

Faith and Hope

An interview with Abdol Karim Soroush

Q. The subject of our discussion is « religious faith ». If I may, I'd like to begin by asking you, what's your understanding and definition of religious faith? If we take religion to be composed of the three elements of religious experiences, religious beliefs and religious practices, what's the relationship between religious faith and these three elements?

A. Religious faith, as I understand it, consists of believing in and becoming attached to someone, as well as trusting them, thinking well of them and loving them. In saying this, I've mainly defined faith in God, because God is the central axis of monotheistic belief systems. Faith cannot be equated with belief per se; not every instance of belief - even dogmatic belief - can be seen as an instance of faith, because in faith you not only have belief, but you also have trust, commitment, devotion, love, humility and submissiveness. We have many beliefs which, while being matters of total conviction, are not described as matters of faith. For example, on the basis of our religious teachings, we have total conviction in the existence of Satan. But we certainly do not have faith in Satan, because we do not consider him worthy of our trust, we do not become devoted to him and we see no virtue in him.

The same can be said of everything that falls under the rubric of science and philosophy. It would be difficult to say that philosophers have faith in the veracity of existence or in the principle of causality. Or that scientists have faith in atomic theory. The reason for this does not lie in any lack of certainty or conviction in these ideas; it is just that other requirements and conditions must be met, alongside belief, for us to be able to use the word « faith » in any meaningful sense.

When religious faith - in the sense and with the conditions I have set out here - comes about in someone's mind or heart, there's a complete transformation in their entire existence. This transformation in one's very being is different from any transformation that

may occur simply in one's mind. A believer hands over their entire being to their faith. And, as certain philosophers have said, faith gives a person a whole new life; it doesn't just plant a new piece of data in their minds. This devout existence is the very opposite of an irreligious existence. An irreligious being is essentially bent on rejection, disobedience and denial, whereas a devout being is brimming with humility and surrender. If we turn to religious texts, we find evidence corroborating this interpretation. There is a verse in the Koran, for example, that states: « For, believers are those who, when Allah is mentioned, feel a tremor in their hearts, and when they hear His Signs rehearsed, find their faith strengthened, and put all their trust in their Lord. » (Anfal, 2) The tremor in the heart is a sign of humility and surrender, and it is an indication of the relationship of love and submissiveness between the believer and the object of faith. It is also clear that trust is one of the other attributes of the believer and, without entrusting oneself, a believer's faith is incomplete, such that the ingredient of trust in the definition of faith must be seen as an analytical ingredient, not as a necessary or accidental descriptive one. Or take the following verse: « Only those believe in Our Signs who, when they are recited to them, fall down in adoration, and celebrate the praises of their Lord, nor are they ever puffed up with pride. Their limbs do forsake their beds of sleep, the while they call on their Lord in Fear and Hope.... » (Sajda, 15 and 16) Here, falling down in adoration, humility, hope and trust have been depicted as indications of faith.

Faith, as I have described it, admits of degree, just as love can grow and grow and just as trust and commitment and devotion may abate or intensify. The discovery of the object of faith's merits and goodness and beauty and majesty is a gradual process and can, therefore, strengthen a person's faith. In this way, the believer may grow more robust or more lean in terms of faith, just as an irreligious person can be afflicted with corpulence or leanness.

I have deliberately not referred to certitude or unquestioning belief, because including certitude in the definition of faith is problematic and suspect. Some Muslim thinkers have defined faith as dogmatic and unquestioning belief. And when they've encountered the idea

that faith admits of degree (something that is explicitly stated in the Koran), they've run into difficulties and tried to explain it as relating to the symptoms of faith, not its essence. Of course, certitude does not admit of degree, but faith does, and this is reason to believe that faith and certitude are not one and the same. In faith, there must be a degree of conviction. As long as a person is more convinced about something or someone's existence and goodness - rather than their non-existence - and, as long as, on this basis the person takes a risk and grows fond of that being and dares to hope and, sensing a certain amount of success, finds their hope and trust and conviction fortified and embarks on even greater hopes and risks and sacrifices, this person can be described as a believer. Here, the elements of risking and hoping and entrusting oneself gain higher marks than certitude and absolute conviction.

The terms hope, doubt, longing, trust... have been used so often in the Koran in connection with faith as to lend credence to the idea that, as far as the Koran is concerned, faith is comprised of these components and ingredients. Hence certitude must move in their direction, not they in the direction of certitude. That is to say, certitude must be defined with reference to them, not they with reference to certitude.

In the history of Christianity, for its part, the role played by certainty in faith is so negative that a great thinker like Thomas Aquinas basically saw uncertainty as the very terrain and bedrock of faith. He said that, if there is indisputable evidence demonstrating the veracity of something then certitude will inevitably and passively be attained in its regard, and there'll be no room for « faith as a verb ». It is the paucity of corroborating evidence that creates space for faith and risk and hope. In Protestantism and for Luther, too, trust plays a bigger part in faith than certainty and conviction. Research by Cantwel Smith, the contemporary Canadian religious theorist, also shows that, for Christians in the early centuries, faith tended to convey a sense of trust, rather than certitude and absolute conviction. (See R. Swinburne: *Faith and Reason*; E. Gilson: *Reason & Revelation in the Middle Ages*; and the article « Renewing Faith » in A. Soroush: *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*) It should be pointed out that the argument here is that faith does not begin with

certainty and is not necessarily based on it; it is not being suggested that faith is incompatible with certainty or cannot lead to it. In brief, the fact that faith is active (as opposed to the passivity of certainty) and the fact that it admits of degree (as opposed to the immutability of certainty) means that the two move along different paths.

Q. If you agree with the division of religion into the three above-mentioned elements, what, in your view, is the relationship between faith and these three elements?

A. I believe that religious experience is both the cause of and the reason for faith. If you don't like the word experience - I've noticed that some people don't like the word « experience » used in this context - we can use the word « discovery ». In any religious experience or discovery, a being, a truth or a secret appears to the discoverer. This secret or truth is on occasion so beautiful, enchanting, glorious and majestic as to engulf the discoverer's entire being and make them fall under its spell. An occurrence of this kind produces most of the characteristics we attributed to faith, such as belief, trust, commitment, devotion, humility and submissiveness, and transforms the person into a believer. This faith is unwillful and lacks the element of risk; it only exists in the state of enchantment. When the person comes to and begins to think about the experience, then the element of risk comes into play and, in the midst of attachments and temptations, they must choose their path and rely on their experience. It is at this point that faith is born as a « verb » and it consists of a mixture of knowledge, will, love and hope.

Religious beliefs formulate religious experiences and religious discoveries into theories. In fact, the relationship between religious beliefs and religious experiences is the relationship established by philosophers between acquired knowledge and immediate knowledge. Immediate knowledge consists of naked and unmediated pieces of information which have not yet been covered up with theoretical garments. We may even describe immediate knowledge as knowledge combined with oblivion, that is to say, a kind of unconscious or oblivious knowledge. But when the mind begins to formulate things, immediate information is transformed into acquired information; in other words, those

discoveries are formulated into concepts and turned into propositions and perceptions, propositions and perceptions that are objective and public and can be presented to others and to the scientific community. These perceptions and propositions are non-personal, cultural and contemporaneous, that is to say, they are entirely in keeping with the discoverer's culture.

Religious practice, for its part, abates and intensifies along with the abatement and intensification of faith. In other words, religious faith produces the will to action. When faith is stronger, the will to action is correspondingly stronger. A number of contemporary analytical philosophers, and even some past thinkers, have considered action to be an analytic ingredient of belief, such that inaction for them implies lack of belief. This is a subject that has a long history in religious debates.

As a simple example, take Ghazzali. Ghazzali was someone whose very existence was intertwined with the fear of God. This fear was not just something that he had experienced once; it had engulfed his whole being, such that, if we were to create a category and description for Ghazzali, we would have to describe him as a fearful mystic. The fear that permeated Ghazzali's existence also dictated his actions. In the first instance, he experienced a terrifying God. Then he placed his faith in Him. And later still, he produced a theory in keeping with this fearsome God and presented it in various forms in his writings. His belief in this terrifying God also affected his deeds and, when a God of this nature had appeared to him, he abandoned the life of joy. He fled from Baghdad to Damascus and became a recluse there. Even on his return to Tous, when Sultan Sanjar and the military commanders invited him to resume his teaching post at the academy, he declined, saying he had made a pact with God and did not wish to break it. This was the nature of Ghazzali's religious experience and faith. As to the experience and faith of the Prophet, peace be upon him, it is clear for all to see. It all began in the cave of Hira and his experience in that cave became the basis of all his subsequent thoughts and deeds.

Q. It seems that, throughout history, religious experiences have always occurred against a backdrop of religious beliefs and faith. In this sense and at a

different level, does religious experience itself not follow from religious faith or religious belief? Is it possible for someone who has no religious faith or religious belief to have a religious experience?

A. Along with faith, an individual will always also acquire an image and form of the object of faith; there is no escaping this. In this sense, I agree that the two things are intertwined. Nonetheless, I don't think that they are one and the same. The substance of religious beliefs is provided by experience; its form by the culture of the age and the discoverer's imagination; and faith by will, love and hope.

Q. What I was trying to say is that it would seem that certain preconditions are needed for having a religious experience and that one of these preconditions is that a person has to have been raised in a religious tradition. Doesn't this create a situation in which you don't know which comes first, a religious belief or a religious experience?

A. There can be no doubt that religious environments are conducive and predisposed to religious experiences and beliefs, and that they give a sense and form to religious discoveries and lend them theoretical substance. There can also be no doubt that religion and religious theories have tended to be cumulative; that is to say, subsequent experiences have sat atop previous experiences, completing one another and growing, in a sense. But to suggest that the first experience must itself have come about in a religious culture, this is much more dubious. Here, cause and effect are so intertwined as to make it difficult to disentangle them. As W.T. Stace has shown in his book *Mysticism and Philosophy*, the religious experiences of mystics throughout history and within a variety of cultures have been so similar and have had so many common features as to make it possible to say that religious experiences occur independently of religious cultures. However, when they are recounted and presented to others, they are expressed in terms of the prevailing religious concepts and culture. We must not forget something that Mowlavi tells us repeatedly: in a religious experience, the person involved has a faceless experience and then they put a face on it. Hence, the naked experience is always covered up by some

garment and the garment is cut and sewn from the available material. This material varies from age to age. Hence the garment is different in every age.

Now, we might raise the question as to whether any of these faces are more in keeping with that faceless entity? Or is it the case that all faces have an equal relationship to it? This is a point that needs to be taken into account in discussing the relationship between religious experience and religious belief: can the different sacred and theological systems based on religious experience claim to be closer to that formless core or not?

Q. It would seem that a theory about faith that sees religious experience as the begetter and creator of faith must be an elitist theory. Since, if we take religious experience, in the technical sense of the word, to mean an encounter with God and if we accept that very few people have such a profound experience, we would have to conclude that many of the people who are described as believers in religious traditions actually lack faith because they've never had a religious experience.

A. I've been speaking about quintessential religious faith; faith as an ideal type or in its purest form. This was all in the nature of a proof, not a demonstration; definition, not realisation. But as you know, we rarely encounter anything in its purest form in our lives. For example, if we were to define quintessential water it would be one thing; real water, another. Quintessential water is neither hot, nor cold; neither salty, nor muddy... But the water that exists in jugs and brooks and oceans tends to have a combination of these qualities.

When we speak about faith in relation to the bulk of the people, we have in mind the affection, belief and hope that I mentioned, which can result from personal experience, inculcation, habit, education, upbringing or anything else. The fact of the matter is that religions themselves recognise and allow this kind of faith. And we certainly have no wish to disallow it. But if these faint, diluted faiths cannot draw strength from pure, concentrated faiths, they'll be unsteady and transient. Pure religious faith and experience is what prophets have. Their faith has reasons as well as causes. But the faith of the bulk of the people is

usually caused not reasoned; passive, not active; determined, not willed; unconscious, not conscious.

The faith of believers in general is mediated. That is to say, they have no direct experience of God and they are unlikely to encounter Him. But since they trust the Prophet, they find God in this way, through him. And, in the course of their lives, if some of their prayers are answered or if they have some genuine visions, their faith may become more intense; otherwise, not. This is why, in my discussions on prophethood, I've emphasised the point that, in monotheistic religions, the prophet is a key, invaluable factor. And most believers first place their faith in their prophet and find God in this way and make Him the object of their faith.

At any rate, whether it is the prophetic experience or an individual's religious experience, a necessary condition (not a sufficient condition) is the birth of a phenomenon known as faith in history and in the general culture of humanity. Then, it is necessary to have a will to action and hope, so that the leap of faith is made possible. Today, we tend to say that someone has faith if they display the general qualities and effects brought about by a faith-giving experience; qualities such as belief, humility, devotion, submissiveness, surrender, trust and the like. They cannot be said to have logical certitude, but they have faith. And their faith is acceptable to religious leaders. The fact that you see that sowing doubt is discouraged in religion and that there are even some harsh precepts against apostates and heretics shows that the Legislator knew that believers' convictions are unsteady and may be shaken; they are nonetheless described as believers, because they display trust, humility and devotion towards the object of faith, and these are qualities that follow from faith.

Q. Given the fact that new rationality is probing and critical, what's the relationship between religious faith and doubt and criticism? And what's the difference between having doubts and being a sceptic or a relativist?

A. I believe that the most important criticism that can be directed at the physiognomies that arise from religious experiences has to do with whether a physiognomy

is in keeping with the experience. This kind of criticism is, of course, different from any scientific or philosophical criticism that would concern itself with those physiognomies themselves and their relationship to one another.

This is one meaning of the veracity of religious beliefs: harmony and accord between a person's religious beliefs and the views and theories that exist in the other fields of human knowledge and discovery. The truth table approach tells us that, wherever they may be, truths must be in accord. This is one type of criticism. Hence, one of the duties of a pious person or theologian is to establish accord between their religious findings and other human findings.

Another meaning of veracity, which is « correspondence to reality », guides us towards another path to criticism. That is to say, if we believe that religious theories are, in reality, garments thrown over naked experiences, the question needs to be asked as to whether these garments are well-fitting or not? Answering this question is, in my view, extremely difficult. And this makes it all the more imperative to investigate and criticise. The person who has had the experience must constantly ask themselves: is this theoretical physiognomy in keeping with what I experienced or not? Here, the question I raised earlier comes into its own: can it be said that some of the faces we lend to a faceless entity are more appropriate to it than others? Does an utterly faceless entity not stand in exactly the same relationship to any face? If we accept that all physiognomies are equally similar or dissimilar to that faceless entity and that all theories are, in a sense, equally valid, then the way will be open to theological pluralism and pluralistic belief.

In any event, I believe that the door is never closed to the criticism of religious beliefs and experiences, and both the person who has had the experience and the people who hear and learn about it must never lay down the flag of criticism. If we accept that, at least at the level of expression and presentation, experiences always draw on the existing reservoir of perceptions and propositions, then we must constantly review, elucidate and clarify this reservoir in order to refine those faces and beliefs. Hence, the criticism of religious experiences and beliefs is always oriented towards the removal of the outer garments and

layers in order to move closer to the pure essence of religious experience and belief. Of course, this kind of criticism robs us of mundane faith. But why should we worry about that? If we come to the conclusion that faith is something that is attained gradually and that it can abate and intensify and be refined and purified, then we won't see any contradiction between the essence of faith and the examination of faith. There is no conceptual or actual incongruity between faith and belief, on the one hand, and change and criticism, on the other. What logic and definition rule out is criticism and change with respect to certitude, but certitude is not an ingredient of faith and belief.

A person who has a religious experience is a sculptor who is never satisfied with the face he sculpts. He's constantly chipping away at it, remoulding it and shaping it into a new face.

Q. Might there not be concern that, in circumstances in which we are moving ever further away in time from the Prophet's faith-giving experience, this constant process of doubt and rational criticism may pose serious threats to the very foundation of faith? From another perspective, wouldn't this constant probing and criticism disturb the believer's mental and psychological stability and calm? In fact, we seem to be facing conditions in which having faith and remaining a believer are increasingly difficult.

A. In the article « Types of Religiosity », published in *Kiyān* (No 50), I was in fact trying to answer these types of questions. The truth of the matter is, we have to differentiate between different kinds of religiosity. In the faith of the bulk of the people, there's no place for whys and wherefores. This kind of faith will become more fragile if subjected to questions and criticism and will ultimately fall into decline. This is why, in the realm of collective religiosity, religion turns into a half-congealed, half-dogmatic ritual. Throughout the course of history, the general mass of believers have followed this kind of religion and faith. But we have two other types of religiosity as well: gnostic religiosity and experiential religiosity. Gnostic religiosity basically came into being through questioning and it thrives on questioning. Pragmatic (or utilitarian) religiosity did not come into being on the basis of

questioning, but on the basis of imitation, so it thrives on imitation and its survival depends on imitation. If ever confronted with questioning and criticism, it would melt like snow. But how can gnostic religiosity ever call a halt to questioning given that it was founded on this very basis? No-one can claim that there is only one type of religiosity: the imitative, pragmatic, ritualistic, mythical religiosity of the general masses. We must also accord official recognition to gnostic religiosity. On the testimony of history and the testimony of the field of theology (which has consistently existed among the followers of all religions), as well as on the testimony of the human mind (which is essentially given to rationality and inquiry and cannot be banned from posing questions), gnostic religiosity has existed and will continue to exist. Hence, if we accept that there is a type of religiosity that begins with criticism and questions, we cannot construct a barrier halfway down its path and ask the gnostic believer to proceed no further. We therefore have to recognise that there is also a probing type of faith as well as an imitative type. This probing faith will find and has found its own way. We've had many examples of theologians, scholars and philosophers who, while persisting in their faith, were engaged in a permanent process of refining their beliefs and looking for possible errors. And, although there were times when they experienced serious misgivings and doubts, since these misgivings arose from faith, we see this as the virtue of faith.

Q. If these misgivings arise, can the believer still maintain their trust, commitment and devotion?

A. The individual is terrified by such misgivings because they're afraid of losing their trust, commitment and devotion. Hence these fears and concerns are the fears and concerns of the faithful. It's like a problem arising between you and your friend. When this happens, you can do one of two things: one, you can use it as an excuse to break off your friendship; two, you can use it as an excuse to ensure that you don't lose them and do your utmost to preserve the friendship. In exactly the same way, as long as the urge to preserve faith, commitment and trust is there, it has to be seen as a misgiving within faith, a misgiving which implies no lack of faith, which is, on the contrary, identical to faith and an example of the risk of faith. As Mowlana put it: « I tremble over my faith like a mother over her child. »

In this light, the weakness and strength that the person experiences along this path are a weakness and strength that is intrinsic to the game of faith. It is like a battle in which you occasionally advance and you occasionally retreat; but all this advancing and retreating amounts to the same thing: fighting and overpowering the enemy. You will also find this in experiential religiosity where mystics have spoken repeatedly and in different terms about the contractions and expansions they've experienced. At times the Beloved was hidden to the mystic and, at times, the Beloved appeared to them. Sometimes their nights were as bright as days; at other times, their days as dark as nights. But, despite all these trials and tribulations, they remained true to their faith and were people of faith.

Of course, if the foundations of faith collapse altogether, faith will become impossible. Faith demands a minimum of conviction and trust. This is generally and conditionally true. For any faith, some particular rule applies, which must be met and cannot be foregone.

I have to repeat that faith is not something that admits of no weakness or strength, that never trembles or even upends. All these conditions are permissible within faith (by its very nature), and so much the more so for the actually existing faiths that are like muddy waters susceptible to a variety of symptoms. God Himself reveals in the Koran the tremors that some believers undergo: « In that situation, where the believers tried: they were shaken as by a tremendous shaking. » (Ahzab, 11) In any great trial or test, there's always severe tremors and turbulence. Like autumn winds, this turbulence tears some leaves off the tree and leaves some behind. This is in the nature of a leaf: it is clinging to the tree by a thin thread. A storm may on occasion uproot the tree itself; what, then, can you expect of a poor leaf?

Q. As you know, rational divinities have faced serious and profound crises over the past few centuries. That is to say, arguments demonstrating the existence of God have been subjected to serious attacks, and strong arguments, such as « the problem of evil », have been reformulated and used to criticise religious beliefs. At the same time, it has become entirely possible to present mechanical explanations devoid of the assumption of God. Can these developments be seen as serious events

in the history of religious faith? What qualitative and quantitative impact have these developments had on religious faith? And has the « will to faith » not been weakened by all this?

A. The events you enumerated have principally occurred in the realm of gnostic religiosity. It was not without reason that people like Ghazzali were so hostile to the field of theology and that Mowlana believed that « the leg of the syllogists is of wood », that they made the path to guidance more onerous and that doubt was inherent to philosophical faith. Again it was not without reason that some people saw the growth of the field of theology as a sign of the weakness of faith. They'd condescendingly tell theologians that when a person turns from experience to theory, it shows that the fire of experience has cooled; that it amounts to leaving the orbit of faith and busying oneself with the consequences, effects and secondary aspects of faith instead.

At any rate, this is nothing new and we have seen it occur in the history of every religion. And, first, it has to be said that, by its nature, it belongs to the realm of gnostic religiosity. All the same, as philosophers have always said, disproving the reason doesn't disprove the contention. In other words, if you disprove the reasons for the existence of something, you cannot conclude that that thing doesn't exist. Even if we disprove all the reasons for the existence of God, it doesn't mean that God doesn't exist. It only means that we have no reasons for His existence. This is why, both for pragmatic and experiential believers, disproving the reasons for the existence of God doesn't undermine their faith. They didn't obtain their faith through reasoning so it isn't shaken if the reasons are disproved.

However, there's no denying that gnostic religiosity does rest on this basis. When someone enters the arena of criticism and opinion, then they'll be buffeted by strong storms. And these storms may at times weaken and undermine their faith and, at times, strengthen it. The situation of the gnostic believer is described in a verse that says: « The thinker who moves forward with reasons/is just as likely to be driven backward by reasons ». Here we have a full scale battle scene and, in battle, you can't afford to go to sleep. Both doubt and

certainty spring forth from evidence and reason. Under the bombardment of reasons, doubt and certainty are, therefore, bound to abate and intensify. In the science of probabilities there's a rule that says: all probability is conditional. In other words, an event can become more or less probable depending on the conditions surrounding it. By the same token, rational certainty is likewise always conditional; as the conditions change, so certainty is pulled this way and that.

In view of all this, gnostic believers mustn't compare their religiosity to the religiosity of pragmatic or experiential believers. They mustn't imagine that the more thoughtless a person is, the more pious they'll be. This is totally false. In fact, this is one point on which Ghazzali is open to reproach. When Ghazzali abandoned gnostic religiosity, he began to long for a return to mundane types of faith. He said somewhere that the concerns and dilemmas that a theologian experiences in the course of their lifetime may flare up when they're on their deathbed and they may leave the world faithlessly; whereas an old woman who has never known such concerns and dilemmas and whose faith hasn't been tainted with theology will leave the world piously. This is a surprising judgement coming from Ghazzali. If a gnostic believer and theologian - who has stepped onto the terrain of qualms and dilemmas - persists along this path with sincerity and strives to discover and understand the truth, they'll be a true player in the field of faith.

I've said a great deal, but one important point remains to be said and that is that everything that befalls a human being is in keeping with human beings. A human being cannot be asked to do something that is beyond their capacities. Faith, doubt, certitude, struggle... all these are human affairs and we cannot expect them to be other than they are. Apart from people who are asleep or frozen, everyone experiences qualms and misgivings and highs and lows. The ocean of everyone's existence undergoes fierce storms and turbulence. Human beings are not like mountains; they are like oceans. Hence their faith is ocean-like and turbulent too. What would be strange is if they were always placid. « If innocent Adam succumbed to sin/who are we to claim to be sin free? »

If Adam suffered from temptations and dilemmas, how can we ordinary human beings be expected not to be sucked into the whirlwind of temptation? Mundane, pragmatic religiosity seems to be the only exception to this rule; but experiential and gnostic religiosity are both equally subject to it. We must correct our image of human beings and see placid faith as a weak, diluted and deficient form of the phenomenon, not as a model of true faith.

According to religious legends, human beings' fall from grace and their life on earth followed from two original sins: one was Satan's sin in not prostrating himself before Adam and, the other, Adam's sin in eating the forbidden fruit, which itself resulted from a frailty of faith: « We had already beforehand, taken the covenant of Adam, but he forgot: and We found on his part no firm resolve. » (Taha, 115)

Hence, people who want to return human beings to a blissful paradise and a placid swamp must turn back the clock, go as far back as Adam and dissuade him from the original sin!

Q. As you said, there may be ups and downs in the religious life of gnostic believers. But the examination of the history of rational debate on religion raises another question. It would seem that, over the course of history, the arguments pointing to the veracity of religious beliefs and experiences have been gradually undermined. At the same time, non-religious explanations have been presented as rivals and replacements for analyses based on faith and religious experiences. What's your assessment of this historical trend?

A. Yes, it is as you say. New philosophies are, more often than not, non-religious philosophies. They're basically not intended for or geared to proving religious claims; unlike older philosophies and, especially, what is described as Islamic philosophy - which was like a steed that Muslim theologians could mount to gallop towards the land of faith. In the past, the religious climate of societies made it impossible to draw non-religious or irreligious conclusions from philosophy. But in modern secular and liberal societies, some philosophical teachings are completely at odds with past religious teachings. It's on this

basis that I think gnostic religiosity in today's society has become sturdier, as well as more difficult and more valuable, than the gnostic religiosity of the past.

I'd suggested in one of my writings that, in the modern world, we must follow the path of the prophets. In other words, we need to bring religious experiences back to life to open the way for religious discoveries, in order to allow the construction of a new theology on these foundations and make it possible to create a garment, woven of the language of the age we live in, by way of a covering for those naked experiences. If the passion of religious experiences subsides, no theory in the world would really have the strength to revive and rekindle religious faith. Mowlana use to say: « Sometimes a locksmith makes locks and sometimes he makes keys ». Today, lock making seems to be all the rage. The possibility of religious experience has, therefore, declined drastically. Of course, the difficulty of religious experience has made one thing more clear: the chance of any claims to prophethood seems remote and implausible in the modern world; hence, it can be said with greater certainty that the Prophet of Islam was the seal of all prophets. That is to say, the historical climate is no longer such as to breed prophets. As I said in the article « The Seal », the world has been so demystified that it is well nigh impossible now to encounter the rich experiences known to prophets.

Q. Has this dramatic qualitative and quantitative decline in religious experience not led to a crisis of faith in the modern world?

A. It may be possible to say that all three types of religiosity are tending to become sturdier and stronger. Pragmatic religiosity is continuing to play its role in reassuring believers and it has an elaborate clerical machinery. Gnostic religiosity has become much sturdier, in view of the books that have been written and are being written on the subject and in view of the extensive and comprehensive debates and critiques that are taking place in this field. As for experiential religiosity, it has gained a larger circle of yearning supplicants since the other two types of religiosity are not entirely reassuring and fulfilling. Today there are many non-religious people who long for a shred of the religious faith possessed by believers. This longing will do its trick one day. At any rate, one thing is certain: in the

modern, demystified world, the God discovered by believers and the theories woven around Him may well be different from those of the past.

Q. It would seem that the ideas raised in your analysis point in a different direction: pragmatic religiosity is basically the religiosity of people who, strictly speaking, have never had religious experiences and who do not have faith in the true sense of the word; gnostic religiosity, for its part, is faced with profound crises and serious problems; and experiential religiosity is suffering from a dearth of deep religious experiences. Things seem to be worse than you suggest.

A. Pragmatic religiosity is basically an everyday type of religiosity. It has served particular functions in society and is set to survive as a phenomenon that bolsters solidarity and assists people in quelling internal and external dilemmas. This is a type of religiosity that has existed and will continue to exist. But, although gnostic religiosity is facing crises, the truth of the matter is that this type of religiosity essentially thrives on crises. You could describe it as a creature that feeds on doubt. It therefore grows sturdier, not slimmer, with doubts and crises. It's like the legendary animal known as the zamel: « There's an animal called the zamel/the more you beat it, the more it works and is content/beat it with a stick to make it happy/make sure you beat it if you want it to become corpulent ».

Q. The problem is that faith is one thing and gnosticism another. Faith, as you described it, has to do with religious experience and the subsequent piety. Otherwise, does the mere process of grappling with questions and doubts have any value in terms of faith?

A. Yes, gnostic religiosity is nourished by criticism and questions. Nonetheless, the concerns of the gnostic are the concerns of the pious; these are not detached and dispassionate mental processes. In other words, it's not as if they approach religious questions in the way a mathematician approaches numerical questions. Quite the reverse. They enter this field on the basis of commitment to theology and piety. It also has to be said that gnostic religiosity should be seen as a collective affair in which there are both victories and defeats. In other words, part of the collective may be suffering from weakness,

while another part is enjoying strength. A new discovery or theory, or the resolution of a doubt may intensify some people's faith, just as the emergence of a new doubt may diminish some people's faith. The history of theology is replete with such victories and defeats. Anyone who looks at these endeavours as a whole may decide that, in this battle, the defeats have outnumbered the victories; or they may conclude that there have been more victories than defeats. The tenor of your remarks suggests that, on the whole, you believe there have been more defeats than victories. Ghazzali's position seems to be much the same.

Q. What's your own assessment?

A. In truth, I have no reason to believe that the defeats have outnumbered the victories or to draw the conclusion, on this basis, that this process has caused more harm than good. And none of the distinguished people who have spoken about this subject have presented any reason that would corroborate such a position. The important point is that, today, gnostic religiosity has become a need, and not just as medicine (as Ghazzali put it), but as food.

Q. If we accept that religious beliefs make it possible for the believer and the religious community to understand and refine their religious experiences, and if we accept that this refined understanding paves the way for subsequent religious experiences, can we conclude that these developments have led to a refinement of religious beliefs and, consequently, religious life and faith as a whole?

A. Yes, just so. That is to say, if we assume the necessity of a clear mind, free of contradictions and open to correct information, for the interpretation of experiences, we can say that the refinement of religious beliefs will help improve and further rectify the interpretation of religious experiences. This, too, may be one of the blessings of theology and gnostic religiosity. It is the story of Moses and the shepherd all over again. Shepherds have experiences and people like Moses concern themselves with the interpretation of experiences. Those whose souls are afire need those who are steeped in knowledge; theologians and religious scholars can fill the knowledge vacuum.

Religion has suffered far more from dogmatism, opportunism and greed than from the doubts raised by gnosticism. Hence, if we are to build a barrier against something, it should not be against the spread of gnosticism but against demagoguery and opportunism perpetuated in the name of religion. Whatever else we might say about theologians, we have to admit that they keep alight the flame of thought and religion-mindedness, and our whole discussion here about faith, hope and certitude falls within the framework of gnostic religiosity. We must therefore applaud theologians and value their efforts. We must celebrate their victories and not be alarmed by or resentful of their defeats; for their defeats today can pave the way for their victories tomorrow. Let's not forget that all their debates are about the preservation of faith and are replete with faith. A historian once said about Darwin's theory that Darwin had delivered a blow to the study of God that no apostate had ever been able to do. Apostates kept alive the debate about the existence or non-existence of God, but, with his theory, Darwin rendered the whole debate unnecessary and pointless. Once this occurs, we've stepped into the arena of irreligiosity; but as long as there are discussions about the existence of God, religious experience, the truth of faith, Satan, the existence of the other world and so on, we should be glad, because it keeps the flame of religion alight.

Q. What specific, practical proposals do you have for strengthening experiential religiosity? Are the current circumstances conducive to strengthening experiential religiosity?

A. I think prophets are the heroes of this field, so we must reap maximum benefit from their experiences. They have been the teachers on this subject. The fact that it is stated in the Koran that this book is guidance for the pious indicates that piety is the first requirement for being guided towards God, communicating with Him, getting closer to Him and, ultimately, discovering Him and having a religious experience. The mystics, too, have followed in the footsteps of the prophets and taught us lessons in this respect. All these teachings have been oriented towards the attainment of a kind of purity, leanness and detachment from worldly concerns; the more a person's attachment to the passing

phenomena and appearances of life diminishes - such that the material aspects of the world become like sea foam, as Mowlana put it - the more they can come to be in touch with the things beyond this world. This is why you'll find that all prophets sought solitude, ate little, spoke little and slept little. And mystics have, therefore, followed the same model. The modern world is a raucous world and it produces many distractions. This makes it more difficult to achieve detachment and, consequently, to have religious experiences. But the path remains more or less the same.

Q. Don't you think that these recommendations were meaningful and effective in the framework of the old world and in the light of the beliefs and ethics of the time? And that the modern world demands new methods? In other words, don't you think there should be recommendations in keeping with the circumstances of human beings today?

A. I think that those old methods are even more essential and vital for today's human beings. Of course, it was easier to carry out those recommendations in the past. It is more difficult today. To be honest, I don't think there's any shortcut and I believe that going through the preliminaries that the prophet's learnt are absolutely essential and vital for the attainment of religious experiences and spiritual discoveries. In other words, they are no less important today and no substitute has been found for them.

Q. Pragmatic or utilitarian religiosity itself has aspects that are knowledge-bound; that is to say, it contains something known as articles of faith. My question is, what is the position of people like Ghazzali on these aspects of religion? Do they hold that thought should be suspended altogether? Or, if there's a need for some people to think and to bring about some adaptations or adjustments in these knowledge-bound aspects, what would the opposition of people like Ghazzali to this kind of analytical or critical activity amount to?

A. Ghazzali wanted to see an end to the study of theology. He believed that theology is, at most, like medicine, not like food, and that it should, therefore, only be used in circumstances where there's illness. Hence, he thought theologians were like doctors

although, unlike doctors, they were not allowed to dispense their wisdom to the general public. Ghazzali saw theologians as parasites. He said that, since there are bandits on the road of religion, there's a need for theologians to fight off the bandits. If banditry is done away with, theologians will be done away with as well. He wrote two relatively non-voluminous books: one was *Message from Jerusalem* [*Al-Risalah al-Qudsiyah*] and the other *Rules of Beliefs* [*Qava'id al-Aqa'id*] which he fitted into the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. He said, if anyone wishes to become familiar with this material in brief, they should read the *Al-Risalah al-Qudsiyah* and, if they wish to become familiar with it at length, they should read the *Qava'id al-Aqa'id*; and, if their questions and concerns remain unresolved after reading these books, they should know that the illness has become deep-seated in them and they should just sit and wait for God's mercy. Ghazzali held this view until the end of his life and offered this free advice to people. But looking at things from the outside, it is clear that Ghazzali himself helped make the field of theology more robust. He wanted to be the last of the theologians, but theology did not oblige. In fact, the source of Ghazzali's regret and sorrow lay elsewhere. He was a revivalist and he could see very clearly that three categories of people, preachers, theologians and jurists [*fuqaha*], had captured the minds of most believers and the field of religiosity as a whole, and that everything they did was directed towards promoting their own trades and nothing that they did was directed towards guiding people to salvation. He therefore made it his duty to give lessons on ethics, in other words, exactly what was needed to achieve other-worldly redemption. And it was in the arena of ethics and internal piety that he managed to embarrass jurisprudence [*fiqh*] and theology. In fact, what he was seeking was balance. And if a balance had been struck between religious teachings externally and internally, as a trade and as contemplation, as ethics and as theology, he would undoubtedly have been satisfied. He had found theologians and the *fuqaha* so unethical and unprincipled that he came to value mundane faith more highly than theological faith (absence of faith). And he believed that the scripture and the *Sunna* were enough and that there was no need to go further than what had been said at the dawn of Islam.

Q. You said in reply to previous questions that religious beliefs are like faces drawn over a faceless entity. My question is this: can we see scripture itself, which is the outcome of prophetic experience, as a face over that faceless entity or a garment sewn over that core? If so, should we abide by the face or the faceless entity?

A. Scripture, especially in Islam, consists of two parts. One part is comprised of mythical faces drawn over the truth. The other part is concerned with life, transactions and laws, where God plays the role of the commander of that which must be done and that which must not be done; or, rather, the commander and the legislator is the prophet, and God has affirmed his legislation. At any rate, the elements that relate to commands and jurisprudential and legal regulations are not at all of the nature of faces over a faceless entity, and their position is clear. As to the first part, that is, the elements relating to God, resurrection, Satan, creation and so on, these are all of the nature of mythical faces over faceless experience. And different religions are like different faces over that faceless entity. One belongs to the Prophet of Islam, another to Jesus Christ and... all the faces stand in the same relation to that faceless, absolute essence. If we were to use a simile, we could say that these faces and that faceless entity stand in the same relationship as languages to a thought. Thought is that faceless entity and languages are the external faces thrown over that thought. All languages stand in the same relationship to that language-less thought, but the languages are all different from one another and stand in different relationships to us. A Chinese person can understand Chinese better than English and the reverse can be said of an Englishman. And thoughts in a Chinese person's mind take on a Chinese demeanour and, in an Indian's mind, an Indian appearance. The thoughts themselves may vary in terms of richness and depth, and this, in turn, is reflected in the languages and their manifestations. The followers of prophets see their leader's revelation as self-contained and complete and, on this basis, they distinguish between the prophets. And, in order to prove these distinctions, they point to the physiognomies drawn over that faceless entity.

As to your question of whether one can forego the existing faces or not, it has to be said that individuals are rationally entitled to do so and to lend a new face to their faceless

experience. But, first of all, most people don't have a faceless experience, so the question of giving it a face doesn't arise. They must, therefore, rely on the prophets and be grateful to them. Secondly, people who do have this experience - in other words, mystics - while being entitled to lend a new face to their experience, must bear in mind two points: one, from the social perspective, as long as they're living within a community of pragmatic believers, they must conform and not speak about their new faces. The prophets and, especially, the Prophet of Islam, were saying that they had founded a community and a civilisation based on certain myths and physiognomies concerning the truth, and they would not allow anyone to wreck these. The other point is that, from a personal perspective, the individual mustn't forget that these existing faces have a history and a tradition, and it would be best not to cut oneself off from all this and to ensure that one's brook is attached to the sea. In other words, one must not be indifferent to the physiognomies of our predecessors and forbears. After all, they were treading this same path and they may well have been much more skilled at it than we are.

Q. In the history of religion and in the history of Islam, in particular, the scripture has always been the centre of attention. And believers have concentrated all their efforts on understanding the text. Now, if we accept that this text is a face standing in for that faceless experience, can we still maintain our total commitment to the text? Does veneration of the face (the text) not give way to veneration of the faceless entity?

A. If you take Muslims in general, their identity has been entirely dependent on the text and their reference point has always been the Koran and the *Sunna*. As to those exceptional individuals who have had their own direct experience, they were never text-bound to begin with. In fact, that's what was meant by interpreting the text. People who dedicated themselves to interpreting the text were, to all appearances, bound by the text, but, in fact, they were setting aside the text. This was a matter of degree, of course. Hence, when you say, we'll be less text bound, it is just so. We will brush aside some of the faces that belong to a specific time, region or culture and, as Mowlavi put it, become less drunk

from the jug of appearance. This process of breaking through the idols of appearance and melting away the appearance of idols is a continuous one, for which no end is imaginable. And let's not forget that all of this belongs to the realm of experiential and gnostic religiosity. Pragmatic religiosity lives with its mythical faces and doesn't alter them. Clerics are the guardians of those mythical physiognomies and they see the preservation of the collective, ritualistic identity of the community as being dependent on the preservation of that ancient, unchanging face.

Q. You've drawn a distinction between the face and the faceless, or between the text and the experiences expressed through that text. It would seem that a believer can only persist in being committed to a particular « face » if they are convinced that, throughout the course of history, that face has been and will continue to be the best covering for that faceless entity or the best explanation for that experience. However, in view of the theory you've presented in *Contraction and Expansion*, it would seem that this assumption is not necessarily true. It's quite likely that that faceless entity will find better explanations and faces in the future.

A. It is exactly as you say, for two reasons: one is based on the arguments I presented in *Contraction and Expansion*; the other is that it is conceptually difficult to say that one face is superior to another, because that faceless entity stands in exactly the same relationship to all faces. It is exactly the same as speaking about the length and width of an incorporeal concept. All widths and lengths are equally appropriate to it or equally inappropriate to it. Hence, all the existing faces are equally explanations, models or manifestations of that faceless entity. The difference lies in their relationship to us. In Mowlavi's words, an individual may become more drunk drinking from one jug than from another. This has to do with us, not with that faceless entity. The God who appeared to the Prophet of Islam was a beautiful God. The God we know in Islam is the God of the Prophet of Islam. When the Prophet says, "God is beautiful and He loves beauty; I've seen God in His best image", he is describing his own experience of God. God never appeared to the Prophet of Islam with an ugly face, or, if He did, that great man never told us. But,

theoretically speaking - just as the mystics have said - the ugly things in the world are just as much a manifestation of God as the beautiful things; although, as human beings, we tend to be more drawn towards the beautiful than the ugly: we become more drunk from this jug than from that. And, of course, the height of a pious devotee's endeavours is to see that faceless wonder facelessly:

The greatest wonder of all lies in that facelessness
Like a thousand forms bursting out of formlessness
Persevere till, without a lens, you can see the light
So that, if the lens shatters, you won't go blind

Translated by Nilou Mobasser