



In Pursuit of Conviction I: Faith & Certainty

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Author Biography

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Abstract

Muslims trying to hold on to their faith in environments hostile to Islam—or to religion in general—often find themselves struggling to achieve a calming sense of certainty for the beliefs they hold.¹ The ‘In Pursuit of Conviction’ series aims to restore clarity and conviction in the fundamentals of our faith as Muslims through an interdisciplinary approach that combines revelation and theology with research in psychology, neuroscience, and other academic fields. With this approach, we will be examining the six core beliefs that serve as the foundation of faith: belief in God, Angels, Scripture, Prophethood, Afterlife, and Destiny.² Through this analysis, we hope to nurture conviction in the hearts of Muslims around the globe who are struggling to understand the value of their faith. This first article serves as an introduction to the series, focusing on understanding the phenomena of faith and certainty themselves.

Preface

In this article, we mainly build on the work of modern Muslim thinkers, Allama Iqbal (d. 1938 CE)³ and Malik Bennabi (d. 1973 CE)⁴ as well as the medieval polymath, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH)⁵ regarding the nature of faith, knowledge,

¹ See: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/youssef-chouhoud/what-causes-muslims-to-doubt-islam-a-quantitative-analysis/>

² *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 60.

³ Sir Muhammad Iqbal was a poet, philosopher, and Muslim thinker born in 1877 CE in the Punjab region of India. His studies of Western philosophy in Europe under a number of professors deepened his appreciation for Islam. He was heavily involved in politics and envisioned a Muslim-majority state in India. This idea would come to fruition after his death and be known as Pakistan. [Aksoy, N. (2015). *Meeting the challenges of modernity as experienced by Said Nursi, Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Abduh* (Doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University-Graduate School-New Brunswick).]

⁴ Malik Bennabi was a modernist Muslim thinker born in Constantine, Algeria in 1905 CE. He was a civil engineer by trade but dedicated his life to developing ideas of social reform for the Muslim world. He was heavily influenced by the modernist Muslim movement in North Africa during the time of colonization. He wrote a number of works in French that outlined his views on social change. He is a controversial figure due to his offensive views on race, specifically African communities. The West also views him as controversial due to his ideas regarding Islam and politics, viewing him as an early founder of ‘Islamism.’ [Naylor, P. C. (2006). The Formative Influence of French Colonialism on the Life and Thought of Malek Bennabi (Malik bn Nabi). *French Colonial History*, 7(1), 129-142.]

⁵ Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Abi Bakr is known as Ibn al-Qayyim Jawziyyah due to the fact his father, Abu Bakr ibn Ayub, was the custodian (*qayyim*) of the *Jawziyyah* school in Damascus. Ibn al-Qayyim was born 691 AH/1292 CE in Damascus to a family of scholars. He mastered the Islamic sciences as well as fields such as astronomy and medicine. He wrote extensively on Islamic theology and the Islamic spiritual tradition with profound insight and mastery. [Krawietz, B. (2006). Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah: His Life and Works. *Mamluk Studies Review*, 10(2).]

and certainty. Iqbal and Bennabi wrote extensively on a problem that they foresaw would arise in the Muslim conscience due to the influence of western thought on Muslims around the world at the turn of the 20th century. They were concerned that Muslims would adopt a Cartesian approach to knowledge and, as a result, start to lose confidence and conviction in their faith due to failing to realize its intellectual underpinnings. Bennabi writes in *The Qur'anic Phenomenon*,

*For a long time, our faith on this point has depended on the principle of authority, which can hardly keep pace with the demands of the minds of an elite already captivated by positivism.*⁶

And

*Whatever it may be, the problem of Qur'anic exegesis arises at two levels: firstly, the problem of religious conviction at the level of the intellectual and secondly, the problem of the popular ideas at the level of the layman.*⁷

While many thinkers attempted to construct arguments and proofs from within the western paradigm, Iqbal and Bennabi recognized the weakness of that approach and provided strong critiques against rationalism and empiricism. Iqbal describes the fall of rationalism in the Western and Muslim world in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*,

*With the elimination of dogma came the utilitarian view of morality, and thus rationalism completed the reign of unbelief. Such was the state of theological thought in Germany when Kant appeared. His Critique of Pure Reason revealed the limitations of human reason and reduced the whole work of the rationalists to a heap of ruins...Ghazali's Philosophical scepticism which, however, went a little too far, virtually did the same kind of work in the world of Islam in breaking the back of that proud but shallow rationalism which moved in the same direction as pre-Kantian rationalism in Germany.*⁸

⁶ Bennabi, M. (2010). *The Qur'anic phenomenon: an essay of a theory on the Qur'an*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, p. 5.

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸ Iqbal, M. (2011). *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*. Lahore, Pakistan: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, p. 4.

Ibn al-Qayyim lived in a very different time in Islamic history but, as Iqbal explains, medieval scholars were also under the influence of a radical rationalistic approach to knowledge. Ibn al-Qayyim, like his teacher Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH), criticized the trend within the Muslim scholastic tradition of attempting to articulate philosophical proofs for the existence of God. Ibn Taymiyyah writes in his introduction to *Radd alaa Mantaqiyeen*,

*I have always known that Greek logic is not necessary for any intelligent minded person and it does not provide any benefit to any light-minded individual...and it is clear to me that most of what they mention regarding the Divine reality and logic comes from false assumptions regarding God.*⁹

In the same vein, Ibn Qayyim also criticized these philosophical proofs,

*They are not able to affirm the existence of the Lord (rabb), the messenger, nor any other of the foundations of faith that are necessary for the happiness (sa'adah) of the servant.*¹⁰

He saw these arguments as coming from the Greek Hellenistic tradition that failed to engender any true knowledge of God:

*They wish to show that a possible existent (mumkin) requires a necessary existent (waajib)...As for the existence of God, the One who is the only worthy of our devotion, the Ever Living, the Sustainer of all, the Irresistible...Who has knowledge of the hidden matters, Who Sees, Hears, Speaks, is Pleased...then their proof and logical premises do not prove any of these essential realities of faith that are shared by the believers.*¹¹

Iqbal also recognized this problem regarding the rational and empirical attempts to prove God,

I hope I have made it clear to you that the ontological and the teleological arguments, as ordinarily stated, carry us nowhere...This view of thought

⁹ Taymiyyah, I. (1976). *Ar-Radd alaa al-mantaqiyeen*. Lahore, Pakistan: Dar Tarjuman As-Sunnah, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ Qayyim, I. (2004). *As-Sawa'iq al-mursala*. Riyaadh, Saudi Arabia: Maktabah Ar-Rushd, vol. 1, p. 359.

¹¹ Ibid.

*gives us a mere mechanic in the one case, and creates an unbridgeable gulf between the ideal and the real in the other.*¹²

From this perspective, Ibn al-Qayyim provides powerful insights into the nature of faith and certainty in many of his works including *Tareeq ul-Hijratayn*, *As-Sawaa'iq al-Mursala*, *Miftaah Dar as-Sa'adah*, and *Madarij as-Salikeen*.

Building on the legacy of these scholars, we will integrate research from fields such as neuroscience and psychology, as well as examine revelation to provide further insight into the phenomena of faith and conviction, while demonstrating the inadequacy of dogmatic rationalism and empiricism. The paper is divided into three sections: i) The Spiritual Instinct, ii) The Necessity of Faith and iii) Attaining Certainty. The first section describes the starting point when it comes to approaching questions about the unseen world. The second section explains faith and its relation to values and reason, demonstrating its necessity. The last section focuses on understanding certainty as a spiritual-emotional experience rather than a theoretical property of a specific argument. We hope that this article provides a framework for Muslims to understand the role of faith in their lives and an alternative Qur'anically-rooted approach to discovering the Truth of this world.

Section 1: The spiritual instinct

Spirituality has been an integral part of the human condition throughout history and across civilizations. The spiritual instinct may manifest as an impulse that there is something greater beyond this existence; a desire to reach beyond the stars to a reality outside of this world. Through art, poetry, mythology, rituals, and religious traditions, humans until today have attempted to conceptualize, describe, and experience the Divine. Iqbal explains,

*The revealed and mystic literature of mankind bears ample testimony to the fact that religious experience has been too enduring and dominant in the history of mankind to be rejected as mere illusion.*¹³

¹² Iqbal, M. (2011). *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*, p. 33.

¹³ Ibid., p. 14.

In the modern period, despite prevailing attitudes of materialism, naturalism, and hedonism, the human need for spiritual expression persists. Carl Jung explains that the field of psychology in the West was, in fact, driven by a neglected spiritual outlet, “*So also a spiritual need has produced in our time our ‘discovery’ of psychology.*”¹⁴ Even the popular atheist writer, Sam Harris, has actively promoted the concept of engaging in meditation to reach profound spiritual states.¹⁵ Moreover, contemporary psychologist Robert Emmons has argued for the integration of spirituality to further our understanding of the human mind, recognizing it as a type of intelligence.¹⁶ Such a strong universal drive suggests that human beings possess a spiritual instinct that inclines them toward the transcendent. Iqbal has described prayer as a type of instinct, “*Thus you will see that, psychologically speaking, prayer is instinctive in its origin.*”¹⁷ This is consistent with the Qur’anic view,

*And when humanity is touched with hardship, he calls upon Us, whether lying on his side, or sitting, or standing.*¹⁸

Recent insights in neuroscience have lent further support to the claim that spirituality can be conceived as instinctual. Andrew Newberg, a physician and neuroscientist, described the limbic system as the ‘seat of the soul’ and demonstrated its role in human spiritual experiences.¹⁹ In his book, he provides neurological correlations for a range of spiritual expressions including rituals, religious beliefs, mystical experiences, and transcendence which led him to the conclusion that these were instinctual and to be taken as serious avenues toward perceiving ultimate reality.

But science has surprised us, and our research has left us no choice but to conclude that the mystics may be on to something, that the mind’s machinery

¹⁴ Jung, C. G. (2014). *Modern man in search of a soul*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, p. 205.

¹⁵ Harris, S. (2014). *Waking up: A guide to spirituality without religion*. New York, USA: Simon and Schuster.

¹⁶ Emmons, R. A. (2000). Is spirituality an intelligence? Motivation, cognition, and the psychology of ultimate concern. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 10(1), 3-26.

¹⁷ Iqbal, M. (2011). *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*, p. 90.

¹⁸ Qur’an, 10:12.

¹⁹ Newberg, A. (2000). *Why god won’t go away: Brain science and the biology of belief*. New York, USA: Random House Publishing.

*of transcendence may in fact be a window through which we can glimpse the ultimate realness of something that is truly divine.*²⁰

Allah has described the spiritual instinct in the Qur'an as part of the *fitrah* with which every human being has been endowed,

*So turn your face toward the true natural way of life—God's chosen fitrah (constitution) upon which He has formed humanity. There is no altering the primary state of God's creation. That is the correct way of life though most people fail to realize it. It is the path of turning towards God, remaining dutiful to Him, establishing prayer, and being not of those who ascribe partners to Him.*²¹

It is fascinating that the Qur'anic term for 'disbelief,' *kufir*, linguistically carries the meaning of covering up and repressing by burying something in the ground. When we think about *kufir* in the context of the spiritual instinct, we can understand it as covering up and repressing an instinctual drive. A recent study into the psychology of disbelief describes this exact process, cognitively,

*Therefore, atheism is possible, but requires some hard cognitive work to reject or override the intuitions that nourish religious beliefs.*²²

Bennabi argues that seeing spirituality as an instinct delivers a lethal blow to the worldview of naturalism and, by extension, atheism.²³ According to Bennabi, if we concede that the cross-cultural consistency of spiritual expression arises from an instinctive process, then we place the phenomenon of religion "at the level of cosmic facts together with natural laws."²⁴ Therefore, if we accept empirical and logical facts based on our instinctive capacity for sensory perception and our innate cognitive ability to reason, we must also accept the spiritual impulse that drives us to believe in the metaphysical unseen realm (*ghayb*). He explains that religion "appears to be inscribed in the order of the universe as a law characteristic of the

²⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

²¹ Qur'an, 30:30-31.

²² Norenzayan, A., & Gervais, W. M. (2013). The origins of religious disbelief. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 17(1), 20-25.

²³ Bennabi, M. (2010). *The Qur'anic phenomenon: an essay of a theory on the Qur'an*, p. 31.

²⁴ Ibid.

human spirit.”²⁵ Denying the legitimacy of our spiritual faculty would also question the validity of all other processes of the mind (including sensory perception and reasoning) since they are derived from the same source. This disingenuous attitude is described in the Qur’an in relation to revelation, “So do you believe in part of the book and deny the other part?”²⁶ This is analogous to arbitrarily trusting some of our faculties (empirical and rational sense) and distrusting others (spiritual sense).

Bennabi explains that humans exist in a dual plane of reality that is comprised of the physical and metaphysical world. This is why,

*Peoples’ customs and habits are moulded by a metaphysical preoccupation that inclines even the smallest village together around a small hut, deliberately and carefully built as a meeting place for spiritual devotions varying in their primitiveness.*²⁷

He goes on to comment,

*That that human consciousness has thus faced, throughout all the phases of its development, the metaphysical problem with such regularity is itself an issue which sociologists wished to resolve by characterizing man as ‘a fundamentally religious animal.’*²⁸

Included within this metaphysical world and the spiritual impulse is the existence of ethics and a moral imperative that drives much of human behavior. Bennabi explains this as

*an ideal of moral perfection towards which civilization has never ceased to move as its essential and ultimate goal.*²⁹

Thus, from the Islamic perspective, intellectual, moral, and spiritual pursuits are unified in the pursuit of God. This is the essence of *Tawheed* (Islamic

²⁵ Ibid., p. 262.

²⁶ Qur’an, 2:85.

²⁷ Bennabi, M. (2010), p. 29.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

monotheism), the fundamental message of the Islamic worldview, as Nazir Khan writes:

*Tawheed blends spiritual, moral and intellectual—the spiritual goal of coming closer to God entails the moral goal of doing good towards His creation, and the intellectual goal of analyzing the signs of God in scripture and nature.*³⁰

The intellectual journey that seeks knowledge of the physical and metaphysical world are in reality knowledge of the Divine Will. The moral journey that seeks to actualize qualities such as compassion, justice, generosity, and kindness are in reality, submitting to the Will of The Most Compassionate, The Most Just, The Most Generous, and The Most Kind. The spiritual journey that seeks a connection with the transcendent involves seeking The Transcendent Who is beyond this world.

Differing approaches to spirituality

One of the biggest pitfalls people fall into when they approach spirituality is the failure to apprehend its purpose in the grand scheme of the human being. Some factions view it purely as a feeling to be achieved, providing the individual with mystical states of euphoria akin to intoxication through substances. Indeed, some spiritual practitioners utilize psychedelics as a means of reaching higher spiritual states. In these states, it is said that an individual experiences a heightened awareness of reality, recognizing its true nature. In essence, they describe experiencing a revelation.

Others view spirituality as engaging in traditional rituals. These rituals endow a person's day-to-day life with a sense of tradition, but do not penetrate their heart. Furthermore, the rituals often don't conform with any clear religious or rational authority. Some take rituals to an extreme and neglect the needs of the flesh as seen in monasticism.

³⁰ Khan, N. (2015 January 10). Tawheed - A Life Worth Living. *Spiritual Perception*. Retrieved from <http://spiritualperception.org/a-life-worth-living/>

*And we instilled compassion and mercy into the hearts of those who followed him (Jesus). But monasticism was something they invented—We did not ordain it for them—only to seek God’s pleasure, and even so, they did not observe it properly.*³¹

The first approach provides the human being with mystical experiences that result in purely subjective knowledge regarding the nature of reality. These experiences do not provide the individual with knowledge of their purpose in life. Recognizing the inherent unity in things, experiencing ‘pure consciousness’ or other mystical states does not inform us of what our life means or why we are here. The end result is confusion. The second approach provides the human being with a belief system and a set of rituals but fails to provide any intellectual, moral, or spiritual growth. The end result is dogmatism.

These two extremes are encapsulated in the most significant prayer of Islam, known as *Al-Fatiha* (The Opening):

*Guide us to the straight path. The path that You have bestowed Your favor upon, not (the path) of those who have earned anger, nor those who have gone astray.*³²

The two divergent paths are described as *maghdoob alayhim* (anger is upon them) and *daaleen* (those who are lost). Ibn Qutayba mentions that *dalaal* refers to confusion and swerving from the truth, something that appropriately depicts those who are fixated on achieving mystical states.³³ And, according to Ibn Kathir, *maghdoob alayhim* are those whose actions are corrupt despite the fact that they know the truth.³⁴ This appropriately depicts the dogmatic attitude of those who hold to religious beliefs but do not let them transform their character.

Toward a balanced spirituality

So how can we differentiate a balanced spirituality from misplaced spirituality rooted in extreme neglect or obsession? The answer is known to us intuitively and

³¹ Qur’an, 57:27.

³² Qur’an, 1:5-7.

³³ Jawzi, I. *Zaad al-maseer fee ilm at-tafseer*. Accessed [online](#).

³⁴ Kathir, I. *Tafseer Quran adheem*. Accessed [online](#).

we engage in the same corrective processes for our other faculties on a daily basis. We are well aware of the multitude of limitations and numerous biases that affect the judgment of our rationality and sense-perception. We often use our reasoning skills but end up making one of the near hundred logical fallacies when attempting to articulate an argument. Sometimes we use our sense-perception and get fooled by optical illusions. By integrating all our faculties together and being critical of our judgment, we are able to correct these misunderstandings. We recognize optical illusions as illusions, indicating our other faculties are enabling us to understand the truth, even if we are experiencing something contrary to it through one epistemological outlet. Thus, it is essential that we seek to understand and interpret our spiritual experiences in light of our entire lived experience.

Intellectual experience

For instance, Allama Iqbal mentions the important role of rationality when it comes to understanding spirituality,

*Indeed, in view of its function, religion stands in greater need of a rational foundation of its ultimate principles than even the dogmas of science.*³⁵

Ibn al-Qayyim also mentions that spiritual experiences can come from satanic delusions,

Everyone should fear that their spiritual experience may be a delusion from Satan.

People often mistakenly place their spiritual experiences above common sense notions as fundamental as self, identity, and memories. For instance, Sam Harris argues “conventional sense of self is an illusion—and...spirituality largely consists in realizing this, moment to moment.”³⁶ This view sees spirituality in a constant battle with something as intuitive as acknowledging the existence of our own self.

³⁵ Iqbal, M. (2011). *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*, p. 1.

³⁶ Harris, S. (2014). *Waking up: A guide to spirituality without religion*, p. 116.

Moral experience

Furthermore, Harris also separates spirituality from morality,

*The link between self-transcendence and moral behavior is not as straightforward as we might like. It would seem that people can have genuine spiritual insights, and a capacity to provoke those insights in others, while harboring serious moral flaws.*³⁷

However, this presentation of morality as wholly separate from the human spiritual instinct is dubious, unfounded, and based on a superficial representation of spirituality. It is in attaining moral excellence that humans achieve the most rewarding spiritual experiences and find meaning in life while, on the other hand, departing from one's moral values precipitates spiritual deterioration. Interestingly, the Qur'an explains that those who seek a life without God will forget themselves and succumb to moral corruption and wickedness.

*And do not be like those who forgot Allah, so He made them forget themselves. They are the ones who are defiantly wicked (fasiquun).*³⁸

Sacred experience

Moreover, one's spiritual journey must inform a person of what is sacred in their life. Disbelieving in the sacred renders the spiritual pursuit fundamentally pointless. Kenneth Pargament, one of the pioneering psychologists of spirituality and religion, states,

*I see spirituality as a search for the sacred. It is, I believe, the most central function of religion. It has to do with however people think, feel, act, or interrelate in their efforts to find, conserve, and if necessary, transform the sacred in their lives.*³⁹

The sacredness of a thing is based on how related it is to a person's understanding of 'the holy.' This represents a person's ultimate concern in life and provides a

³⁷ Ibid., p. 159.

³⁸ Qur'an 59:19.

³⁹ Pargament, K. I. (1999). The psychology of religion and spirituality? Yes and no. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 9(1), 3-16.

person with meaning and purpose.⁴⁰ Spirituality requires this transcending force nested in the overall purpose of a person's life. A fascinating study in neuroscience demonstrates the significance of purpose to the psyche of the human being. In this study, well-being was associated with the left hemisphere of the prefrontal cortex, an area that is associated with engaging in goal-oriented activities.⁴¹

Thus, having a purpose in one's life can be seen as a neurological necessity in making a life worth living. Searching for the purpose of life has been hard-wired into our brain and compels us to seek answers to this existential question and live by its consequences. Through an understanding of one's purpose in life, a person is able to sanctify and transform the mundane into the spiritual. Robert Emmons, one of the leading psychologists of spirituality, explains,

*To sanctify means to set apart for a special purpose—for a holy or a godly purpose. A recognition of the presence of the divine in ordinary activities is an aspect of spiritual knowing in all major religions of the world.*⁴²

Pargament also comments on the process of sanctification,

*There may be important consequences of the sanctification process. A job is likely to be approached differently when it becomes a vocation. A marriage likely takes on special power when it receives divine sanction. The search for meaning, community, self, or a better world are likely to be transformed when they are invested with sacred character.*⁴³

Islamic paradigm of spirituality: *Tawheed*

Spirituality arises from a coherent conception of reality that unifies the intellectual, moral, and sacred dimensions of life as seen in the Islamic conception of *tawheed*. It is meant to be an integrative and unifying force that mirrors the unity of the

⁴⁰ Emmons, R. A. (2000). Is spirituality an intelligence? Motivation, cognition, and the psychology of ultimate concern. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 10(1), 3-26.

⁴¹ Urry, H. L., Nitschke, J. B., Dolski, I., Jackson, D. C., Dalton, K. M., Mueller, C. J., ... & Davidson, R. J. (2004). Making a life worth living: Neural correlates of well-being. *Psychological Science*, 15(6), 367-372.

⁴² Emmons, R. A. (2000). Is spirituality an intelligence? Motivation, cognition, and the psychology of ultimate concern. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 10(1), 3-26.

⁴³ Pargament, K. I. (1999). The psychology of religion and spirituality? Yes and no. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 9(1), 3-16.

Divine (*tawheed*). As Ibn al-Qayyim beautifully expresses in his poetic treatise *Al-Kaafiya Ash-Shaafiya*, widely known as the *Nooniya*,

For the One, be one, in one

*In the path toward Truth and faith.*⁴⁴

Meaning, for the sake of the *One* God, be *one* in your ambition and pursuit of *one* path that leads a person to understand Truth. From the Islamic perspective, the spiritual journey is seen as a unification of all pursuits of a human being toward Truth.

Thus, true spiritual development arises from a journey towards God through the mobilization of intellectual, moral, and sacred ambitions. It does not ignore a person's rational approach to the world, a person's strongly held moral ideals, nor a person's need for purpose. Rather, when a person realizes that the unified pursuit of the Divine is the fulfillment of all their needs, an internal unification occurs that results in a person becoming a unique individual.

Unlike other popular notions of spirituality, *tawheed* is not based on the eradication of the 'self,' but the actualization of it. As Allama Iqbal mentions in his introduction to the widely acclaimed Farsi poem, *Secrets of the Self*,

*Thus, man becomes unique by becoming more and more like the most unique Individual. What then is life? It is individual: its highest form, so far, is the self (khudi) in which the individual becomes a self-contained exclusive centre...The greater his distance from God, the less his individuality.*⁴⁵

While the idea of union with God and extinguishing the self is present in many spiritual traditions, including certain Muslim orders, it is an idea that is absent from any explicit reading of the Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition. Ibn al-Qayyim, in *Madarij as-Salikeen*, has criticized this notion as something that has emerged as an illusion of the mind, akin to an optical illusion, that has not been necessarily tempered with reason and revelation.

⁴⁴ Qayyim, I. (2007). *Al-Kaafiya ash-shaafiya*. Makkah, Saudi Arabia: Dar 'Alim Al-Fawa'id, p. 188.

⁴⁵ Iqbal, M. (2010). *The secrets of the self*. New York, USA: Cosimo Classics, p. 19.

And this matter (spiritual experience) is shared between those who believe and don't believe in Islam...When a person experiences the complete extinguishing of reality (fanaa' al-mutlaq), then this is an illusion (wahm) that contradicts reality, it is simply imagination (khiyaal) that throws a person into a deep ocean with no shore, entering into a dark night with no dawn.⁴⁶

Conclusion

This section has explored the reality of the spiritual instinct that exists within every human being. It behooves us to consider the true expression of this instinct, as it will form the basis of our entire value system, along with our purpose and sense of self-worth. It will determine what we choose to pursue in life, as well as provide us with meaning and fulfillment. These are vital components of our lives and approaching them from a false paradigm will necessarily have severe consequences.

Section II: The necessity of faith

The preceding section has established the existence of a spiritual drive within the human being that inspires them to answer existential questions and contemplate a higher reality. These questions cannot be approached purely through abstract reasoning, nor purely through seeking spiritual experiences. Rather, what is required is for an individual to approach these questions by integrating one's entire being, merging the rational, moral and spiritual dimensions to produce the greatest feature of the human being: faith.

What is faith?

Faith is one of the most misunderstood theological concepts in the history of religion. The Qur'an mentions that the details of faith were not fully grasped even by the Prophet ﷺ prior to revelation.

⁴⁶ Qayyim, I. (2013). *Madarij as-salikeen*. Al-Mansoorah, Egypt: Maktabah Al-Fayyadh, p. 493.

*You knew neither the Scripture nor the faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants.*⁴⁷

In fact, the first theological controversy in Islamic history was a debate surrounding the nature and reality of faith. Some schisms that arose erroneously limited the scope of faith to either a pure theoretical affirmation of the mind or mere verbal utterances of the tongue. However, a comprehensive reading of the Qur'an demonstrates that faith is a complete manifestation of the whole self, comprised of beliefs, feelings, and actions. Ibn Abi'l-'Izz al-Hanafi (d. 792 AH) explains in his commentary of *'Aqeedah Tahawiyyah* that the majority of the early Muslim scholars saw faith as a reality that emerges from the heart (feeling), tongue (belief), and limbs (action).⁴⁸

This holistic expression being the essence of faith is one of the reasons why the Qur'an refers to *salah* (Muslim prayer) as faith itself. The *salah* is a complete manifestation of faith such that one's entire physical body, mental attention, and spiritual focus are engaged. God says regarding the prayer, "*God will not let your faith go to waste.*"⁴⁹

Therefore, contrary to the conventional understanding that faith is belief in the absence of evidence, this view regards faith as the foundation of every human being's life. Moreover, faith is not merely a feeling that cannot be articulated. It contains intelligible content that serves as an organizing principle that renders life meaningful, inspiring individuals with their deepest aspiration and providing them with beliefs about themselves and the world. Faith, far from being irrational, is an inescapable reality for every human being living in this world. As Muslim thinker Allama Iqbal writes, "It is neither mere thought, nor mere feeling, nor mere action; it is an expression of the whole man."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Qur'an, 42:52.

⁴⁸ Al-Hanafi, I.A. (1990). *Sharh 'aqeedah tahawiyyah*. Beirut, Lebanon: Mu'assisa Ar-Risaala, vol. 1 p. 462.

⁴⁹ Qur'an, 2:143.

⁵⁰ Iqbal, M. (2011) *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*. Lahore, Pakistan: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, p. 2.

Faith in the unseen

We don't just experience the material world, we experience the metaphysical (*ghayb*) realm at every moment. Every snapshot of reality we witness is grasped through the lens of moral values (good and evil), the lens of aesthetic values (beauty and ugly), and the lens of epistemic values (truth and falsehood). These transcendent ideals are held deep in the hearts of humankind. However, these realities are not known through any logical deduction, nor any empirical sense. They can only be known through the gateway of faith. The Qur'an starts with an imperative to place one's faith in the unseen,

*This is a book about which there is no doubt. It is guidance for people mindful of God. **Those who have faith in the unseen**, establish the prayer and give from what We have provided them with.⁵¹*

The necessity of faith

Understanding faith as a necessity allows us to appreciate its reality and function in our lives. Ibn al-Qayyim explains that human beings are dependent creatures and thus require an understanding of what will bring their lives true fulfillment and joy. Conversely, they must also understand what brings about the pain and misery of existence so they can actively fight against it.

It is known that every living thing besides Allah...is in dire need (faqeer) of achieving benefit and thwarting harm. This cannot be accomplished except by identifying the [ultimate source of] benefit and harm.⁵²

Ibn al-Qayyim explains that, without this set of beliefs, a person would not be able to thrive, nor even sustain their existence. It is important to note that merely satisfying the biological needs of human beings does not bring about a fulfilling and meaningful life, nor does it protect against the pain of existence. Many wealthy people cannot escape the suffering of life, as they have neither sought after the true source of fulfillment nor protected against the ultimate source of pain.

⁵¹ Qur'an, 2:2-3.

⁵² Qayyim, I. (2011). *Ighaathat lahfaan*. Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: *Majma' Al-Fiqh Al-Islamee*, p. 39.

Whatever a person chooses to believe are sources of benefit and harm in their life forms their sense of purpose and drives their deepest ambitions and aspirations. This forms the basis for an individual's value system. Regardless if a person professes belief in an official creed or not, every single human being, the atheist, the agnostic, and the religionist has a value system. Faith in this value system is what drives us to act in the world despite the immense resistance that we face while pursuing our most strongly held dreams. It is what tells us that life is worth living and that the pain we experience is worth the gift of life.

*Whoever, male or female, does acts of goodness while they are believers, then We will awaken them to a blessed life.*⁵³

Faith is not irrational

The vehicle that carries an individual from the shore of reality onto the sea of life is a person's faith. It is the ship upon which a person traverses the great ocean of life with its waves that take an individual through the ups and downs of destiny. The bearing of the ship points toward the horizon, beyond what can be physically seen to a reality that is perceived by faith. The ship is an extension of a person's entire being, integrated and working together to carry them to their ultimate aspirations.

The analogy of religion to a ship has been made by Imam Malik (d. 170 AH),

*The prophetic tradition is like the ark of Noah: whoever embarks on it will be saved, and whoever leaves it will drown.*⁵⁴

So, far from being an irrational belief, faith is the starting point of every person's journey of life and the very justification for rationality itself. Rationality is impotent on its own due to the fact that it cannot sustain itself. Why should we trust that our innate cognitive abilities provide us with an accurate representation of reality? Indeed, through the lens of evolution, the entire process is nothing more than the amalgamation of a series of random mutations, which casts doubt on its

⁵³ Qur'an, 16:97.

⁵⁴ Taymiyyah I. (1995). *Majmoo' al-fataawa*. Riyaadh, Saudi Arabia: Majma' Malik Fahd, vol. 1, p. 57.

own merit. Therefore rationality has to depend on another method of inquiry that is self-sustaining.

This paradox has been identified by serious evolutionary scientists. Max Delbrück⁵⁵ writes,

*Our concrete mental operations are indeed adaptations to the mode of life in which we had to compete for survival a long, long, time before science...Why, then, do the formal operations of the mind carry us so much further? Were those abilities not also matters of biological evolution? If they, too, evolved to let us get along in the cave, how can it be that they permit us to obtain deep insights into cosmology, elementary particles, molecular genetics, number theory? To this question I have no answer.*⁵⁶

Faith is the reality that enables us to validate and utilize all our faculties, skills, and talents to reach our destiny in life. It cannot be considered ‘irrational’ because it is the very justification for rationality. Allama Iqbal explains the complex relationship of reason and faith,

*Thus, in the evaluation of religion, philosophy (reason) must recognize the central position of religion and has no other alternative but to admit it as something focal in the process of reflective synthesis.*⁵⁷

Faith is the necessary foundation to pursue meaning in this world.⁵⁸ Paul Davies, a contemporary physicist, in his article “Taking Science on Faith,” explains, “All science proceeds on the assumption that nature is ordered in a rational and intelligible way.”⁵⁹ Therefore, science represents a faithful approach to the world, believing that there is knowledge to discover.

⁵⁵ Max Delbrück was born in 1906 in Berlin, Germany. He was a Nobel-Prize winning molecular biologist, also excelling in physics and philosophy with a strong passion for art. He passed away in 1981 in America. [Hayes, W. (1982). Max Ludwig Henning Delbrück, 4 September 1906-10 March 1981.]

⁵⁶ Delbrück, M. (1978). Mind from matter? *The American Scholar*, 47(3), 339-353.

⁵⁷ Iqbal, M. (2011) *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*. Lahore, Pakistan: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Khan, N. (2015 January 10). The Real Battle: Meaningful vs. Meaningless. *Spiritual Perception*. Retrieved from <http://spiritualperception.org/the-real-battle-meaningful-vs-meaningless/>

⁵⁹ Davies, P. (2007 November 24). Taking Science on Faith. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/24/opinion/24davies.html>

Hence, faith cannot be considered a mere unprovable assumption, for it is an ontological reality beyond the grasp of ‘rational’ or ‘empirical’ proof. Trusting our reason and empirical senses is dependent on faith, so how can it challenge faith’s existence? Ibn al-Qayyim explains that Islamic theologians viewed faith as a necessity, rather than an idea that required proof. He quotes them by saying, “How can I seek proof for the One who is a Proof for everything.”⁶⁰

Faith is the only way meaningful way forward in response to the sea of the unknown we are confronted with. Set sail or stay stranded on the island of darkness, despair, and nihilism.

*Whoever turns away from My Remembrance, then for them is a miserable life.*⁶¹

For those who refuse to construct the ship of faith, they are doomed to a life without purpose, meaning, or values. Hence, the rejection of faith is the very pinnacle of irrationality and immorality. Moreover, the question of what makes life worth living is not one that lends itself to being answered through syllogistic reasoning or mathematical equations. Nor is it something that can be uncovered by examining one’s material existence empirically, analyzing each cell of the human body. The avenue of faith is the only way to access these deeper questions of human existence.

Finding true faith

So we have explained the nature of faith and established its necessity to human existence. But how can a person differentiate true faith from false faith? It is important to note that reason is not separate from faith, but an integral part of its whole. So, while reason does not supercede faith nor challenge its reality, it plays a vital role in evaluating whether the content of faith is true or false. Allama Iqbal mentions the importance of faith being consistent with rational principles,

Now, since the transformation and guidance of man’s inner and outer life is the essential aim of religion, it is obvious that the general truths which it

⁶⁰ Qayyim, I. (2013). *Madarij as-salikeen*. Al-Mansoorah, Egypt: Maktabah Al-Fayyadh, p. 720.

⁶¹ Qur’an, 20:124.

*embodies must not remain unsettled. No one would hazard action on the basis of a doubtful principle of conduct.*⁶²

Therefore, having faith in realities that violate rational principles is not true faith.

*For that is Allah , your Lord, the Truth. And what can be beyond truth except error? So how are you averted?*⁶³

Similarly, having faith that violates strongly held moral convictions cannot be considered the right thing to pursue.

*And when they commit an immorality, they say, “We found our fathers doing it, and Allah has ordered us to do it.” Say, “Indeed, Allah does not order immorality. Do you say about Allah that which you do not know?”*⁶⁴

*Say, “How wretched is that which your faith enjoins upon you, if you should be believers.”*⁶⁵

Lastly, having faith that does not provide a person a reason to live can never fill the void inside the human spirit.

*And whoever turns away from My Remembrance—indeed, he will have a depressed life and We will gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind.*⁶⁶

All dimensions must be merged to produce the reality of faith deep inside our conscious. All these components form the criterion that evaluates the truthfulness of a person’s faith: *sidq* (authenticity). One must endeavor to ensure that the faith they express is truly a reflection of who they are. This authenticity is challenged by the alluring nature of the worldly life and all its temptations that tarnish the pure nature of humanity. This prevents them from confirming truth when it comes to them, as they are not being true to themselves.

⁶² Iqbal, M. (2011) *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*. Lahore, Pakistan: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, p. 2.

⁶³ Qur’an, 10:32.

⁶⁴ Qur’an, 7:28.

⁶⁵ Qur’an, 2:93.

⁶⁶ Qur’an, 20:124.

*And who is more oppressive than the one who lies about Allah and lies about the truth when it comes to them.*⁶⁷

Therefore, the journey of faith is the journey of searching for authenticity and manifesting a lifestyle congruent with one's pure nature. Ibn al-Qayyim describes this process as *riyaadha*, where a person trains themselves to remove biases, societal pressures, inherited cultural beliefs, and the like so that they are able to live an authentic existence.

*The station of riyaadha is training the self to be authentic (sidq) and sincere (ikhlaas).*⁶⁸

The greatest companion of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was named *As-Siddeeq* (the confirmer of truth) which captures the authentic attitude of Abu Bakr toward his faith. He was known for his uncompromising commitment to the truth, being ready to accept it whenever it came, despite any barriers and challenges.

Faith in Islam

According to the Islamic tradition, there are two layers of faith that can settle in the heart. The first layer is the faith that emerges from the *fitrah* that provides the human being with an innate set of beliefs and motivations that orients them in the direction of Truth.⁶⁹ The second layer of faith is that which emerges from a person's encounter with *wahi* (revelation) that complements the primordial faith like a glove on a hand. The revelation is meant to guide the pursuit that flows from the first layer of faith, answering deeper questions and clarifying the way forward.

From the Islamic perspective, if a person is true to themselves, the first layer of faith will emerge. This faith manifests as a strong desire to connect with the Divine Reality characterized by all the qualities of beauty, goodness, power, and perfection. This is expressed through refining one's character with these values and attempting to experience the divine reality through spiritual practices. People at the

⁶⁷ Qur'an, 39:32.

⁶⁸ Qayyim, I. (2013). *Madarij as-salikeen*. Al-Mansoorah, Egypt: Maktabah Al-Fayyadh, p. 390.

⁶⁹ Khan, N. (2015, January 1). *Fitrah: The Primordial Nature of Man*. *Spiritual Perception*. Retrieved from, <http://spiritualperception.org/fitrah-the-primordial-nature-of-man/>

first layer of faith are described as *hunaḥḥā*, possessing the primordial faith instinctive to mankind, “Inclining [only] to Allah , not associating [anything] with Him.”⁷⁰

But this faith is incomplete, like a ship at sea without a map or a compass to deliver the passengers to their destination. What is the Divine Reality? What does this Reality expect from me? Why did this Reality place me here?

The Divine Reality that human beings naturally seek expressed His Will through the phenomenon of *wahī* to a select category of his creation. We know them through history as prophets. They receive articulated forms of revelation that enabled the ideas to spread among a society of people. A person recognizes the Truth of revelation by examining its message and analyzing the character of the messenger.

*Do they not ponder upon the Qur'an? Had it been from other than Allah they would have found in it much discrepancy.*⁷¹

*Say I only advise you to one thing, that you stand for the sake of Allah, in pairs or in isolation and then reflect. Your companion (the Prophet Muhammad) is not insane.*⁷²

When a person sees the revelation as congruent with their first layer of faith, sees the signs of its divine origin, and recognizes the sincerity of the messenger, a new layer of faith emerges in the heart. Confirming this truth flows from living an authentic existence.

*And the one who brings the Truth and the one who confirms it, they are the righteous.*⁷³

The Qur'an describes the moment people recognize the truth of revelation, the culmination of a journey of faith:

⁷⁰ Qur'an, 22:31.

⁷¹ Qur'an, 4:82.

⁷² Qur'an, 34:46.

⁷³ Qur'an, 39:33.

*And when they hear what has been revealed to the messenger, you see their eyes overflowing with tears because of what they have recognized of the truth. They say, "Our Lord, we have believed, so write us among the witnesses."*⁷⁴

At the moment of finding the Truth that they have sought their entire life, journeying through the seas of confusion and obscurity, their heart illuminates. The dawn of revelation radiates the light of guidance to a world already shimmering with the light of the first layer of faith. This produces the effect of light upon light.

*Light upon light, Allah guides to His light whoever He Wills.*⁷⁵

These two lights are the two layers of faith and are captured in the *shahada*, the first pillar of Islam,

I bear witness that there is nothing worthy of worship except God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His messenger.

Once these truths are witnessed, a person achieves faith in the heart in its full form. They find in this faith an authentic expression of their entire being. From this faith arises a conviction that endows a person's will with the fire of determination. From this faith arises love, in its purest form: Divine Love, untarnished by self-interests and dependency. From this faith arises hope so powerful that it can withstand any storm that comes its way, granting the individual courage to overcome the trials of life in pursuit of their ultimate destiny. From this faith arises fear. This is not a fear that limits a person's potential. Rather, it is a fear that expands the boundaries of the possible for an individual. It is the fear that a person will not be able achieve what their faith is carrying them toward. This possibility lurks in the spirit of this faithful soul, obliterating the presence of any self-limiting fears that hold a person back from achieving their greatest aspiration. It is the fear that aids a person to temper their passions as they recognize the dark places their desires can lead them. This is a fear that is freeing and breaks the shackles of this world, allowing a person to soar to the sky with their wings outstretched. The everlasting bond of

⁷⁴ Qur'an, 5:83.

⁷⁵ Qur'an, 24:35.

faith endlessly inspires, continuously supports, and constantly reminds us of our ultimate purpose as we journey through life.

Conclusion

In summary, the human being is brought into the world with a spiritual inclination to answer the big questions of life, the ability to reason, and a strong belief in moral values. Faith brings the human being into an authentic existence by mobilizing one's spirituality, intellectuality, and morality to discover the answers to the questions that confront the deepest aspects of one's consciousness. Far from conventional definitions of faith being belief in the absence of evidence, faith is an essential part of being human. It is the decision to see life as meaningful, to pursue the ideals we hold deep inside, to live life, and accept all that it reveals to us at every moment. Rejecting faith involves suppressing what appears readily and instinctively in our consciousness. It involves denying the beauty that is seen as we gaze upon the skies, suppressing the moral inclinations we feel in response to an atrocity, and ignoring the questions that confront us on a daily basis.

*So whoever disbelieves in false gods and has faith in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing.*⁷⁶

Section III: Attaining certainty

What is certainty?

Certainty is often viewed as a passive mental state that is exclusively related to the exposure to evidence for a particular truth claim. This view holds that achieving certainty is an intellectual exercise and can be achieved through reasoning alone. According to this notion, if one is not certain (or in doubt) about something, it necessarily implies that the problem either lies in the rationality of the idea itself or the individual's insufficient exposure to the evidence for said idea. This is the basic assumption of modern skepticism. Rene Descartes (d. 1650 CE) defined perfect

⁷⁶ Qur'an, 2:256.

certainty as “*a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed*” and perfect knowledge as “*impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of.*”⁷⁷ Immanuel Kant (d. 1804 CE) describes the attitude of the modern age thus:

*Our age is the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit...reason grants only to that which has been able to withstand its free and public examination.*⁷⁸

These ideas have been perniciously inherited by many Muslims across the world through the globalization of western intellectual culture and its epistemic perspectives. Thus, if a person is not convinced of the existence of God, for instance, and they have been exposed to all the proofs and arguments, it must mean that belief in God is irrational. Iqbal explains the plight of the modern believer,

*Moreover, the modern man, by developing habits of concrete thought—habits which Islam itself fostered at least in the earlier stages of its cultural career—has rendered himself less capable of that experience which he further suspects because of its liability to illusion.*⁷⁹

And so the war rages on inside the minds and hearts of young Muslims who are struggling to hold on to their faith while not feeling a sense of certainty or intellectual clarity. They equate the absence of personal conviction with the absence of rationality of their faith. Despite being exposed to all the arguments, evidences, and proofs that have been provided by scholars, speakers, debaters, friends, and family, they can’t ever seem to be convinced.

Certainty as an emotion

Contrary to the idea that conviction lies in our exposure to evidence for a belief, recent developments in the field of metacognition suggest a different conceptualization of certainty.⁸⁰ They have described it as a feeling that arises from

⁷⁷ Newman, L. (2008). Descartes' epistemology. Retrieved from, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology/#ConcKnow>

⁷⁸ Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of pure reason*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, pp. 100-101

⁷⁹ Iqbal, M. (2011). *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*. Lahore, Pakistan: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, p. i.

⁸⁰ Koriat, A. (2000). The feeling of knowing: Some metatheoretical implications for consciousness and control. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 9(2), 149-171.

parts of the brain that are associated with emotional processing (the limbic system).

⁸¹ Therefore, from a neurophysiological perspective, certainty seems to contain an emotional response to a particular idea, rather than a purely intellectual one.

Understanding this dimension of certainty helps us make sense of everyday lived experiences. We often feel certain about things we don't consciously know. This is captured in the "tip-of-the-tongue" paradox of not being able to remember a name, place, thing, or word, but being certain that it is known to us. How is it we can be certain without any conscious knowledge?

Conversely, we can also be uncertain about things we consciously know. All evidence, memories, and even witnessed accounts may point toward the fact that you turned off the kitchen stove before you left the home. But we can start to experience an unrelenting feeling of uncertainty that can only be quelled by returning to the home and checking "just to be sure." This phenomenon is taken to an extreme in the mental illness known as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). One study found that pathological subjective uncertainty in the face of objective certainty in individuals with OCD was linked to hyperactivity of the limbic and paralimbic brain regions.⁸²

Excessive uncertainty exists along a spectrum and, while the most extreme cases may manifest in mental illness, even healthy individuals can reason in ways that bring them to unjustified uncertainty about something that is clearly true or unjustified certainty in something that is clearly false. In fact, it has been found that using logic and reasoning rarely aids in changing the state of a person's feelings of knowing.⁸³ Most often people engage in logical reasoning to justify a conclusion that they already feel confident about for other psychosocial reasons. Therefore, when one encounters uncertainty, it is not necessarily a proof that there is something wrong with the thing being doubted, but rather it is simply a mental sensation from the limbic system which may be justified or unjustified depending

⁸¹ Burton, R. A. (2008). *On being certain: Believing you are right even when you are not*. New York, USA: St. Martin's Press, p. 23.

⁸² Stern, E. R., Welsh, R. C., Gonzalez, R., Fitzgerald, K. D., Abelson, J. L., & Taylor, S. F. (2013). Subjective uncertainty and limbic hyperactivation in obsessive-compulsive disorder. *Human Brain Mapping*, 34(8), 1956-1970.

⁸³ Burton R. A. (2008). *On being certain*, p. 13.

on the context. Feelings of uncertainty regarding faith in God, Islam, or the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ must be considered from this perspective. Perhaps the issue lies in the individual rather than the presence of ‘convincing’ evidence.

Psychosocial aspects of certainty

A person may ask how can we nurture conviction if it seems to arise arbitrarily, rather than meaningfully? The response is that the opposite is true. The research informs us that certainty is a subjective phenomenon that arises from an individual’s psychosocial context. Hence, when subjective certainty does not correlate with objective truth, it means that something in the mind or environment of the individual is out of equilibrium. Consider the example of someone who experienced trauma in childhood with religious authority figures. Due to their social circumstances, their mind has made an emotional association between their religion and trauma. Later in life, when this person interacts with their faith, it can activate an anxiety response in the limbic structures in the brain, leading to feelings that may be interpreted as uncertainty or doubt. The influence of early childhood experiences on faith later in life has been described by Albertz (translated by Waaijman),

*What an individual person hopes for and experiences from God has its frame of reference in what he has experienced in the years of childhood from his parents in terms of love, affection, and security.*⁸⁴

There are many social and psychological factors that can follow this same pathway. This can range from a person who has grown up in a strongly religious household in which religion was associated with limitation, restriction, and punishment to someone who has experienced judgment, ostracization, and loneliness in the Muslim community. There is also the person who has erroneously internalized the belief that certainty is only achieved through evidence, which subsequently transforms any strange transient feelings of uncertainty into intrusive obsessions, shaking the core of their faith. Therefore, taking a holistic approach that addresses the intellectual, psychological, social, and spiritual needs of

⁸⁴ Waaijman, K. (2007). What is spirituality? *Acta Theologica*, 27(2), 1-18.

Muslims struggling with their faith will enable us to build communities of conviction.

Certainty as a spiritual pursuit

We have not yet mentioned the most fundamental and essential quality of certainty. When we take a deeper look at the brain structures associated with the feeling of certainty, we find that they are also the structures associated with spirituality. The limbic system has been termed the “seat of the soul” and is an integral part of our spiritual experiences.⁸⁵

Thus, certainty (*yaqeen*) can be conceived of as a spiritual pursuit at its root. In fact, the spiritual tradition of Islam includes *yaqeen* as a spiritual station that is reached through cultivation of the soul.⁸⁶ The Qur’an elaborates on this understanding with reference to two concepts: *inaabah* (sincerely turning towards the truth and towards God) and *hidayah* (Divine guidance)—“*He guides those who sincerely turn towards Him.*”⁸⁷

Rather than *yaqeen* being a random inexplicable occurrence in the limbic system, or something achieved through argumentation and debate, *yaqeen* can be brought about through sincere reflection and *inaabah*, through which God confers the gift of *yaqeen* upon one’s “limbic system.” Looking at guidance and *yaqeen* as a gift makes sense when we see how often the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ used to pray: “*O Turner of the hearts, make my heart firm upon Your Way.*”⁸⁸

Indeed, even the Prophet of God did not see himself as self-sufficient in the quest for certainty. He ﷺ recognized conviction as a gift from God and was continually connected to Him.

In *Madarij as-Salikeen*, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH) includes *yaqeen* as a spiritual station one traverses in one’s journey toward Allah. His treatment on the subject

⁸⁵ Newberg A. (2000). *Why god won’t go away: Brain science and the biology of belief*. New York, USA: Random House Publishing.

⁸⁶ Qayyim, I. (2013). *Madarij as-salikeen*, p. 757.

⁸⁷ Qur’an 13:27.

⁸⁸ *Jami’ al-Tirmidhi*, Hadith 3522.

provides us with a holistic understanding of the nature of *yaqeen*, the paths toward it, and the role it is meant to play in our lives.

The nature of *yaqeen*

Ibn al-Qayyim explains that *yaqeen* is not something that can be acquired through a simple cause-and-effect pathway.

*Achieving certitude cannot occur by virtue of the person's own ability, it is solely a gift from God that is granted to people as a favor upon them.*⁸⁹

Having said that, he also acknowledges that there are certain means a person can take to make it more likely to receive this gift.

*The truth of the matter is that it (certainty) is earned from the perspective of its means, but it is a pure gift from the perspective of its essence and ontological reality.*⁹⁰

In explaining the reality of *yaqeen*, he quotes Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 298 AH),

*Yaqeen is the internalization (istiqaar) of knowledge that will not turn, change, or waiver in the heart.*⁹¹

This describes *yaqeen* as an active processing that occurs due to knowledge that a person has acquired. As mentioned earlier, a person does not have complete control over this processing. It can be seen as an automatic process, akin to the processing of visual stimuli that occurs at the level of the brain. We have no control over our ability to visually process the world. It is automatic but we know that certain things can enhance or diminish this process.

The experience of *yaqeen* itself, according to Ibn al-Qayyim, exists on a spectrum of three stages,

An example of these three degrees is like a person who tells you that he has honey with him. (At this stage) you have no doubt in his testimony. Then you actually see the honey and this increases your yaqeen, then you actually

⁸⁹ Qayyim, I. (2013). *Madarij as-salikeen*, p. 458.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 758.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 758.

taste the honey. The first is reasonable certainty ('ilm al-yaqeen), the second is empirical certainty ('ayn al-yaqeen), the third is ultimate certainty (haqq al-yaqeen).⁹²

It does not contradict *yaqeen* to wish for higher levels of certainty; in fact, this is something that naturally flows from having *yaqeen*. This idea is captured in the story of Ibrahim and the birds,

And remember when Ibrahim said, "My Lord! Show me how you give life to the dead." Allah responded, "Do you not believe?" Ibrahim replied, "Yes I do, but just so my heart can be reassured." Allah said, "Then bring four birds, train them to come to you, then cut them into pieces, and scatter them on different hilltops. Then call them back, they will fly to you in haste. And thus you will know that Allah is Almighty, All-Wise."⁹³

Badr ad-Deen al-Ayni (d. 855 AH) explains that Ibrahim wished to “ascend from ‘ilm al-yaqeen to ‘ayn al-yaqeen.”⁹⁴ Ibn Hajr (d. 808 AH) also includes this in his commentary,

It can be understood that he asked to increase his yaqeen, not to say that he was doubtful before. Knowledge has levels of strength, and he intended to ascend from ‘ilm al-yaqeen to ‘ayn al-yaqeen.^{95,96}

Interestingly, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ commented on this story saying, “We have more right to doubt (*shakk*) than Prophet Ibrahim.”⁹⁷ This aids us in understanding the nature of *yaqeen* and its relation to doubt. Having uncomfortable thoughts or feelings that come to our mind does not contradict *yaqeen* or our faith.

⁹² Ibid., p. 762.

⁹³ Qur'an, 2:260.

⁹⁴ Al-Ayni, B.D. (2001). *Umdat ul-qari*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar ul-Fikr, vol. 19, p. 128.

⁹⁵ Al-Asqalani, I.H. (1960). *Fath ul-bari*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Al-Maktaba As-Salafiyya, vol. 6, p. 413.

⁹⁶ It should be noted that there are multiple interpretations regarding the reason why Ibrahim asked to see life come to the dead. Ibn Hajr al-Asqalani (d. 856 AH) explains that some have understood the story to also mean: 1) Ibrahim was affected by the whispering of Shaytaan; 2) he was not in doubt of the power of resurrection, but doubted whether he was really *Khaleel Allah* and made this prayer as a sign that he truly achieved this status; or 3) he wanted to see it due to his previous debate with Nimrod who claimed he could give and take life. Ibn al-Jawzi also documents the various interpretations in his commentary on the verse in *Zaad al-Maseer Fee Ilm at-Tafseer*.

⁹⁷ *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith 4537.

In fact, these are proofs of our faith as explained by the Prophet ﷺ in another narration,

“O Messenger of God, verily we perceive in our minds that which any one of us would consider too grave to even express.” The Prophet replied, “Do you really have such thoughts/feelings?” They said, “Yes.” Upon this he remarked, “That is the manifestation of faith.”⁹⁸

Imam Nawawi explains how such thoughts paradoxically indicate strong faith. He explains that the person’s reaction to such involuntary thoughts indicates that they are protective of their faith and wish to ensure its security.⁹⁹ The reason they feel uncomfortable and blasphemous is because faith is present. If there was no faith, these thoughts would not cause any dissonance or anxiety. In terms of where these thoughts come from, he quotes Al-Qadhi Iyaadh’s (d. 543 AH) interpretation,

The Shaytaan only throws these whispers into the minds of those who he has given up on misguiding. So he frustratingly whispers these thoughts out of a deep failure to misguide this person.¹⁰⁰

The path to *yaqeen*

Yaqeen processing at the level of the spirit recognizes truth in knowledge that is acquired and provides a person with firm conviction in its reality. This concept is further explored when examining certain verses in the Qur’an. For instance, Ibn al-Qayyim comments on the interesting usage of the term *yaqeen* in the Qur’an when describing the clear signs of truth, “*And in the earth are signs for those who are certain*” (Qur’an, 51:20). Ibn al-Qayyim explains,

God specifies that the people of certainty will be the ones who will be able to benefit from the signs and proofs.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 247.

⁹⁹ An-Nawawi (1929). *Al-Minhaj sharh sahih muslim*. Cario, Egypt: Al-Matba’a al-Misriyya bi-Al-Azhar, vol. 2, p. 205.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 757.

While the superficial reader may think that it is circular reasoning to state that in order to be convinced of a proof, you need to have prior certainty in what it was trying to prove, the Qur'an actually gives a profound insight into the nature of *yaqeen*. It appropriately describes *yaqeen*, not as a characteristic of the argument or proof, but as the approach of the person. As Imam al-Alusi (d. 1270 AH) comments in his *tafseer*,

*(The people of certainty refer to) the monotheists that take the straight and rational path that leads to true knowledge and understanding, using their piercing insight.*¹⁰²

Therefore *yaqeen* represents a mindset whereby a person is determined to discover the truth and build their understanding. The Qur'an explains that a sincere individual with a *yaqeen* mindset will benefit from their experiences in life, which will ultimately lead them toward the truth. Imam Raazi (d. 606 AH) explains in his commentary on the aforementioned verse,

*The person who achieves certainty (al-muqin) is never heedless of God, and sees signs of Him in everything.*¹⁰³

This is in contrast to the *shakk* mindset that is cynical and distrustful of the most obvious of realities and not concerned with building knowledge and understanding. The Qur'an provides a hypothetical example that illustrates the futility of the *shakk* mindset.

*And if we opened for them a gateway from the universe so that they would ascend (through it), they would say, "Our eyes are hallucinating or even worse we have been affected by magic."*¹⁰⁴

The *shakk* mindset yields doubtful assumptions, conjecture, and no real knowledge. It comes from the unconscious desire of the *nafs* (self) to avoid the responsibilities of life by being doubtful of any real purpose or meaning,

¹⁰² Al-Alusi. *Ruh al-ma'ani*. Accessed [online](#).

¹⁰³ Ar-Raazi. *Mafaatih al-ghayb*. Accessed [online](#).

¹⁰⁴ Qur'an, 15:14-15.

*They only follow assumptions and whatever their self desires, even though guidance has come to them from their Lord.*¹⁰⁵

The Qur'an demonstrates how this mindset enables them to reject responsibility for their actions by being skeptical about the reckoning of the next life:

And when it was said, "Indeed, the promise of Allah is Truth and the Hour [is coming]—no doubt about it," you said, "We know not what is the Hour. We assume only conjecture (dhann) and we are not seeking certainty (yaqeen)." ¹⁰⁶

The *yaqeen* mindset is the only epistemological approach that enables a person to acquire true knowledge. It comes from a spirit that yearns for knowledge and understanding of life's big questions. Therefore, the means we can take to making our hearts more receptive to the gift of *yaqeen* is to furnish in our minds this *yaqeen* mindset. Ibn al-Qayyim describes three signs of this mindset,

*Seeing Allah in everything, returning to Him in every situation (you encounter), seeking His Aid in every circumstance.*¹⁰⁷

Seeing Allah in everything is about witnessing the Divine Names and Attributes in everything that a person experiences. Returning to Him in every situation is about seeing every life event as an opportunity to come closer to God. Seeking His Aid is about recognizing one's weaknesses and limitations and finding strength through relying on His Strength to overcome any challenges or obstacles. Cultivating this attitude and approach to life will make a person's heart a receptacle for the gift of *yaqeen*.

A crucial aspect of developing a *yaqeen* mindset requires creating a protective environment in the heart against doubts. We mentioned previously that experiencing feelings of doubt does not necessarily mean absence of certainty or faith. However, this does not mean that we can be negligent toward these thoughts

¹⁰⁵ Qur'an, 53:23.

¹⁰⁶ Qur'an, 45:32.

¹⁰⁷ Qayyim, I. (2013). *Madarij as-Salikeen*. Al-Mansoorah, Egypt: Maktabah Al-Fayyadh, p. 758.

and let them sink into our hearts. Ibn Taymiyyah provided sagacious advice to Ibn al-Qayyim regarding this point,

*Do not let your heart be a sponge for every doubt and allegation so that it absorbs them and is moistened with nothing else. Instead, make your heart like solid glass; doubts pass over its surface but do not settle on the inside. Thus, the doubts are seen through the clearness of the glass, but are repelled by its firmness. Otherwise, if you allow your heart to drink every doubt you encounter, it will end up affirming them.*¹⁰⁸

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ taught us how to actively disengage from doubts to avoid absorbing them into our hearts. There are two narrations that provide us with a beautiful strategy to counteract doubts,

*Men will continue to question one another till this is propounded: Allah created all things but who created Allah? He who found himself confronted with such a situation should say: "I have faith in Allah."*¹⁰⁹

*Satan comes to one of you and says, "Who created so-and-so?" till he says, "Who has created your Lord?" So, when he inspires such a question, one should seek refuge with Allah and give up such thoughts.*¹¹⁰

These are profound narrations that provide us with deep insight in to the phenomenology of doubt. Firstly, they both speak to the spiraling nature of doubt that starts with one question that carries a person down the rabbit hole of a multitude of unsettling questions and feelings. Secondly, they explain the sources of doubt that can come from either intrusive and obsessive satanic whispering from the inside or from encountering unguided philosophical discourse from the outside. Thirdly, an 'emergency exit plan' is provided for those who find themselves in these situations. Declaring one's faith in Allah represents returning to one's grounding of certainty after venturing into questions that are beyond the limits of our intellect. The Qur'an deters us from attempting to philosophize realities beyond our intellectual capacity,

¹⁰⁸ Qayyim, I. (2010). *Miftah dar al-sa'adah*. Makkah, Saudi Arabia: Dar 'Alam al-Fawa'id, vol. 1, p. 395.

¹⁰⁹ *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 134.

¹¹⁰ *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith 3276.

*And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed, the hearing, the sight, and the heart—about all those [one] will be questioned.*¹¹¹

Regarding the intrusive and obsessive thoughts that are a result of the whispering of Satan, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ encouraged us to seek protection in Allah and to actively desist from these doubts. Seeking Divine Aid grants us the strength necessary to prevent these thoughts from being absorbed into our hearts like a sponge, as Ibn Taymiyyah explains. The advice to actively disengage from these thoughts demonstrates to us that we can develop the capacity to choose what thoughts our consciousness focuses on. As discussed by Muslim psychotherapist, Najwa Awad, certain forms of psychotherapy can be useful in granting us the strategies and tools to take back control of our minds from obsessive and intrusive thoughts.¹¹²

The point of *yaqeen*

People erroneously assume that the sole function of certainty is establishing the veracity of a particular truth claim. As explained, *yaqeen* is not reached through abstract proofs, nor through being convinced of an argument. Rather it is a gift that is received from God that amounts to a spiritual experience.

Yaqeen is not meant to merely be a theoretical state we experience to put to rest our own insecurities. Rather, it serves a very important practical function in our lives. It drives our actions. Ibn al-Qayyim explains that “*Yaqeen* is the spirit of the actions of the heart, which are the spirit of the actions of the body.”¹¹³ Conviction is meant to inspire us with the courage necessary to act in the world based on what we believe. He says,

*If it weren't for yaqeen, no one would choose to embark on the journey to Allah. Moreover, it is only through it (yaqeen) that a person is able to stand firm on the path.*¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Qur'an, 17:36.

¹¹² See: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/najwa-awad/clinicians-imams-and-the-whisperings-of-satan/>

¹¹³ Qayyim, I. (2013). *Madarij as-Salikeen*, p. 757.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 760.

Yaqeen is meant to drive contribution by granting us the resolve and determination to work toward a better world. Ibn al-Qayyim explains that knowledge (*ilm*) on its own is not enough to inspire contribution. In fact, it often leads to hesitancy and reluctance to act as a person is aware of all the possible dangers and potentially negative repercussions of that action.¹¹⁵ Therefore, a person requires conviction in their knowledge to feel the burning desire to push one's boundaries and to be blessed with a relentless drive that reaches beyond the horizon with every step they take.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the concepts of spirituality, faith, and conviction holistically rooted in the Islamic tradition, drawing on insights from modern psychology and neuroscience. This approach challenges western skepticism and how it views the relationship between reason and faith. We hope that future articles in this series serves as a framework to confront the theological challenges facing the *ummah* today. It is a call to examine the fundamentals of our faith and find a dormant light that can guide us through the confusion of the 21st century. Rather than requiring external evidence or justification, the six pillars of faith themselves may be the evidence and justification necessary to become convinced of our way of life. Through deep reflection on these theological concepts along with their epistemic, spiritual, and moral implications we can transform as individuals and as a community. Thus, we can continue to inspire contribution through conviction.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.