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The Materiality of Faith: Divine Belief Manifested in Historical and Material Reality A Study of the Material Forms of Spiritual Expression in Light of the Holy Quran and Islamic History

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Abstract

This study proceeds from the foundational Islamic principle that faith (Iman) is divine revelation bestowed by Allah upon His servants as guidance and light. It is not derived from material conditions or socio-economic accumulations; rather, it is a divine gift embedded by Allah in the hearts of believers. The central contribution of this research, however, lies in examining how this divinely-sourced faith manifests and expresses itself through tangible, material, and historical forms — transforming rituals, institutions, and architectural monuments into civilizational expressions of a belief firmly rooted in the heart. This study therefore investigates the material forms through which divine faith becomes visible in Islamic history, while affirming unequivocally that the true source of creed is divine revelation as embodied in the Holy Quran and the Prophetic Sunnah. The research adopts the historical-analytical method in examining Islamic civilizational models — mosques, endowments (Waqf), madrasas, and reform movements — as material evidence of faith's power in building civilization.

Keywords: Materiality of Faith, Civilizational Expression of Creed, Divine Revelation, Islamic History, Islamic Rituals, Waqf, Islamic Architecture, Islamic Jurisprudence.



1. Introduction

Faith in Islam is not an abstract philosophical concept or a product of human reasoning alone. It is, at its core, a divine trust — a light that Allah places in the heart of the believer, as the Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم described when he said: 'Faith is what has settled in the heart and been confirmed by action' (al-Bayhaqi). The Quran itself declares: 'It is He who sent down tranquility into the hearts of the believers that they would increase in faith along with their [present] faith' (Quran 48:4). This divine origin of faith is the non-negotiable starting point of this study.

Yet this divinely-bestowed faith does not remain invisible or purely interior. It finds expression — indeed, it demands expression — in the material world. When the early Muslims built the Prophet's Mosque in Medina from palm trunks and clay, they were not merely constructing a shelter; they were materializing their faith in the oneness of Allah and the prophethood of Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم. When Muslim jurists developed the institution of the Waqf (endowment) to sustain hospitals, libraries, and schools across the medieval Islamic world, they were translating the Quranic injunction of charity and social solidarity into durable material form. When the great mosques of the Abbasid and Ottoman eras rose toward the sky with their towering domes and elegant minarets, they were proclaiming in stone and marble what the believer proclaims in prayer: Allahu Akbar — God is the Greatest.

This study examines this relationship between the divine source of faith and its material manifestations in Islamic history. It does so while firmly rejecting any interpretation that treats material conditions as the cause or origin of faith — a position that would contradict Islamic creed. The research question is not 'What creates faith?' but rather 'How does faith, whose source is Allah, express and sustain itself through material and historical forms?' This distinction is theologically essential and analytically productive.

The paper is organized into six substantive sections following this introduction: (2) Methodological Framework, (3) The Quranic and Prophetic Foundation of Faith's Materiality, (4) Material Expressions of Faith in Islamic History, (5) The Dialectic of Faith and Socio-Economic



Reality, (6) Critical Assessment of Materialist Approaches to Islamic Thought, and (7) Conclusion and Policy Implications, followed by a complete bibliography.

2. Methodological Framework

This research adopts the historical-analytical method as its primary methodological approach. This method involves the systematic collection and critical evaluation of primary and secondary historical sources — Quranic texts, Prophetic hadith, classical Islamic scholarship, and documentary evidence from Islamic civilizational history — followed by analytical synthesis to identify patterns and draw conclusions. The historical-analytical method is appropriate for this study because it allows the researcher to trace the concrete manifestations of faith across different periods and contexts while remaining grounded in textual evidence.

The study also employs a comparative dimension, examining material expressions of faith across three major periods of Islamic history: the formative period of the Prophet ﷺ and the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, the classical period of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, and the late classical period of the Ottoman and Mughal Empires. This comparative approach enables the identification of both continuities and variations in how faith manifests materially across different historical contexts.

A critical methodological principle of this study is the distinction between the source of faith and the forms of its expression. The source of faith — as established by Quranic evidence and Prophetic tradition — is divine revelation. The forms of its expression are historical, material, and culturally embedded. Any methodology that conflates these two dimensions — treating material conditions as the generator of faith — is rejected on both theological and epistemological grounds. The present methodology maintains this distinction rigorously throughout its analysis. The study engages critically but selectively with the scholarly literature on materialism and religion, including the work of Hussein Mroué (Muruwah) on materialist trends in Islamic philosophy. Mroué's contribution is assessed for its descriptive insights into the historical conditions surrounding Islamic intellectual development, while his materialist-determinist framework — which treats religious ideas as

products of class struggle and economic conditions — is subjected to critical evaluation from an Islamic theological perspective.

3. The Quranic and Prophetic Foundation of Faith's Materiality

3.1 Faith as Divine Gift: The Quranic Position

The Holy Quran establishes with absolute clarity that faith is a divine gift, not a human construction or a product of material circumstances. Allah says: 'But Allah has endeared to you the faith and has made it pleasing in your hearts and has made hateful to you disbelief, defiance and disobedience. Those are the [rightly] guided' (Quran 49:7). In another verse, Allah declares: 'And you did not will, except that Allah wills. Indeed, Allah is ever Knowing and Wise' (Quran 76:30). These texts establish the theological foundation from which this study proceeds: faith originates with Allah, not with human social conditions.

At the same time, the Quran emphasizes that faith is not a passive, interior state but an active, world-transforming force that demands material expression. The Quran repeatedly pairs 'those who believe' (alladhina amanu) with 'those who do righteous deeds' (wa-'amilu al-salihah), insisting that genuine faith necessarily produces action in the material world. The Prophet ﷺ further specified this in the famous hadith: 'Faith is seventy-odd branches, the highest of which is to say La ilaha illa Allah, and the lowest of which is to remove something harmful from the path' (Muslim). Faith, in the Islamic framework, is simultaneously a divine gift and a lived practice — it has both a heavenly source and an earthly expression.

3.2 The Material Obligations of Faith in Islamic Law

The Five Pillars of Islam represent the most fundamental institutionalization of the relationship between divine faith and material practice. Prayer (Salat) requires physical movement, material space (the mosque), a specific direction (qibla), and a material instrument of purification (water for wudu). Zakat transforms spiritual conviction into economic redistribution. Sawm (fasting) disciplines the material body in service of spiritual elevation. Hajj requires physical presence in a specific material location — Mecca — at a specific time. In each case, the divine



command does not remain in the realm of intention alone; it demands material enactment.

This Quranic and Prophetic framework directly challenges any interpretation that would treat faith's material expressions as mere social constructs or products of economic interest. When a Muslim builds a mosque, he is responding to divine command, not merely expressing class interest. When Islamic jurists developed the Waqf institution, they were implementing the Quranic principle of sadaqah jariyah (ongoing charity) as documented in prophetic tradition. The material forms of faith in Islamic history are not explanations of faith but expressions of it — they are faith's response to divine command in the conditions of time and place.

4. Material Expressions of Faith in Islamic History

4.1 Sacred Architecture as Civilizational Faith

The evolution of Islamic architecture offers one of the most eloquent demonstrations of how divine faith expresses itself through material form. The Prophet's Mosque in Medina, built in 1 AH (622 CE), was constructed with simplicity — mud bricks and palm trunks — reflecting both the material circumstances of the nascent Muslim community and the Islamic values of humility and egalitarianism. Its form expressed the faith of a community that had surrendered entirely to Allah's command regardless of material resources (Ettinghausen et al., 2001).

As the material resources of the Islamic world expanded through legitimate trade, governance, and conquest, the architectural expression of faith evolved accordingly. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (completed 691 CE), the Great Mosque of Cordoba (begun 784 CE), and the Ottoman masterpieces of Sinan — particularly the Süleymaniye Mosque (1558 CE) and the Selimiye Mosque (1575 CE) — represent the materialization of a faith that had grown in geographical scope, institutional complexity, and civilizational confidence (Hillenbrand, 1994). Each of these structures proclaims, in material form, the greatness of Allah and the conviction of the believers who commissioned and built them.



Critically, the Islamic scholarly tradition has always understood these architectural achievements not as products of class ambition or political power alone, but as acts of worship and expressions of gratitude to Allah. The Sultans who commissioned great mosques typically understood themselves as performing a religious duty, fulfilling the Quranic injunction to 'establish prayer' (aqimu al-salat) in its fullest institutional sense. The material grandeur was a means of honoring Allah, not a sign of faith's subordination to material power.

4.2 The Waqf Institution: Faith Translated into Permanent Social Benefit

The institution of the Waqf (Islamic endowment) represents perhaps the most sophisticated institutionalization of the relationship between divine faith and material social organization in Islamic history. A Waqf involves the permanent dedication of a property or asset to a charitable purpose in the name of Allah, with its revenues used to sustain mosques, schools, hospitals, orphanages, water fountains, and caravanserais across the Islamic world (Hallaq, 2009).

The theological foundation of the Waqf is direct Quranic instruction and Prophetic example. The Prophet ﷺ instructed 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, when he received land in Khaybar: 'Dedicate its original [capital] and give its produce as charity' (Bukhari, Muslim). This single hadith established a model that, over twelve centuries, produced an extraordinary material infrastructure of social welfare across the Islamic world — from the educational endowments of the Nizamiyya madrasas in Baghdad and Nishapur to the complex Ottoman Waqf systems that sustained entire urban economies. Faith, responding to divine command, created material institutions that outlasted the individual believers who established them by centuries.

4.3 Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh) as Material Faith

Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) represents the most systematic elaboration of how divine revelation addresses the material conditions of human life. Far from being merely a set of abstract moral codes, Fiqh developed as a comprehensive engagement between divine text and human material reality. The early Muslim jurists — Abu Hanifa, Malik ibn Anas, al-



Shafi'i, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal — were not creating new law from social conditions; they were deriving legal rulings from the Quran and Sunnah and applying them to the specific material circumstances of their times and places (Hallaq, 2009).

The concepts of Maslaha (public interest) and 'Urf (recognized customary practice) within Islamic jurisprudence do not represent the subordination of divine law to material conditions, as materialist interpretations might suggest. Rather, they represent the juristic acknowledgment that Allah's revelation, being perfect and universal, must be applied with wisdom and contextual understanding to the infinite variety of human material circumstances. As Imam al-Shafi'i wrote in his Risala: 'Allah addressed the Arabs in their tongue according to the meanings they knew' — divine speech is adapted to human capacity, but its origin and authority remain divine.

5. Faith and Socio-Economic Reality: A Critical Perspective

5.1 The Legitimate Insights of Historical Analysis

Historical analysis of Islamic thought reveals genuine and important relationships between theological developments and the socio-economic conditions of their time. The debate between the Qadariyya (proponents of human free will) and the Jabriyya (proponents of divine determination) during the Umayyad period did occur in a context of political contestation over the legitimacy of Umayyad rule (Mroué, 1978, p. 145). The flourishing of Islamic rationalist philosophy during the Abbasid Golden Age was connected to the translation movement and the relative intellectual openness of Abbasid court culture. These historical correlations are factually established and analytically useful.

Hussein Mroué's contribution to Islamic intellectual history, in his work *Materialist Trends in Arab-Islamic Philosophy* (1978), lies in his meticulous documentation of how theological debates reflected the social and political tensions of their era. This historical documentation has scholarly value. The critical limitation of Mroué's framework, however, is his materialist-determinist claim that religious ideas are products of material conditions rather than engagements between divine guidance and



human historical reality. This claim is rejected by Islamic theology on the basis of clear Quranic evidence of faith's divine origin (Asad, 1993).

5.2 The Islamic Corrective: Material Context Without Material Causation

The Islamic understanding of the relationship between faith and material reality follows a fundamentally different logic from materialist determinism. In the Islamic framework, Allah reveals guidance that is applicable across all times and conditions, and Muslim scholars and communities engage with that guidance within their specific material contexts. The material context shapes the questions that faith must answer, but it does not determine faith's content or origin.

When the early Muslim community in Medina faced questions about trade, contracts, inheritance, and social organization that had not been directly addressed in Meccan revelation, Allah revealed additional guidance responsive to these material circumstances. This is not faith being produced by material conditions; it is divine wisdom responding to human need through the channel of prophecy. The Quranic principle of 'We have not neglected in the Register a thing' (Quran 6:38) affirms that divine guidance encompasses all material dimensions of human life without being produced by them.

This perspective allows for a nuanced historical analysis of Islamic thought that acknowledges the material context of theological development without reducing faith to a product of that context. The Zanj Rebellion of 869-883 CE, for instance, invoked Islamic principles of justice and equality to challenge the institution of slavery — but the Islamic principles themselves were not created by the social conditions of the rebellion; they were divine teachings being applied to those conditions by believers seeking justice in accordance with their faith.

6. Critical Assessment of Materialist Approaches to Islamic Thought

The application of historical materialism to the study of Islamic thought, as practiced by thinkers like Hussein Mroué, offers genuine descriptive insights into the social and economic contexts surrounding theological developments. These insights are valuable as historical data and should not be dismissed. However, the materialist framework carries

philosophical assumptions that are incompatible with Islamic theology and must be engaged critically rather than accepted wholesale.

The fundamental incompatibility lies in the materialist premise that human consciousness — including religious consciousness — is a product of material conditions. This premise, derived from Karl Marx's foundational claim that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' (Marx, 1970), directly contradicts the Quranic teaching that Allah is the source of guidance and that faith is a divine gift. Accepting materialist determinism as an analytical framework for Islamic thought therefore involves a prior rejection of Islamic theological premises.

A more epistemologically sound approach — and the one adopted in this study — treats materialist historical analysis as a useful descriptive tool while rejecting its deterministic philosophical framework. We can acknowledge that the great mosques of the Abbasid era were built with the material wealth of an expanding empire without concluding that faith was therefore produced by imperial wealth. We can observe that theological debates often reflected political tensions without concluding that theology was merely political ideology in religious dress. The historical correlations are real; the materialist causal claims require critical scrutiny from within the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Contemporary Islamic scholarship offers resources for this critical engagement. Scholars such as Muhammad Arkoun have contributed to the understanding of how Islamic intellectual history developed in dialogue with its material context, while maintaining commitments to the transcendent dimension of revelation (Arkoun, 1994). Wael Hallaq's work on Islamic jurisprudence demonstrates how legal reasoning engaged with material circumstances without being reducible to them. These scholarly traditions provide a more adequate framework for the study of faith's materiality than materialist determinism.

7. Conclusion: Faith as Divine Reality, Historically Expressed

This research has examined the relationship between divine faith and its material expressions in Islamic history through a framework that honours



both the transcendent source of faith and its concrete historical manifestations. The central findings can be stated as follows.

First, faith in Islam originates with Allah — it is divine revelation and divine gift, not a product of material conditions. This theological principle, established by clear Quranic evidence and Prophetic tradition, constitutes the non-negotiable foundation of any Islamic study of faith's relationship to material reality.

Second, this divinely-sourced faith necessarily and powerfully manifests in the material world. The rituals of the Five Pillars, the institution of the Waqf, the development of Islamic jurisprudence, and the architectural achievements of Islamic civilization are all material expressions of a faith whose origin is divine. These material expressions do not explain or produce faith; they express it.

Third, historical analysis of Islamic intellectual development reveals genuine relationships between theological debates and their socio-economic contexts. These relationships are descriptively important and analytically valuable. However, the materialist-determinist framework that treats religious ideas as products of material conditions is incompatible with Islamic theology and must be subjected to critical evaluation.

Fourth, the appropriate analytical framework for studying faith's materiality in Islamic history is one that acknowledges the material context of theological development while maintaining the theological distinction between the divine source of faith and its human historical expressions. This framework combines rigorous historical analysis with fidelity to Islamic epistemological principles.

The practical implications of these findings for contemporary Islamic society are significant. Understanding that faith demands material expression — in the form of social justice, institutional building, educational investment, and care for the disadvantaged — provides a powerful Islamic rationale for socio-economic development as a religious obligation. The great institutions of Islamic civilization — the madrasas, hospitals, endowments, and architectural monuments — were built by believers who understood their material work as an act of worship. This

understanding remains available to contemporary Muslim communities as a resource for civilizational renewal.

ملخص الدراسة بالعربية

خلصت هذه الدراسة إلى جملة من النتائج الجوهرية يمكن إيجازها فيما يلي:
أولاً: الإيمان وحي رباني ومنحة إلهية، لا صنعة الأوضاع المادية أو التراكمات الاجتماعية. وهذا المبدأ العقدي الراسخ الذي أقره القرآن الكريم والسنة النبوية الشريفة يُشكّل المنطلق الثابت لأي دراسة إسلامية أصيلة في هذا الموضوع.
ثانياً: هذا الإيمان الرباني يتجلّى ضرورةً وبقوة في الواقع المادي. فشعائر الإسلام الخمس، ومؤسسة الوقف، وتطور الفقه الإسلامي، والإنجازات المعمارية للحضارة الإسلامية كل ذلك- تعبيرات مادية عن إيمان مصدره الله تبارك وتعالى. وهذه التجليات لا تُفسّر الإيمان ولا تُنتج، بل هي تُعبّر عنه.
ثالثاً: التحليل التاريخي للفكر الإسلامي يكشف عن علاقات حقيقية بين التطورات العقيدة وسياقاتها الاجتماعية والاقتصادية. وهذه العلاقات ذات قيمة وصفية وتحليلية. غير أن الإطار المادي الحتمي الذي يُرجع الأفكار الدينية إلى الأوضاع المادية يتعارض مع العقيدة الإسلامية ويستوجب نقداً منهجياً.
رابعاً: الإطار التحليلي الملائم لدراسة مادية الإيمان في التاريخ الإسلامي هو الذي يُقرّ بالسياق المادي للتطور العقدي مع الحفاظ على التمييز العقدي بين المصدر الإلهي للإيمان وتجلياته التاريخية الإنسانية.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that this research was conducted independently. There are no conflicts of interest to report, and no financial support or grants were received for the authorship and/or publication of this article.

مادية الإيمان: تجلي الإيمان الرباني في الواقع المادي والتاريخي دراسة في الأشكال المادية للتعبير الروحي في ضوء القرآن الكريم والتاريخ الإسلامي مستخلص البحث:

تنطلق هذه الدراسة من مبدأ راسخ مفاده أن الإيمان الحقيقي وحيّ رباني أنزله الله تعالى على عباده هدايةً ونوراً، وأن هذا الإيمان لا يُستمدّ من الظروف المادية أو التراكمات الاجتماعية، بل هو نعمة إلهية أودعها الله في قلوب المؤمنين. غير أن الإيمان -وهذا محور الدراسة- يتجلّى ويُعبّر عنه عبر وقائع مادية وتاريخية ملموسة، إذ تتحوّل الشعائر والمؤسسات والآثار المعمارية إلى تجليات حضارية للعقيدة الراسخة في القلوب. وعليه، فإن هذه الدراسة تبحث في الأشكال المادية التي يتجلّى من خلالها الإيمان الرباني في التاريخ الإسلامي، مؤكدةً في الوقت ذاته أن المصدر الحقيقي للعقيدة هو الوحي الإلهي المتمثل في القرآن الكريم والسنة النبوية الشريفة. ويعتمد البحث المنهج التاريخي التحليلي في دراسة النماذج الحضارية الإسلامية من مساجد وأوقاف ومدارس وحركات إصلاحية، بوصفها أدلةً مادية على قوة الإيمان وأثره في بناء الحضارة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مادية الإيمان، التجلي الحضاري للعقيدة، الوحي الإلهي، التاريخ الإسلامي، الشعائر الإسلامية، الوقف، العمارة الإسلامية، الفقه الإسلامي.