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A BRIEF REVIEW AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MAJOR THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS CLASSICAL MUSLIM SCHOLARS HAD ON WHETHER ACTIONS ARE PART OF *IMAN*

Amer Ali*

Abstract: This article briefly reviews and presents critical analysis of the major theological positions classical Muslim scholars held regarding the role of actions in one's *iman* (faith). The intricate relationship that actions commands in the expression of *iman* has carved its way throughout Islamic history. Dogmatic opposing theological positions, such as actions being an integral part or completely independent of *iman*, were passionately deliberated and propagated in early Islam. Among the extreme views of the Kharijites and early Murijites, Ash'arism and Maturidism, however, was a more balanced theological construct encompassing actions through the tenets of Islam. Since an individual's actions in a social construct are the personification of its civic values, it has always been of utmost importance for Muslim scholarship to condemn philosophies that propagate unrestrained freedom of actions or excommunication of a Muslim due to the frivolity of their actions. To foster civilities that typify the very essence of a religion that dignifies human character as its very reason, it is only befitting of its scholarship to continue to relentlessly deliberate and advance the relationship that exists between one's actions and *iman*.

Keywords: *actions, iman, kharijism, murijism, ash'arism, maturidism*

The role of actions in one's *iman* (faith) has been extensively debated by classical Islamic scholars without any unequivocal theological conclusion. The complexity in exploring the relationship between actions and *iman*, on the surface a simple discourse, has had Muslim scholarship belligerently fascinated for over a millennium. The consequences of misinterpretation and misconstruction of the intricate balance between one's actions and *iman* have injured spans of Muslim history. However, when this relationship is appreciated dispassionately, in its very essence, it affirms one's faith inwardly in the commands of Almighty Allah (swt)¹ and outwardly through believers' actions. This article critically explores the intricate relationship between *iman* and one's actions from various theologically historical positions of classical Muslim scholarship, to highlight how *iman* and actions were traditionally affiliated and ramified.

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¹ Subhanahu wa ta'ala – Arabic for “Glorious and exalted is He.”

Iman takes one from just being a Muslim to a higher level of being, a state in which one's heart is filled with true belief. The Qur'ān states:

The Bedouins say, 'We have believed.' Say, 'You have not [yet] believed;' but say [instead], 'We have submitted,' for faith has not yet entered your hearts. And if you obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not deprive you from your deeds of anything. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.²

Imam Al-Suyuti (d. 1505), while presenting various interpretations of this *ayat* (verse), explains in the words of Abi Hind that Islam means utterance from the tongue while *iman* means conviction by the heart.³ The Prophet (pbuh)⁴ further explained *iman* in a foundational *hadith*,⁵ narrated by Abu Huraira (ra):⁶

One day while the Prophet (pbuh) was sitting out for the people, (a man – the angel) Jibril (Gabriel) came to him and asked, 'What is faith?' Allah's Messenger (pbuh) replied, 'Faith is to believe in Allah, His angels, (the) meeting with Him, His Messengers, and to believe in Resurrection.' Then he further asked, 'What is Islam?' Allah's Messenger replied, 'To worship Allah (swt) Alone and none else, to perform *salat* (prayers) to pay the *zakat* and to observe *Saum* [fast (according to Islamic teachings)] during the month of Ramadan... 'That was Gabriel who came to teach the people their religion.' Abu 'Abdullah said: He (the Prophet) considered all that as a part of faith.⁷

The Prophet (pbuh) in this *hadith* clearly validated the above Qur'anic verse (49:14) by highlighting that *iman* is related to inner belief (conviction by the heart), while Islam is outward actions of worship.

The greatest imam according to Sunni Muslims, Abu Hanifa (d. 767), defined faith in *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar* as,

it is obligatory to state: I believe in Allah, His angels, His scriptures, His messengers, resurrection after death, that destiny, good and evil, is from Allah Most High, the Reckoning, the Scale, Paradise, and Hellfire; and that they are all true.⁸

Abu Muntaha al-Maghnisawi (d. 1592), a well-known Hanafi scholar, further explained that *iman* is affirmation by the tongue (*iqrar*) and conviction of the heart (*tasdiq*).⁹ The obvious question then is: how can *iqrar* and *tasdiq* be expressed in the daily matters of a believer's life?

² Qur'an 49:14. The Sahih International translation of the Qur'an is used in this article.

³ Jalaluddin Al-Suyuti, *Tafsir Dur-e-Mansoor*, trans. S. M. I. Shah, M. Bostan and M. A. Mahghalvi (Lahore, Karachi: Zia Al-Quran Publications, 2006), vol. 6, 197, <https://archive.org/details/TafseerDurEMansoor6>.

⁴ Peace be upon him.

⁵ Al-Bukhari, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, trans. M. M. Khan (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 1997), vol. 1, 81.

⁶ Radiallahu anhu – Arabic phrase meaning "May Allah be pleased with him."

⁷ For complete text, refer to Sahih Al-Bukhari, *hadith* 50.

⁸ Mangera Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's Al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained* (London: White Thread Press, 2016), 63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.