْ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ كَتَبَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الْإِيمَانَ وَأَيَّدَهُم بِرُوحٍ مِنْهُ ۚ وَيُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ

فِيهَا ۚ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ حِزْبُ اللَّهِ ۚ أَلَا إِنَّ حِزْبَ اللَّهِ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

“You shall not find a people who believe in Allah and the latter day befriending those who act in opposition to Allah and His Messenger, even though they were their (own) fathers, or their sons, or their brothers, or their kinsfolk; these are they into whose hearts He has impressed faith, and whom He has strengthened with an inspiration from Him: and He will cause them to enter gardens beneath which rivers flow, abiding therein; Allah is well-pleased with them and they are well-pleased with Him these are Allah's party: now surely the party of Allah are the successful ones.” (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Mujadilah, 58:22)

18. The eighteenth difference between Islam and Iman is that Islam does not have varying degrees and by this we mean that all Muslims are equal however Iman has many different degrees and stages thus, not all Mo`minin are equal. This can be clearly seen from the ahadith and verses of the Quran al-Majid including the following:

وَلِكُلِّ دَرَجَاتٍ مِّمَّا عَمِلُوا ۚ وَلِيُؤْفِقَهُمْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

“And for all people are levels according to what they do (their actions).” (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Ahqaf, (46: 19)

يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ

“Allah will exalt those of you who believe (have Iman), and those who are given knowledge, in higher degrees.” (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Mujadilah, 58: 11)

. إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِرَ اللَّهُ وَجِلَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَإِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُهُ زَادَتْهُمْ إِيمَانًا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ

. الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ

. أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ حَقًّا ۚ لَهُمْ دَرَجَاتٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ

“Those only are believers whose hearts become full of fear when Allah is mentioned, and when His communications are recited to them they increase them in faith, and in their Lord do they trust. Those who keep up prayer and spend (benevolently) out of what We have given them. These are the believers in truth; they shall have from their Lord exalted grades (various levels)

and forgiveness and an honourable sustenance.” (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Anfal, 8:2-4)

[1.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Volume 68, Page 246

[2.](#) Usul al-Kafi, Volume 2, Page 24

[3.](#) Al-Mahasin, Page 285

[4.](#) Al-Mahasin, Page 285

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