بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Difference Between Īmān & 'Aqidah And Which One Comes First?

Aqidah is what one holds with certainty in the heart. Iman is the belief + speech + action. 'Aqidah refers to the doctrinal foundations whereas Iman includes that along with practice. 'Aqidah refers to Internal conviction whereas Iman is both Internal + external/outward expression. 'Aqidah is fixed and absolute where as Iman increases and decreases.

Evidence That Īmān Includes ʿAqīdah (But Not Vice Versa)

لِيَزْدَادُوا إِيمَانًا مَّعَ إِيمَانِهِمْ

"…So that they may increase in Īmān…"[1]

ʿAqīdah doesn't increase or decrease — it is settled truth. But Īmān fluctuates based on obedience.

"Īmān has over seventy branches…"[2] it includes: statements (e.g., Lā ilāha illa Allāh), actions (e.g., removing harm) and the Heart (e.g., ḥayāʾ). This shows Īmān encompasses more than just ʿAqīdah.

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[1] Surah al-Fatḥ 48:4
[2] Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 35

Statements of the Salaf Clarifying the Distinction:

Imām Aḥmad (Uṣūl as-Sunnah): "The foundation of the Sunnah with us… is to hold fast to what the Companions were upon — in belief and practice."

Here, "foundation" refers to ʿAqīdah, upon which Īmān is built and enacted.

Imām al-Barbahārī in Sharḥ as-Sunnah said: "Know that the fundamentals of the Sunnah (i.e., ʿAqīdah) are: belief in the attributes of Allāh, the Qurʾān being His speech, and belief in Paradise, Hell, and the Fire… and whoever opposes them is not upon the Sunnah."

All of these are internal certainties — thus, ʿAqīdah.

Which Comes First: ʿAqīdah or Īmān?

ʿAqīdah comes first — it is the foundation upon which true Īmān is built.

Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān حفظه الله said: "'ʿAqīdah comes first, because actions are only valid upon sound belief. If the foundation is corrupted, the building falls. So too if the ʿAqīdah is corrupt, the acts of worship are invalid."[3]

Shaykh Ibn al-ʿUthaymīn رحمه الله said: "'ʿAqīdah is the foundation. Īmān builds upon it. A person cannot be called a believer (mu'min) unless his ʿAqīdah is sound."[4]

The Prophet ﷺ began with Tawḥīd (ʿAqīdah) in Makkah before teaching Ṣalāh, Zakāh, etc. "Let the first thing you call them to be the testification that none has the right to be worshipped but Allāh…"[5]

Hence aḥkām (rulings and acts of Īmān) came after belief (ʿAqīdah).

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[3] al-Mulakhkhaṣ fī Sharḥ Kitāb at-Tawḥīd
[4] Sharḥ al-ʿAqīdah al-Wāsiṭiyyah
[5] Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 1458

SALAF

FOLLOWING THE SAVED WAY