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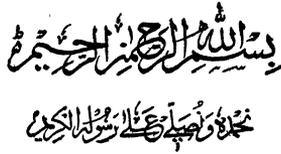
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## THE MEANING OF *IMĀN* AND *ISLĀM* IN THE QUR'ĀN

ABDUL KHALIQ KAZI

In the second and third centuries of Islamic era Muslim theologians were busy defining the words *īmān* and *mu'min*. The believers were now many, exhibiting a great variety in ways of life and outlook, differing in their conformity to the inherited socio-religious pattern and holding an incredible variety of views from extreme right to the extreme left—all within the framework of, or at least made to fit into, the Qur'ān-*Sunnah* thought, with yet undefined and uncanonized *ḥadīth* a convenient and elastic element in that Qur'ān-*Sunnah* framework.

When views that relate to the essence of their faith are sharp and dogmatic and apparently opposed to each other, where the truth must seem either/or, time would then be ripe for defining the essential and the fundamentals. Similarly, when conduct breaks away from the norm set by Qur'ān-*Sunnah*, or supposedly set in the light of Qur'ān-*Sunnah*, and this divergence from norm reaches a serious proportion or even sets a different norm, in such a case several fundamental questions must arise, such as (a) What is the norm? (b) Is the norm fundamental?, etc. This is the background to controversy around the definition of *īmān*.

The vague but pressing search for the fundamental that would be a criterion for judging the right or wrong of a claim on the part of a person to be a believer appeared first of all in the form of a crude question: What is the position of a person who commits a grave sin? While it is, no doubt, a primitive theological question, it, nevertheless, adequately expresses a basic search. When the three possible answers to it had been given, that he was (i) an infidel, (ii) still a *mu'min*, (iii) neither an infidel nor a *mu'min*, the stage was set for one of the most fundamental and crucial questions, viz: What is *īmān*? Answers to this question were in some cases expressing a principle already implied in the positions adopted by various bodies among the believers in answer to the first question. Briefly the views expressed were:—

Khārijī: *Īmān* is belief in heart and profession of that belief through the tongue accompanied with abstinence from *all* sins.

Mu'tazilah and Shī'ī: *Īmān* is belief in heart and profession of that belief through the tongue accompanied with abstinence from *major* sins.

Shāfi'ī and Ahl al-Ḥadīth: *Īmān* is word and deed; acts of obedience are part of *īmān*; but *īmān* is possible without corresponding deeds, i.e., man will not be declared an infidel in default of them.

Māturīdī: It is belief in heart and its profession by tongue.

Ash'arī: It is belief in heart only.

Murji'ah: It is knowledge of God only *plus* profession.

Karrāmī: It is profession by tongue only.<sup>1</sup>

We do not require a very critical insight to be able to see in these views on *īmān* the varying standards accepted for inclusion of a person in the community of *mu'minūn*. We can see that Khawārij, followed by Mu'tazilites and Shī'ites set the highest standard which would allow only a small group conforming to that standard to claim to be a *mu'min*; the rest of 'the people of Qiblah' were considered either infidels or a category by themselves, i.e., neither *mu'min* nor *kāfir*. Most of the orthodox views aiming at avoiding a complete break between members of community at widely varying levels of piety and goodness include in their definition of *īmān* that element which is common to all and exclude that element which is present in some and absent in others. Those who believe and say so are *mu'minūn* without any consideration to the actual life they lead. *Īmān* lay in verbal expression of belief, uttered by all, not in living expression managed by a few. *Īmān* lay in the minimum one can do, not in the maximum one should do. As *īmān* could not vary in quality (*lā yazīd wa lā yanquṣ*) and conduct did not count towards it, the word *mu'min* could be applied equally to Abū Nuwās and Ḥaṣan al-Baṣrī.

The logical conclusion of the views of exponents of Orthodoxy in the lowering of the standard of *īmān* must have made many unhappy. Khawārij and Mu'tazilah were certainly not willing to allow the use of the word *mu'min* so indiscriminately. The need would therefore arise for finding a more acceptable term for those who did not qualify to be called *mu'minūn*. The term *kāfir* was destructive, *fāsiq* was abusive, *mu'min fāsiq* was in the eyes of the

Mu'tazilites, an offensive juxtaposition of a word of praise and a word of abuse. They must, therefore, look for a suitable designation elsewhere. What about the word *muslim*?

It is not being suggested that the word *muslim* came out of nowhere, or that it was not used previously. The point to note is the new connotation given to the term and the choice made, as we shall presently see it was a choice, in favour of the term *muslim* as distinct from, and in place of *mu'min* where the latter could not be used and even ultimately to replace it completely as is evident today.

It is significant to note that throughout the formative period of Muslim Theology the discussion is basically on *īmān* and *mu'min* and not on *islām* and *muslim*. The refusal on the part of Khawārij and Mu'tazilites to apply the term *mu'min* to sinners and the heat generated by this refusal quite strongly indicate that the followers of the Prophet Muhammad were called *mu'minūn*. The caliphs from 'Umar onwards were titled *amīr al-mu'minīn* not *amīr al-muslimīn*. In the Qur'ān itself the nomenclature for the believers in Muḥammad and his message is *المؤمنون* and *الذين آمنوا* as shown in *ان الذين آمنوا والذين هادوا والنجاريون* (XIV: 10) *ان المؤمنون اخوة* (II: 62) and other similar verses which are very consistent in using the word *المؤمنون* and its derivatives for this particular group of people, i.e., the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad just as *يهود* and *نصارى* are used as nomenclatures for communities of Jews and Christians. To this, however, we shall return later.

What is *islām* and how does it stand in relation to *īmān* must have become an issue in the first half of the 2nd century for it to have gained a place in Abū Ḥanīfah's *al-Fiqh al-Akbar* where it is briefly said that, from the language point of view there is a difference between *īmān* and *islām* as *īmān* means *al-iqrār wa 'l-taṣdīq* and *islām* means *al-inqiyād wa 'l-taslīm*. But one is not possible without the other, i.e., *īmān* without *islām* or *islām* without *īmān*.<sup>2</sup> The commentator adds that Abū Ḥanīfah here is advocating the view of the people who hold that the two words are synonymous.<sup>3</sup>

Al-Ash'ari, however, in his *al-Ibānah*<sup>4</sup> declares that *islām* is more general than *īmān* and that not every *islām* is *īmān*, meaning thereby that application of the term *al-islām* is wider and could in fact be applied to anyone who cared to call himself a Muslim, whereas *mu'min* is limited in its application.

Strange as it may seem, the above view reflects the Mu'tazilites'

stand which is well summed up by al-Bazdawī: "According to the Mu'tazilites and Rāfiḍites, one is different from the other. Therefore, in their view, a person who commits a grave sin is a *muslim* but not a *mu'min*. So, if someone made a will in favour of poor *mu'minūn* the money will not be distributed to those guilty of grave sins, nor indeed to the Sunnites. The money in such a case will only be given to the Mu'tazilites and the Shī'ites. But if the will is in favour of poor *muslimūn*, the money could be given to the poor from all the people of Qiblah."<sup>5</sup>

In all the cases where difference between *īmān* and *islām* was advocated, the following verse was quoted in support:

قالت الاعراب آمنا قل لم تؤمنوا ولكن قولوا اسلمنا ولما يدخل الايمان في قلوبكم  
(XLIX : 14)

The above discussion shows the causes underlying the controversy as well as the direction it was taking. The whole situation is summed up by al-Shahristānī in his *K. al-Milal wa 'l-Nihāl*. After quoting the famous tradition, in which *islām*, *īmān* and *ihsān* are defined,<sup>6</sup> he goes on to say: "So the Prophet has differentiated in the meaning of the words *al-islām* and *al-īmān*. *Al-islām* therefore, may be used to mean outward submission and as such it is equally applicable to a believer and a hypocrite." After quoting the verse XLIX : 14 he says, "It shows that even the Qur'ān differentiated between the two." Al-Shahristānī then adds: "On this basis the word *al-muslimūn* will cover both those who will be saved and those who will perish."<sup>7</sup> Here al-Shahristānī is not giving a sectarian view, rather it is presented as a universally accepted opinion on the basis of which he proposed to include in his book all kinds of sects in its chapter on *al-muslimūn*. *Muslim* had thus become the accepted nomenclature, completely replacing *mu'min* of the earlier usage. This replacement is noticeable in earlier theological works where, even while discussing *īmān*, the nomenclature adopted is *muslim*. *Hadīth* reflects this process of change in its more frequent usage of the words *aslama*, *islām* and *muslimūn* than *īmān*, *āmāna* and *mu'minūn* in contrast to the Qur'ān. Today a person reads formulae of *īmān*, viz., آمن بالله و ملائكته الخ and becomes a *muslim*. The adoption of the name *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*<sup>8</sup> while based on the Qur'ānic concept of *الما المؤمنون* (XLIX : 10) is a clear example of this complete replacement, that has taken place.

In this process two things are to be particularly noted. The

word *mu'min* has been saved and despite the views of the Kar-rāmites and some of the Murji'ites, it has been allowed to retain a high status. Rather, indirectly, it has enhanced its status. Now the word has a romantic association with the Companions of the Prophet. For example, Iqbal's *mard-i-mu'min*, therefore, appears more meaningful and significant than if he had used the term *mard-i-muslim*. But the elevation of *īmān* and *mu'min* was accomplished at the cost of *islām* and *muslim*.

The second thing would already have been noted by the reader that the verse XLIX: 49 quoted above must have been an important factor in the connotation that the word *muslim* was given, due to the contrast shown between *اسلمنا* and *آمنا*. It is, therefore, necessary to look at this verse more closely, but before we do that we should first of all familiarize ourselves with the usage of these two words and their derivatives in the Qur'ān. We should aim at discovering the distinctive meanings conveyed by these words in the context of their usage in the Qur'ān.

In the Qur'ān the first thing that strikes one looking for instances of where the two words have been used is the great abundance of the word *āmana* and its derivatives compared with which *aslama* and its derivatives appear to be very infrequent. Secondly, the *āmana*-group begins to appear fairly early in the Meccan verses while the *aslama*-group is later in appearance, definitely after the sixth year of the Prophet's preaching.

While it is extremely difficult to be sure of the chronological order of chapters and verses of the Qur'ān, a general division into periods is possible without claim, of course, for chapters so divided to be in any way exclusive to one period or another. We are sometimes helped in this by *Ḥadīth* describing the circumstances of the revelation of a particular verse or a group of verses, but often we have to rely upon the content, i.e., the subject matter or the style and choice of words. There is, of course, the broad division which puts the long Madanī chapters in the beginning of the Qur'ān and the short early Meccan ones at the end, most of the rest being either Madanī or middle and late Meccan. For the purpose of our enquiry, this will have to do.

We begin our enquiry by looking into chapters from *al-Muzammil* (LXXIII) onward, most of which are early Meccan except for *al-Bayyinah* (XCVIII) and *al-Naṣr* (CX). In these chapters we clearly find a gradual development of the terms used

for following the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad and ultimately of the term used as nomenclature for his followers. Note these expressions :

- (١) فذِّكَّرَ ان نَعْتِ الذِّكْرَى - سَيِّدٌ كَرَمٌ يَخْشَى وَيَتَجَنَّبُهَا الْاَشْقَى الَّذِي يَصَلِي النَّارَ الْكَبْرَى..... قد افلح من تزكى و ذكر اسم ربه فصلّى  
(LXXXVII: 9-15)
- (٢) قد افلح من زكها وقد خاب من دساها (XCI: 9-10)
- (٣) فاما من اعطى واتقى و صدق بالحسنى فسنيسره لليسرى و اما من بخل واستغنى و كذب بالحسنى فسنيسره للعسرى..... فانذرتكم نارا تلظى لا يصلها الا الاشقى الذى كذب وتولى - وسيجنبها الاتقى الذى يؤتى ماله يتزكى (XCII: 5-18)
- (٤) رأيت الذى ينهى عبداً اذا صلى، رأيت ان كان على الهدى او امر بالتقوى (XCVI: 9-12)
- (٥) عيس وتولى ان جاءه الاعمى و ما يدريك لعله يزكى او يذكر فتنفعه الذكري (LXXX: 1-4)

The above verses describe the nature of change in a person, in his attitude and conduct, when he has listened to the Prophet Muḥammad and followed his teachings. Phenomena or the essence of phenomena of this tremendous change and the moving experience in his followers is given no particular name. *Dhikrā* and *hudā* stand out as summing up the basic element in revelation (God's communication to man). *Taşdīq* is the human response followed by *tadhakkur* and *tazakkī* describing their inner experience. 'Aṭā', *taqwā* and *ṣalāh* could be described as the visible phenomena accompanying the inner experience. In this period the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad are spoken of as طائفة من الذين معك (LXXIII: 20), المتقين (LXXVII: 41), الابرار (LXXXII: 13) and عباد الله (LXXVI: 6). But soon afterwards a new expression is introduced. At this stage of our knowledge of the chronological order of the verses of the Qur'ān it seems nearly impossible to know the exact verse where *āmana* or *mu'min* was used for the first time, but the following verses are most probably among the early ones :

- (١) ان الذين اجرموا كانوا من الذين آمنوا يضحكون.... فاليوم الذين آمنوا من الكفار يضحكون (LXXXIII: 29 and 34)

(٢) فما لهم لا يؤمنون... فبشرهم بعذاب اليم الا الذين آمنوا وعملوا الصلحت

لهم اجر غير ممنون (LXXXIV : 20-25)

(٣) قتل اصحاب الاخدود النار ذات الوقود اذ هم عليها قعود وهم على ما

يفعلون بالمؤمنين شهود ، وما نقموا منهم الا ان يؤمنوا بالله العزيز الحميد

ان الذين فتنوا المؤمنين والمؤمنات ثم لم يتوبوا فلهم عذاب جهنم ولهم

عذاب الحريق ، ان الذين آمنوا وعملوا الصلحت لهم جنت تجري من

تحتها الانهر ذلك الفوز الكبير (LXXXV : 4-11)

Here in these verses we experience no difficulty in understanding who are the people meant by *الذين آمنوا* and *المؤمنون* and *المؤمنات*. There is not the slightest doubt that these words refer to the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad. But the expression is new, there being no background to its usage in this or a similar sense in the pre-Islamic Arabic language. The only authenticated pre-Islamic usage of *āmana* is in the sense of giving protection. When, therefore, the theologians of the 2nd and 3rd centuries and the lexicographers later on tell us that *āmana* literally means *taṣḍīq*, they in fact are telling us what became the literal meaning of *āmana* under the impact of its characteristic usage in the Qur'ān. *Lisān al-'Arab* quotes no example from the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry to corroborate that *al-īmān* is *taṣḍīq*. So the case is not that *āmana* was previously used to mean *ṣaddaqa* therefore it means *ṣaddaqa* in the Qur'ān also. Rather it would have been truer to say that it seemed to us that the Qur'ān meant *ṣaddaqa* when it said *āmana* and hence it has also become the normal usage of the word. But by putting it the other way, in identifying *āmana* with *ṣaddaqa* on the presumed basis of a pre-Qur'ānic usage, a limitation has been placed on its meaning in the Qur'ān. The meaning of the word *āmana* as *ṣaddaqa* has, to say the least, been fixed on a wrong basis. The meaning of *āmana* in the Qur'ān should, indeed, be sought in the Qur'ān itself, in its characteristic usage in a variety of places expressing a complex of ideas. The richness of its meaning may be seen in that it now (in these latter verses) alone stood to say what was previously expressed by a variety of words noted in the first group of verses quoted above. The underlying vision where the veil of *kufṛ* has been removed, the receptive mind to the Divine truth is washed clean of distorting impurities (i.e. *التذكر والتزكي*), the

accompanying experience gained in the realization of the one and only relationship between man and God that of *'abadīyah* and its manifestation in *al-zakāh*, *al-ṣalāh*, *dhikr Allāh*, *al-taqwā*, and *al-birr*—all these constitute the meaning of *īmān* when the Qur'ān says قد افلح المؤمنون (XXIII: 1). The *Ḥadīth* such as النفاة من الايمان and الزانى لا يزنى و هو مؤمن etc., can only be understood in the light of a comprehensive meaning of *īmān* suggested above.

While this comprehensive meaning continued to be associated with this word, it, in the remainder of the period of revelation, develops two more specific meanings already implicit in the earlier more comprehensive meaning. One is *taṣdīq* i.e., belief, the inner experience of energy-liberating and vitalizing cognition of truth and being receptive to God's will. Wherever this meaning is intended آمنوا is almost always followed by عملوا الصلحت. One wonders if *īmān* there only means *taṣdīq*. As a matter of fact, it is this separate mention of عملوا الصلحت that appears to reduce the meaning of *īmān* in those verses to belief only. In the light of these verses *al-'amal al-ṣāliḥ* would be the outward expression of *al-īmān* or better still its visible aspect, which the Qur'ān wished to emphasize by isolating it from *al-īmān*.

The other specific usage of some of the derivatives of *āmana* is as a nomenclature for the followers of Muḥammad, developing its significance as a term out of its usage as a brief description for their total experience and the ensuing distinct personality and identity. Henceforth *āmana* meant to follow Muḥammad and enter that experience. The word began to be used to express one's will to do so. The verse قالت الاعراب آمنا (XLIX: 14) is a clear proof that this was the custom. The Qur'ān thus uses the words المؤمنون and المؤمنات, and الذين آمنوا as names for those who have expressed their will to follow Muḥammad. And, as if to remind them of the full import of *īmān* the Qur'ān sometimes details its meaning such as in :

(١) يا ايها الذين آمنوا اركعوا واسجدوا واعبدوا ربكم وافعلوا الخير لعلكم تفلحون (XXII: 77)

(٢) قد افلح المؤمنون الذين هم في صلواتهم خاشعون والذين هم عن اللغو

معرضون ، والذين هم للزكوة فاعلون (XXIII: 1-4)

These words, therefore, throughout the Qur'ān mean the followers of Muḥammad with ideals and identity of their own as distinct from other communities such as Jewish and Christian.

This is brought into clear relief in the chapter *al-Mā'idah* (V) where the Qur'ān repeatedly addresses the believers by the phrase *يا أيها الذين آمنوا*. Probably the most indicative in this regard are the verses where *الذين آمنوا* is used for followers of Muḥammad in contradistinction to Jews and Christians such as in :

ان الذين آمنوا والذين هادوا والصابئون والنصارى من آمن بالله واليوم الآخر  
و عمل صالحاً فلا خوف عليهم ولا هم يحزنون (V : 69)

*Islām* is different from *īmān* first of all in that it had a basic secular meaning in Arabic before its usage in the Qur'ān. Though there is no evidence of the occurrence of the 4th form in pre-Islamic poetry, other forms do occur. But as the word is sometimes used in the Qur'ān in what may be regarded its basic meaning of surrender and submission, (XXVII : 31), it may be presumed to be a continuation of its pre-Qur'ānic usage or at least incorporating the essential idea of the root word *s.l.m.* which also means submission. The point being made here is that whereas *īmān* derives its meaning almost exclusively from its usage in the Qur'ān, it is not so in the case of *islām*. A certain basic meaning (surrender of price, goods, self when defeated) continues and, therefore, its religious meaning in the Qur'ān must, at least initially, be related to its basic meaning. It is, of course, always possible for a word, through long process of change and development and through association of ideas taking it from one step to another, to come to mean something seemingly entirely unrelated to the original meaning, but this does not seem to have happened to *aslama*.

It is significant that *aslama* and its derivatives do not occur in the Qur'ān till the second half of the Meccan period at a time when persecution was at its worst. The forces in the hands of pagan Quraysh were being applied with full vigour against the followers of Muḥammad. When it became unbearable, some migrated but not everyone was in a position to do so. It was a matter of life and death. Torn between the call of God and oppressive might of Satan the followers of Muḥammad had to choose between an obedient response to the call of God or defeat and surrender to the fires of persecution. Therefore, their continuance in the path they had chosen confirmed that they had fully surrendered themselves to God. The *mu'minūn* therefore were *muslimūn*. The believers following previous prophets had similarly had to make their choice and were *muslimūn*. The pro-

phets were *muslimūn* also.

Here Qur'ān is introducing a new insight into the nature and history of religion. The Qur'ān shows that the essence of religious experience is man's submission to the call of God. That is the gist of what the prophets always taught. History of Religion is epitomized when the Qur'ān says, speaking of Abraham :

اذ قال له ربه اسلم قال اسلمت لرب العلمين، ووصى بها ابراهيم بنيه و يعقوب

يُنِيَّ اِنَّ الله اصطفى لكم الدين فلا تموتنَّ الا و اتم مسلمون (II : 131-32)

The religion is one and that is *Islām*. There cannot be any other. Without *Islām* any so-called religion would fail to be a religion. Religion is a form through which man relates himself to God. For as long as God is God and man is man, the relationship basically must remain the same. Each thing has a specific nature and its acts are expressions of that nature. Human acts are expressions of human nature. The highest act is self-cognition, the knowledge of the Divine in man, and uninhibited surrender to it. It is not a single act. It is a life-long experience in the manner of journey to destiny. The fulfilment takes place in accelerated momentum. Judaism and Christianity are phases in the history of *Islām*, its temporal expressions. These are forms that have, perhaps, become petrified and distorted in the course of history. But they are basically forms of *Islām* nevertheless. It is on this basis that the Qur'ān says, addressing the People of the Book :

قل يا اهل الكتاب تعالوا الى كلمة سواء بيننا و بينكم الا نعبد الا الله ولا نشرك

به شيئاً (III : 64) and ان الذين آمنوا والذين هادوا والصابئون والنصارى

من آمن بالله واليوم الاخر وعمل صالحاً فلا خوف عليهم ولا هم يحزنون (V : 69)

But it must also be added that in the revelation of the Qur'ān through Muḥammad, *Islām* comes out in the clearest and most perfect expression and when this has been achieved, the religion is complete. Man ('*abd*') now knows his way (*islām*) to God, his *Rabb*. This is the meaning of the verse :

اليوم اكملت لكم دينكم و اتممت عليكم نعمتى و رضيت لكم الاسلام ديناً (V : 3)

**Conclusion:** *Al-Islām* is not mere outward conformity, nor is it inferior to *al-īmān*. اسلمنا in the oft quoted verse XLIX : 14 is used in its literal sense—a military surrender which historically it was, and should not affect the general concept of Islam in the Qur'ān. *Islām* is the essence of the teaching of all the prophets ;

the Qur'ān draws attention to this common element in all religions and shows it to be the true way—the only way. *Muslim* is a word of universal application for all those who find *al-islām* as the essence of their religious experience. A *mu'min* (i.e., follower of Muḥammad) is a Muslim because *al-islām* is his religion, but he walks in this path as a *mu'min*, that is, in the light of the example of Muḥammad and the teaching of the Qur'ān, all of which are part of his total religious experience. But not every Muslim is a *mu'min* since Muslim is applicable to the followers of the previous prophets also whether before or after the revelation of the Qur'ān. Islam is not a *mu'min's* exclusive possession but he knows it, while others do not know it fully. This fact makes him its champion and guardian.

## NOTES

1. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Bazdawī, *Kitāb Uṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. Hans Peter Linss, Cairo, 1963, 145-51.
2. *Al-Rasā'il al-Sab'ah fi 'l-'Aqā'id*, Hyderabad (Dn), 1948, 59-60.
3. *Ibid.*, 60.
4. *Ibid.*, 7. The treatise is published as a part of *Al-Rasā'il al-Sab'ah*, *op. cit.*
5. Al-Bazdawī, *op. cit.*, 154.
6. Al-Shahristānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa 'l-Niḥal*, ed. Muḥammad b. Faṭḥ Allāh Badrān, Cairo, 1910, I : 53. The text of the *ḥadīth* is as follows :  
 جاء (جبرئيل عليه السلام) على صورة اعرابي و جلس حتى الصق ركبته بركبة  
 النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم وقال يا رسول الله : ما الاسلام ؟ فقال : ان تشهد ان  
 لا اله الا الله و انى رسول الله و أن تقم الصلاة و تؤتي الزكاة و تصوم شهر رمضان  
 و تحج البيت ان استطعت اليه سبيلا ، قال صدقت ثم قال : ما الايمان ؟ قال  
 عليه السلام : أن تؤمن بالله و ملائكته و كتبه و رسله و اليوم الاخر و ان تؤمن  
 بالقدر خيره و شره ، قال صدقت ، ثم قال ما الاحسان ؟ قال عليه السلام : ان  
 تعبد الله كأنك تراه فان لم تكن تراه فانه يراك . . . الخ
7. Al-Shahristānī, *op. cit.*, I : 53-54.
8. The name of the well-known religio-political party of the U.A.R.