A Brief Review and Critical Analysis of the Major Theological Positions Classical Muslim Scholars had on Whether Actions are Part of *Iman*

Amer Ali

Published online: 18 September 2019

Submit your article to this journal

View related and/or other articles in this issue

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.

---

[*]   Amer Ali is a student of Master of Classical Arabic at Charles Sturt University.
[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, *hādith* 50.
[8]   Mangera Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's Al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained* (London: White Thread Press, 2016), 63.
[9]   Ibid., 66.

Is utterance of words of faith and their conviction in the heart sufficient or does one have to practically live by this belief? What are the consequences of not following one's faith, if any?

Rahman (d. 1988) proclaims the first question raised in Islam was about the relationship between grave sin and one's faith, due to its crucial role in balancing faith and action.[10] Since being Muslim means to have *iman*, it is, therefore, not rational to call oneself a Muslim without 'believing'.[11] Hence, the question arises, if a believer does not perform the ritualistic and obligatory duties, should they be called Muslim? This relationship between *iman* and Islam, depending on the believer's actions, would not only have consequences on one being considered Muslim, which could lead to exclusion from the Muslim community and its legal implications, but also question salvation in the hereafter.

The importance of the relationship between actions and *iman* is highlighted in a *hadith*, among many others, narrated by Abu Sa'eed Al-Khudri (ra):

> I heard the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) say: Whoever among you sees an evil and changes it with his hand, then he has done his duty. Whoever is unable to do that, but changes it with his tongue, then he has done his duty. Whoever is unable to do that, but changes it with his heart, then he has done his duty, and that is the weakest of Faith.[12]

The lesson understood by the *hadith*, as narrated by Imam An-Nasai in his *Sunan*,[13] is that witnessing a sin without taking appropriate action is also a sin. Moreover, this *hadith* also points out that *iman* can increase or decrease with one's ability of action, or lack of it. This concept is further supported by a *hadith* narrated by Ali ibn Abi Talib (ra): "The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said: Faith is knowledge in the heart, words on the tongue and actions with the physical faculties (limbs of the body)."[14] This indicates, when one has conviction of faith in the heart, one's thoughts, words and actions will be the evidence of this faith and perhaps was the reason this *hadith* starts with 'knowledge in the heart.'

The relevance of having *iman* and arguably the actions for one's worldly success and salvation in the hereafter is the epitome of Islamic tradition. The role of actions in accentuating one's *iman*, and hence salvation, can be understood through the Qur'anic verses: "O you who have believed, why do you say what you do not do? Great is hatred in the sight of Allah that you say what you do not do."[15] The significance of *iman* for salvation in the hereafter is equally highlighted through a *hadith* narrated by Abdullah (ra), in which the Prophet (pbuh) said, "Whoever has a mustard seed's weight of pride (arrogance) in his heart, shall not be admitted into Paradise. And whoever has a mustard seed's weight of faith in his heart, shall not be

---

10   Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 86.
11   Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concepts of Belief in Islamic Theology* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2006), 77.
12   Abu Abdur Rahman Ahmad An-Nasa'i, *English Translation of Sunan An-Nsas'i*, trans. Nasiruddin Al-Khattab (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 2007), vol. 6, 31.
13   Ibid.
14   Muhammad Bib Yazeed ibn Majah Al-Qazwini, *English Translation of Sunan Ibn Majah*, trans. Nasiruddin Al-Khattab (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 2007), vol. 1, 119-120.
15   Qur'an 61:2-3.

admitted into the Fire."[16] Though it is important to understand the jihad context in which the Qur'anic verses quoted above (61:2-3) were revealed, Sayyid Qutub (d. 1966), commenting on these verses, expressed the dimension in which an individual is in a community;[17] hence, the community must implement an Islamic approach and its system.

Therefore, every Muslim aspires and seeks guidance in acquiring this state of *iman* in which their heart has nothing but conviction regarding faith in Allah (swt), His angels, meeting Him, His messengers and belief in resurrection. Islamic scholars, particularly classical Muslim scholars, passionately following the footsteps of the Prophet (pbuh) and Companions, have scrutinised and delved into the practices and manners in which this state of *iman* can be achieved. They painstakingly explored the connections between one's actions and *iman* over the centuries. This spiritual and intellectual pursuit historically had never been just a benign process; rather, it became acrimoniously fractious and fragmentary because of the philosophies and ideologies regarding the role one's actions has on their *iman*.

One of the earliest doctrines that surfaced in Islamic tradition regarding the relationship between actions and *iman* essentialised one's actions as an absolute part of *iman*. It proclaimed a gravely sinning Muslim was an unbeliever because actions were a condition of faith; therefore, a Muslim who committed such a sin must be denounced as an infidel.[18] Such indoctrination, as part of a much larger ideological construct of one's control over actions and their absolute role in true faith, free will, creation of evil, attributes and essence of Allah (swt) and the nature of the Qur'ān, however, carried toxic philosophical dimensions. Though a detailed discussion on these dogmatic theological viewpoints is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note such ideologies challenged the entire corpus of Islamic tradition from within, resulting in extreme ramifications.

On the other end of the spectrum is a philosophy that proclaims no actions are part of one's faith, as Allah (swt) forgives all the sins of those who have faith in their hearts. Although this ideology refrains from professing *takfir* (act of declaring someone *kafir* – infidel) on Muslims who commit grave sins, such belief, though very permissive at its core, would result in a society that exonerated people from their religious rights and obligations. Since an Islamic society, like any other civilised social construct, enforces certain obligations and rights upon its members that must be observed at all times, it could not possibly have permitted such unrestrained freedom, with devastating long term consequences for the social order it is designed to protect.

Among such philosophies, many classical Sunni scholars reasoned a more balanced, yet comprehensive approach to the relationship between actions and *iman*. Ash'ari (d. 935) and Maturidi (d. 944) presented creedal views that became mainstream Sunni doctrine regarding the relationship between actions and *iman*. In Al-Shahrastani's (d. 1158)[19] account, although

16   Abu Eisa Mohammad Ibn 'Eisa At-Tirmidhi, *English Translation of Jami' At-Tirmidhi*, trans. Abu Khaliyl (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 2007), vol. 4, 89-90.
17   Sayyid Qutub, *In the Shade of the Qur'an* (Markfield, UK: Islamic Foundation, 2009), vol. 16, 486, accessed April 24, 2017, https://www.kalamullah.com/shade-of-the-quran.html.
18   Izutsu, *The Concepts of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 50-51.
19   Ibid., 174-178.

Ash'ari considered *tasdiq* as the core element of *iman* and doing actions (religious duties) as its branches, interestingly he considered carrying out basic religious duties (articles of Islam) as part of *tasdiq*. He did not proclaim *tafkir* against any Muslim due to sin. Likewise, in Maturidi's views, *iman* will not vanish due to the enormity of sin because the locus of *iman* is the heart and the locus of actions is the body.[20]

In this article, the theological positions of classical Muslim scholarship on whether actions are part of *iman* will be reviewed through Muslim scholarly discourse, largely about the role of actions in preserving one's *iman*. The discussion will continue through exploring how *iman* is related to Islam and the more balanced and moderate opinion about the relationship of actions with one's *iman*. Lastly, the topic will be critically analysed before its conclusion.

IMAN AS A CONSENSUS OF CLASSICAL MUSLIM SCHOLARS

Since there exist many views regarding what constitutes *iman* and if one's actions are part of their *iman*, as discussed earlier, it is now essential to understand *iqrar* and *tasdiq* and their role in *iman* from the viewpoint of classical Muslim scholars. These scholars' use of these terms accentuates their understanding of *iman* and its relationship with one's actions. Furthermore, it highlights the 'how and why' of the prevailing philosophies regarding this relationship and their consequential manifestations in Islamic tradition.

Imam Abu Hanifa expressed that *iqrar* and *tasdiq* in the six articles of faith, as discussed earlier, are integral parts of *iman*.[21] Imam Malik (d. 795) and Imam Hanbal (d. 855), however, explained *iman* as a statement (*iqrar*) and actions. Although, in their view, one must appreciate that actions regarding faith are not separate and require conviction by the heart.[22] Wensinck (d. 1939)[23] quoted Imam Ash-Shafi'i's (d. 820) position from his *Fiqh Akbar* that *iman* is to confess with the tongue (*iqrar*), know with the heart (*tasdiq*) and perform chief work.[24] Imam Al-Tahawi (d. 933), on the other hand, includes *tasdiq* in defining *iman*, as he states in his creed, "faith entails assertion with the tongue (*iqrar*) and conviction in the heart (*tasdiq*)."[25]

The mystic Asha'rite theologian Imam Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) stated in his *Ihya Ulum-id-Din*[26] that *iman* has a seat in the heart (*tasdiq*) and the tongue is its interpreter (*iqrar*), though these words (*tasdiq* and *iqrar*) are not specifically mentioned in the translated work and applied here for their broader meaning (as is the case with some of the other statements quoted above).

---

[20]   Ibid., 57.
[21]   Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's Al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained.*
[22]   www.islam.gq, "Malik ibn Anas," in *Aqeedah of the Imams Ahl-us-Sunnah: The Correct and Upright Creed* (San Francisco, CA: Internet Archive, 2014), 25, https://archive.org/details/AqeedahOfTheImams OfAhlUsSunnah/page/n25.
[23]   Arent Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 267.
[24]   Wensinck disputes associating Fiqh Akbar with *iman* and calls it Fikh Akbar III.
[25]   Hamza Yusuf, *The Creed of Imam Al-Tahawi* (USA: Zaytuna Institute, 2007), 66.
[26]   Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Ihya ulum-ud-din*, trans. F. Karim (Karachi: Darul Ishaat, 1993), vol. 1, 119.

Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328),[27] on the other hand, viewed *iman* as utterance (*iqrar*) and deeds (actions). In his view, actions command paramount importance in expressing belief and believing inwardly, which could be understood as *tasdiq*, without following what belief dictates is irrational.[28] In line with the more orthodox Sunni position, Al-Taftazani (d. 1390), commenting on the creed of Al-Nasafi (d. 1142), described *iman* as assent (*tasdiq*) and confession of it by the tongue (which is to say, *iqrar*).[29]

Lastly, this enumeration of classical Muslim scholarship on *iman* cannot be considered sufficient before enlisting Ash'arism and Maturidism creedal views on the relationship between actions and *iman* that are widely accepted and practiced by many of the classical scholars discussed here. Al-Ash'ari defined *iman* essentially in his creed as words and deeds.[30] Al-Ash'ari's position regarding *iman* is no different than Imam Hanbal's, whose teachings Al-Ash'ari strictly followed once he left Mu'tazila doctrine, which is to say that *iman* is *iqrar* by the tongue and performing actions accordingly. On the other hand, Al-Maturidi, a strict follower of Imam Abu Hanifa, viewed faith (*iman*) as an endorsement by the heart (*tasdiq*) and proclamation of the tenets of faith by the tongue (*iqrar*).[31]

Demonstratively, through the creeds and views of the abovementioned classical Muslim scholars, it can arguably be concluded that, though there are some differences of opinion among these scholars regarding what constitute *iman*, seemingly all agree articulation of the tenets of faith, meaning *iqrar*, is a part of *iman*. Although some believed *tasdiq* is essential, while others emphasised actions, it is important to highlight that all these classical scholars outrightly negated the doctrine of the Kharijites, who essentialised actions as an integral part of *iman*, and some of the Murjites, who professed that no action can ever affect one's *iman* because it is a state of conviction in the heart.

ACTIONS ARE PART OF *IMAN*

It is important to understand the distinction between actions being a foundation of *iman*, as the Kharijites believed, versus the view that *iman* is delineated through one's actions, which is more in line with orthodox Sunni doctrine. The views of those who believed actions were an essential part of *iman*, and there was no decisions but God's (*la hukm illa lillah*), and a believer

---

[27]   Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyyah, *Kitab-ul-Iman*, trans. Salman Hassan Al-Ani and Shadia Ahmad Tel (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009), 10, http://www.muslim-library.com/dl/books/english_Kitab_Al_Iman.pdf..

[28]   Izutsu, *The Concepts of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 75.

[29]   Sa'd al Din Abd Allah Al-Taftazani, *Creed of Islam: Sa'd al.Din al-Taftazani on the Creed of Najam al-Din al-Nasafi*, trans. E. E. Elder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 116-188, https://archive.org/details/ACommentaryOnTheCreedOfIslamSadAl-dinAl-taftazaniOnTheCreedOfNajm/page/n1.

[30]   Abu Al-Hassan Al-Ash'ari, *Al-Ibanah an usul ad-diyanah*, trans. W. C. Klein (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1940), 33, https://archive.org/details/Al-bnaheng.-Ear.pdf.

[31]   Askar B. Akimkhanov, Albert A. Frolov, Shamshat A. Adilbaeyva, and Kalmakhan Yerzhan, "Principles of Abu Mansur Al-Maturidi, Central Asian Islamic Theologian Preoccupied with the Questions of the Relationship between the Iman/Credo and the Actions in Islam," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 12, no. 6 (2016).

was an infidel if their actions were perceived to contravene Allah's (swt) commands, transitioned a doctrine that was intolerant and authoritarian in its essence.

The dictatorial dogma of *la hukm illa lillah*, practiced by the Kharijites, was contingent on actions being the essential part of *iman* and was originally exploited in an ambience of a socio-political discord within the camp of Ali ibn Abi-Talib (ra). When Ali (ra) decided to end the civil war through arbitration with Mu'awiyah ibn Abi-Sufiyan (ra), a group of people, which came to be known as the Kharijites, considered those within the Muslim community who admitted to his (human) decision (*hukm*) were unconditionally apostates.

This radical doctrine, for the very first time, infused the "dichotomy of Muslim–*Kafir*" (Muslim–unbeliever) into Islam and fractured the Muslim community,[32] disputedly with everlasting consequences. True *iman* was linked to the gravity of sin (action of disobedience) and *takfir* was declared with fatalistic consequences upon Muslims who were viewed to be guilty of such acts. However, driven by such radical fanaticism, this philosophy further evolved to judge a Muslim who committed any sin, greater (*kaba'ir*) or lesser (*sagha'ir*), as an outcast[33] and condemned them to apostasy. A more extremist faction, the Azraqite Kharijites, even made it lawful to rob or kill a Muslim who did not subscribe to their ideology.[34]

The more moderate and traditional Sunni view, which developed in response to the Kharijites regarding the role of actions in one's *iman*, viewed actions as a reflection of one's state of *iman* rather than the foundation of *iman*, as clearly illustrated in the creedal views of the classical Muslim scholars mentioned above. These scholars avoided practicing *tafkir* against sinning Muslims and made an obvious distinction between greater and lesser sins. Though they did not ignore proclamations and convictions regarding the tenets of faith, the decision of punishment and condemnation to hellfire was left to Allah (swt). Classical Muslim scholarship deliberated and developed "goal-oriented" jurisprudential flexibilities to nourish the social realities,[35] rather than outright declaration of *tafkir*.

ACTIONS ARE NOT PART OF *IMAN*

At the other end of the spectrum of the discourse is a philosophy that promotes a peculiar view on the relationship of actions with *iman*. This doctrinal view, known as Murjism, supports the idea that actions have no effect on one's *iman*. They propagate that external actions and utterances do not mirror one's inner belief and, in its more extremist version, Jahm ibn Safwan

---

[32]   Hanaa Omar, "Apostasy in the Mamluk Period: The Politics of Accusation of Unbelief" (Doctoral diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 25, accessed July 30, 2019, https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/docview/304716575?pq-origsite=primo.

[33]   Yusuf*, The Creed of Imam Al-Tahawi*, 118.

[34]   W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 22.

[35]   Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: The Islamic Text Society, 2011), 519.

(d. 746) considered *iman* exclusively as an inner conviction and even proclaimed other religions would not take a believer out of the folds of Islam.[36]

Though Murjism is identified as an extreme opposition of the Kharijites' philosophy,[37] it was not a monolithic doctrine in its creed and to label it as just reactionism is "only a small part of the truth."[38] This doctrine, which succeeded the Kharijite ideology, with its liberalistic heterogeneity, made outstanding contributions to the theological development in Islam.[39] It was the result of the *irja* (deferment of judgement) ideology of early Murjites, a profound intellectual tradition of Maturidism that followed the Hanafi school of thought. Murjism argued the worst of sinners could not be regarded as unbelievers and the decision of their *iman* should be left to Allah (swt).[40]

Aslan (b. 1972)[41] equates theological development to any institutionalised scientific faculty that prospers through allegorical ritualistic ideologies into authoritative models. However, regardless of their orthodoxy and orthopraxy, their contributions to overall tradition should be appreciated, as in the case of most Murjites' beliefs that played an important part in "mainstream Sunni Synthesis."[42]

This leads to yet another very important discussion regarding the validity of rituals (practices or actions) in one's life. In other words, what role should the tenets or pillars of Islamic tradition have in Muslims' lives and consequentially on their *iman*, if any? Do we have any obligations towards our Creator? How should we understand and fulfil our civic responsibilities in moral and ethical manners? Do we need spiritual guidance and where should we derive it from? To answer these questions, one not only must understand the relationship of actions with *iman* but also appreciate the composition of actions and their religious dimension, which will be discussed next.

ACTIONS ARE NOT AN INTEGRAL PART OF *IMAN* BUT ARE RELATED

Discussion on actions being related to *iman*, rather than an integral part, is important in analysing the relationship between *iman* and Islam. Islam is to completely surrender oneself, in practice, to the commands of Allah (swt), in accordance with what is permitted and to abstain from what is forbidden without any objection; therefore, submitting one's existence in totality to the will and guidance of Allah (swt). Abu al-Muntaha al-Maghnisawi, in describing the relationship between *iman* and Islam, states that *iman* linguistically means *tasdiq* (assent) and Islam, on the other hand, is *taslim* (total surrender); therefore, the obvious locus of *iman* is the heart while the tongue is just an interpreter, whereas Islam (complete surrender) does not have

---

[36]   Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2007, s.v. "Murji'ah," https://www.britannica.com/topic/Murjiah.
[37]   Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 38.
[38]   Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, 119.
[39]   Izutsu, *The Concepts of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 46.
[40]   Oliver Leaman and Sajjad Rizvi, "The Developed Kalam Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 86.
[41]   Reza Aslan, *No God but God* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011), 146.
[42]   Khalid Blankinship, "The Early Creed," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45.

any locus, as it includes submission of all human faculties, whether it be the heart, tongue or bodily parts.[43] Similarly, Watt (d. 2006),[44] while quoting Imam Abu Hanifa on the relationship between *iman* and Islam, states the terms *iman* and Islam are linguistically discrete but theologically they are inseparable and complementary.

Ibn Hazam (d. 1064) takes the view that the manner in which *iman* is generally described in the Qur'ān includes submission to acts of obedience and refraining from acts of disobedience.[45] Imam Al-Ghazali, when expounding the relationship between *iman* and Islam, suggests in Sharia (Islamic law) scholars have given this relationship many different facets. However, he states one such dimension does not make any distinction between *iman* and Islam, through quoting the Qur'anic verse, "So We brought out whoever was in the cities of the believers. And we found not within them other than a [single] house of Muslims" (51:35-36).[46] Said Nursi (d. 1960), in his Risale-i Nur collection, describes belief as an indivisible truth in the six pillars.[47]

Ibn Taymiyyah, in a long and very detailed discussion on the subject through multiple chapters in his *Kitab Al-Iman*, stated:

> … in explaining these words, one should refer to the definitions given by Allah and His Messenger, for they are both unequivocal and sufficient … On this basis, if one looks attentively at the way the Kharijites and the Murjites explained the meaning of *Iman*, he is bound to see that their explanation contradicts that of the Messenger. He is also bound to know that obedience to Allah and His Messenger is part of the perfection of *Iman* and that he did not consider anyone who commits a sin to be an unbeliever [as the Kharijites say].[48]

Al-Ash'ari, who represents "a middle intellectual ground for orthodoxy,"[49] does not see *iman* and Islam as one in his *ibanah*; however, it is interesting to note that he describes *iman* as 'saying' and 'doing', whereas in his *Luma* he linguistically legitimises *iman* as *tasdiq*,[50] which, as mentioned earlier, is performing actions (tenets of Islam). Equally, the other well-established Sunni creed by Al-Maturidi also viewed *iman* as *tasdiq*, which did not depend on good deeds; however, good deeds may result from *iman*.[51] The multiplexity in the relationship between *iman* and Islam, particularly accentuated in Ash'arism, is a reflection of the overall complex nature of this subject.

The heterogeneity highlighted by classical Muslim scholarly thought regarding the role of actions in relating one's *iman* typifies the theological complexity of seemingly explicit

---

[43]   Izutsu, *The Concepts of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 84.
[44]   Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*.
[45]   Izutsu, *The Concepts of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 87.
[46]   Al-Ghazali, *Ihya ulum-ud-din*, vol. 1, 119.
[47]   Said Nursi, *Risale-i-Nur Collection 4: The Rays Collection*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Neşriyat A. Ş., 2007), 250, https://ia600501.us.archive.org/34/items/RisalaNur/TheRays.pdf.
[48]   Ibn Taymiyyah, *Kitab-ul-Iman*, 287.
[49]   Al-Ash'ari, *Al-Ibanah an usul ad-diyanah*, 25.
[50]   Izutsu, *The Concepts of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 175-176.
[51]   Mustafa Ceric, "A Study of the Theology of Abu Mansur Al-Maturidi" (Doctoral diss., University of Chicago, 1987), 193, https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/docview/303614721?accountid= 10344.

terminology in a religious construct. Although most orthodox classical Muslim scholars viewed *tasdiq* as essential to one's *iman*, they also regarded actions that conformed to the tenets of Islam as equally invaluable for the existence of true *iman*. Therefore, it can be concluded that conventional Sunni Islamic thought did not view actions as an integral part of *iman*; however, they also did not consider them tangential.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Civil values, such as public morality, respected conventions and conscientious individualism, demand freedom of human actions to be curtailed through law, public scrutiny and the mores of prescribed individual conscience.[52] The importance of such social norms based on human decency and social attitudes can be highlighted by the narration of the Prophet (pbuh) that "I was sent to perfect good characters."[53] In another narration, the Prophet (pbuh) said, "The most perfect man in his faith among the believers is the one whose behaviour is most excellent …"[54] It is the result of such impeccable teachings that Huntington (d. 2008) confesses "the great religions are the foundation of great civilisations"[55] and the majority agreed on orthodox Sunni doctrine rooted from such teachings.

However, failure to diligently persevere in these excellent religious principles and consequently turn to coercive and violent means to forward a factional political motif of a dogmatic doctrine, such as Kharijism, which not only questioned the earthly significance of a believer who dared not to endorse such fanatism, but also condemned them to eternal hellfire in the hereafter. Hence, one's salvation was deemed conditional upon membership in their sorority.[56] Unfortunately, this intolerant ideology left tradition with unforgiving and relentless remnants that still echo through the annals of history.

It is beyond comprehension, though not unimaginable, that Islam, which is a very natural religion at its core, could preach such extreme views. It comes as no surprise, on the contrary, to such a radical doctrine that Al-Taftazani explains how the Qur'ān validates the *iman* of those who have neglected some of their duties in the verse, "And if two factions among the believers should fight" (49:9), indicating the probability of transgression on the part of one of the factions.[57] Additionally, many narrations from the Prophet (pbuh) discuss various degrees or states of *iman* believers can possess and assure them of their salvation in the end. In one of his narrations, the Prophet (pbuh) said, "Faith has sixty-some or seventy parts, the least of which is to remove a harmful thing from the road …"[58] This *hadith* clearly demonstrates that even the

---

[52] Mehmet Ozalp, *Islam Between Tradition and Modernity: An Australian Perspective* (Barton ACT: Barton Books Pty Ltd, 2012), 162.
[53] Malik ibn Anas, *Al-Muwatta*, trans. G. A. R. Hibah (Beirut-Lebanon: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 2007), vol. 2, 926.
[54] At-Tirmidhi, *English Translation of Jami At-Tirmidhi*, vol. 4, 89-90.
[55] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 47.
[56] Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, 35.
[57] Al-Taftazani, *Creed of Islam*, 120.
[58] Ibn Majah, *English Translation of Sunan Ibn Majah*, 111.

trivial action of 'removing a harmful thing from the road' is evidence of faith, encouraging Muslims to perform good deeds, regardless of their perceived insignificance, but also highlighting how seemingly frivolous actions are testimony of some degree of *iman*. Hence, warning believers not to demonise one another based on perceived weaknesses of *iman* through outward actions. Imam Abu Hanifa in his *Fiqh Al-Akber* also states, "We do not charge any believer with unbelief for any sin he commits, even if it is an enormity, as long as he does not regard it as lawful."[59]

The act of *tafkir* was brought within the boundary of Islam for the first time by dogma, such as Kharijism, that deemed actions as an integral part of *iman*, taking its roots from an ambience that was socio-politically charged, as discussed earlier. Disguised behind theocratic veils for its own political motif and supremacy, this intolerant doctrine practiced *tafkir* freely for legitimising violence against their own Muslim community. Al-Ghazali, on the other hand, made an important observation on *tafkir* by stating one can be judged a liar or ignorant through reason but only revelation can decide if someone is an infidel or Muslim.[60] He was extremely careful in matters of belief and unbelief, so much so that he even classified '*kafir*-ness' in six degrees.[61] Therefore, declaring *tafkir* on other Muslims is not an orthodox Sunni position and completely against the norms of Islamic religiosity and civilities.

The overtly persuasive philosophy of unrestrained freedom of action, such as extreme Murjism, has its own share of theological irrationalities. The extreme faction of Jahmite professed faith to be exclusively an inward conviction (*tasdiq*) and *iqrar* and/or actions did not play any role in faith. These liberal views, which were initially developed in opposition to Kharijism, in its extreme form allowed Muslims to proclaim other religions and perpetrate immoralities without any consequences on their faith.[62] Such philosophy was not only harmful to religion, due to its encouragement of a doctrine that imparted no admirable or religious norms, but was also against the fabric of the society it was born to save, since it offered no socio-ethical principles that could hold an individual accountable in a society for inordinate and/or illicit behaviour.

It is no surprise that such extreme ideologies, which were so against the ethos of a civil society, could not have continued to exist unremittingly due to their "failure of legitimacy"[63] and were renounced historically. It is no wonder such extreme indoctrination and/or exceptional liberalism ensured religion a notoriety for being an "unreasonable force that must be excluded from the politics of civilised nations."[64] However, more balanced and moderate views, such as the original Murjite doctrine, not only survived historically but also played a significant role in propagating dynamic theological positions that continue to evolve with time.

---

[59]   Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's Al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 147.
[60]   Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Moderation in Belief*, trans. A. M. Yaqub (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 242, https://archive.org/details/ModerationInBeliefIqtisadFiAlItiqadByGhazali.
[61]   Izutsu, *The Concepts of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 35.
[62]   *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Murji'ah," 2007.
[63]   Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 15.
[64]   Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Bloods: Religion and the History of Violence* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014), 313.

Ash'arism and Maturidism, being more orthodox Sunni doctrines, drew their traditional and intellectual roots from the abovementioned extreme philosophies to develop a very balanced creedal construct that resonated with mainstream Muslims almost over a millennium. This revival of orthodox Islam is appreciatingly a result of these two impartially enlightening indoctrinations. They not only define the true relationship between actions and *iman*, but also provide superior understanding of the intimacy that exists between *iman* and Islam. By taking a theological position that defines actions as not being an integral part of *iman*, opposing the Kharijites' violent dogma and not rejecting all actions out of *iman*, as seen in extreme Murjites' convoluted philosophy, these two creeds present a cravingly balanced theological construct. In fact, by associating *tasdiq* and *iqrar* to *taslim* and then to acts of Islam, Ash'arism and Maturidism develop a more logical and moderate understanding of the relationship of actions to *iman* and Islam.

CONCLUSION

Whether actions are part of one's *iman* is a complex topic that has been comprehensively debated without unanimous agreement from classical Islamic scholarship. However, in the orthodox Sunni view, it is obligatory to say (*iqrar*) and have conviction in the heart (*tasdiq*) regarding belief in Allah, His angels, His scriptures, His messengers, resurrection after death, that destiny, good and evil are from Allah Most High, the Reckoning, the Scale, Paradise and hellfire. Though not all classical Islamic scholars agreed upon *iqrar* and *tsadiq* as fundamental requirements for *iman*, almost all proclaimed *iqrar* was an essential component for *iman*.

The first question raised in Islam was about the relationship between grave sin and one's faith, highlighting the importance of the relationship of actions to *iman*. The Qur'ān and *hadith* literature expound on this relationship through many facets. One aspect that signifies the role of *iman* is its requisition for one's salvation in the hereafter and has therefore been the subject of many Prophetic narrations. Another very important question that classical Muslim scholarship has grappled with over a millennium is the relationship of *iman* to Islam and what role the tenets of Islam play in one's actions.

Three main positions have been taken by classical Muslim scholars on the relationship between actions and *iman*. The first position was from those who believed actions were an essential part of *iman*, such as the Kharijites, and there was no decisions but God's (*la hukm illa lillah*) and *takfir* could be proclaimed on a believer whose actions contradicted the commands of Allah (swt). Though this dogmatic philosophy was originally exploited in an ambience of a socio-political discord in Islamic history, it soon became a theological position that, for the very first time, infused the dichotomy of Muslim–*kafir* into Islam and fractured the Muslim community. True *iman* was measured against the gravity of the sin and those Muslims whose *iman* was considered not of the correct standard were subjected to violence with frequent fatalistic consequences.

The second position was that of Murjism, which arguably emerged as disapproval of the Kharijites dogma, that professed external actions and utterances did not mirror one's inner

faith. Its sub-faction of Jahmites considered *iman* as exclusively an inner conviction that could not be affected by any act of disobedience or sin. This overtly convoluted but persuasive philosophy of unrestrained freedom of action had its critics throughout the Islamic history; however, in its liberalistic heterogeneity, it made outstanding contributions to the theological development in Islam.

The third more balanced theological position related actions to *iman*, as opposed to considering them either an integral or completely worthless part of *iman*. This philosophy further argued that *iman* and Islam are contingent upon each other; hence, intimately connecting and surrendering oneself, in practice or otherwise, to the commands of Allah (swt) is the way to achieve success in this world or to have any hope of salvation in the hereafter. The two orthodox Sunni doctrines of Ash'arism and Maturidism were not only instrumental in developing this creedal construct but also nurtured it through employing centuries of tradition and intellectual discourse. It is hardly a surprise, therefore, that such balanced and moderate views, defying the realms of history, evolved to become orthodox Sunni doctrines.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Akimkhanov, Askar B., Albert A. Frolov, Shamshat A. Adilbaeyva, and Kalmakhan Yerzhan. "Principles of Abu Mansur Al-Maturidi, Central Asian Islamic Theologian Preoccupied with the Questions of the Relationship between the Iman/Credo and the Actions in Islam." *European Journal of Science and Theology* 12, no. 6 (2016): 165–176.

Al-Ash'ari, Abu Al-Hassan. *Al-Ibanah an usul ad-diyanah.* Translated by W. C. Klein. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1940. https://archive.org/details/Al-bnaheng.-Ear.pdf.

Al-Bukhari. *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari.* Translated by M. M. Khan. Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 1997.

Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Ihya ulum-ud-din*, vol. 1. Translated by F. Karim. Karachi: Darul Ishaat, 1993. https://archive.org/details/IhyaUlumAlDinVol1.

Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Moderation in Belief.* Translated by A. M. Yaqub. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. https://archive.org/details/ModerationInBeliefIqtisad FiAlItiqadByGhazali.

Al-Suyuti, Jalaluddin. *Tafsir Dur-e-Mansoor.* Translated by S. M. I. Shah, M. Bostan, and M. A. Mahghalvi. Lahore, Karachi: Zia Al-Quran Publications, 2006. https://archive.org/ details/TafseerDurEMansoor6.

Al-Taftazani, Sa'd al Din. *Creed of Islam: Sa'd al Din al-Taftazani on the Creed of Najam al-Din al-Nasafi*. Translated by E. E. Elder. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950. https://archive.org/details/ACommentaryOnTheCreedOfIslamSadAl-dinAl-taftazaniOn TheCreedOfNajm/page/n1.

An-Nasa'i, Abu Abdur Rahman Ahmad. *English Translation of Sunan An-Nsas'i.* Translated by Nasiruddin Al-Khattab. Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 2007.

Armstrong, Karen. *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. London: The Bodley Head, 2014.

Aslan, Reza. *No God but God*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011.

At-Tirmidhi, Abu Eisa Mohammad Ibn 'Eisa. *English Translation of Jami' At-Tirmidhi.* Translated by A. Khaliyl. Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 2007.

Blankinship, Khalid. "The Early Creed." In *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, edited by Tim Winter, 33-54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Ceric, Musafa. "A Study of the Theology of Abu Mansur Al-Maturidi." Doctoral diss., University of Chicago, 1987. https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/docview/ 303614721?accountid=10344.

Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2007. s.v. "Murji'ah." https://www.britannica.com/topic/Murjiah.

Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006.

Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Ibn Anas, Malik. *Al-Muwatta.* Translated by G. A. R. Hibah. Beirut-Lebanon: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 2007.

ibn Majah Al-Qazwini, Muhammad Bib Yazeed. *English Translation of Sunan Ibn Majah.* Translated by Nasiruddin Al-Khattab. Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 2007.

Ibn Taymiyyah, Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim. *Kitab-ul-Iman.* Translated by Salman Hassan Al-Ani and Shadia Ahmad Tel. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009. http://www.muslim-library.com/dl/books/english_Kitab_Al_Iman.pdf.

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

Izutsu, Toshihiko. *The Concepts of Belief in Islamic Theology*. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2006.

Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*. Cambridge: The Islamic Text Society, 2011.

Leaman, Oliver, and Sajjad Rizvi. "The Developed Kalam Tradition." In *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, edited by Tim Winter, 77-96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Nursi, Said. *Risale-i-Nur Collection 4: The Rays Collection*. Translated by Sukran Vahide. Istanbul: Sözler Neşriyat A. Ş., 2007. https://ia600501.us.archive.org/34/items/RisalaNur/TheRays.pdf.

Omar, Hanaa. "Apostasy in the Mamluk Period: The Politics of Accusation of Unbelief." Doctoral diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2001. Accessed July 30, 2019. https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/docview/304716575?pq-origsite=primo.

Ozalp, Mehmet. *Islam Between Tradition and Modernity: An Australian Perspective*. Barton ACT: Barton Books Pty Ltd, 2012.

Qutub, Sayyid. *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, vol. 16. Markfield, UK: Islamic Foundation, 2009. Accessed April 24, 2017. https://www.kalamullah.com/shade-of-the-quran.html.

Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966.

Watt, W. Montgomery. *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973. https://ia801900.us.archive.org/8/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.122022/2015.122022.The-Formative-Period-Of-Islamic-Thought.pdf.

Wensinck, Arent. *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932. Accessed September 11, 2019. https://archive.org/details/WensinckMc1932/page/n8.

www.islam.gq. "Malik ibn Anas." In *Aqeedah of the Imams Ahl-us-Sunnah: The Correct and Upright Creed*, 19-28. San Francisco, CA: Internet Archive, 2014. https://archive.org/details/AqeedahOfTheImamsOfAhlUsSunnah/page/n25.

Yusuf, Hamza. *The Creed of Imam Al-Tahawi*. USA: Zaytuna Institute, 2007.