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An interview with Abdulkarim Soroush By Matin Ghaffarian

Q. Dr Soroush, we've been hearing for some time that you're busy studying the ideas and works of the Mu'tazilites. I wanted to ask you about the ins and outs of this.

A. I started thinking about this project a long time ago - even before I began speaking about renewing the Mu'tazilite experience - and I wanted to work on this subject both from the historical-chronicled aspect and from the analytical-rational aspect. I respect the Mu'tazilite school of thought and I esteem them highly, because they were the first group to raise the banner of rationality in Islamic culture. Unfortunately, not much remains of the works of the vanguards of the Mu'tazilite school of thought. We find their views mirrored in their opponents' works. In other words, most researchers have referred to the books written by the Mu'tazilites' opponents - i.e., the Ash'arites - in order to know what the Mu'tazilites were saying and, as you know, this method imposes many limitations on the researcher. Fortunately, over the past 50 years and even more recently than that - over the past 10 years - many good discoveries have been made in Yemen and in a number of other regions, and some of the authentic and early works of the Mu'tazilites have been found. Now, a group of researchers at the Frei Universität Berlin are examining and publishing these books. Sabine Schmidtke and a number of other researchers are deeply involved in this project. I'm trying to use their findings. On the whole, many doors and windows have been opened in this field, and researchers can enter it with greater ease and confidence. I, too, am trying to do my share - more from the analytical-rational aspect than the historical-chronicled one, of course - in studying the Mu'tazilites' views.

Even back at the time when I was learning about and teaching the Ash'arite school of thought and the Ash'arites' views on exegesis, theology and ethics, I was gradually becoming interested in the Mu'tazilites and their disagreements with the Ash'arites. This was how it happened that I chose this project. Of course, there was another reason for my interest; as I've said elsewhere, it was the form that the question of modernity and tradition had taken in Iran. The question of modernity and tradition has turned into a grim subject in our country. Everyone speaks about tradition and modernity as if they were closed chests, and then they try to describe their similarities and differences. I think that this is out of keeping with the analytical approach. We have to open the chests of tradition and modernity, take out their components and demonstrate the link between them. Speaking in this closed way is not going to take us anywhere. I started the Mu'tazilite project in order to breathe new life into tradition and modernity. Rereading, reconsidering, renewing and assessing the views and ideas of the Mu'tazilites and their school of thought, which are hefty components of tradition, can bring new gains, and truly show us the way both to using tradition and to extricating ourselves from tradition. This is the kind of potential I see in the Mu'tazilite project and I'm trying to take advantage of it.

Q. You said that you became interested in the Mu'tazilites in the context of the feud between tradition and modernity. But I'd like to know what your main question was in studying this Islamic school of thought. Did you have a prior plan when you studied the Mu'tazilites' views? Was there a link between your prior views and this study?

A. Of course, this study was linked to my prior ideas. I like the Mu'tazilite religious theory and ethics, and the main reason why I like this school is because they raised the banner of revelation-independent reason and then they reflected on the nature of the relationship between these two independent things - i.e., reason and revelation - and offered a new view. This quality - i.e., the rationality of their school - is extremely valuable. I think that it's a coin that has currency and is precious, and it can be used in the market of learning

and research. So, my project is the project of rationality and I see the Mu'tazilites as fellow travellers and I try to establish a link with them.

I came across the views of the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites directly when I started teaching the philosophy of morality. I used to teach Izz al-Din al-Iji's *Al-Mawaqif*, the classical book on Ash'arite theology. The Mu'tazilites' views are also mentioned and severely criticized in the book. But, even through these possibly-misrepresented views, you can get a sense of some of the Mu'tazilites' important insights and ideas. Later, I studied them more directly, especially their Qur'anic commentaries. Subsequently, it was the theory of contraction and expansion that really further clarified the issue for me. I realized that there have been two sets of presuppositions in approaching the Qur'an and exegesis - at least in the history of Islamic culture: one consisted of Ash'arite presuppositions and the other of Mu'tazilite ones. It was from this perspective that I turned to these two groups' commentaries. For example, I studied Fakhr Razi's *Tafsir Kabir* and Jarallah Zamakhshari's *Tafsir Kishaf* and saw how these presuppositions were fully involved in their understanding and annotation of the Qur'an. It was at this point that the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites took on added importance for me. They became illustrations of the theory of contraction and extraction, and were used to explain, defend and confirm the theory. This was the first aspect of my liking for the Mu'tazilites.

From another aspect, the Mu'tazilites' rational morality was of interest to me. As we all know, the Mu'tazilites believed in the principality of morality. In modern parlance, they believed in the objectivity of moral values and held that, regardless of the existence or non-existence of the prophets, morality had its own independent value. In other words, human reason can say whether an act is good or not. God endorses and confirms the verdicts of reason. That is to say, an act that reason considers good or bad is also considered good or bad by God. This independence of moral reason from revelation was very important to me. I've studied the Ash'arites views and arguments on the philosophy of morality diligently. They have some novel ideas in some respects. But they run into problems on the wellsprings of morality. Some people imagine that my book *Learning and Values* is Ash'arite through and through, whereas this is not at all the case. There, I have at most explained the views of Hume and a number of modern philosophers about how an "ought" cannot be derived from an "is" or how moral propositions cannot be derived from factual propositions; I haven't said anything more than this. That is to say, the question of how moral values are discovered - whether reason discovers them or revelation teaches them to us - is an independent issue that has to be discussed in its own place. Like the Mu'tazilites, I believe that human reason discovers them as evident and can, therefore, establish a revelation-independent reason. Of course, I disagree with the Mu'tazilites on some issues. I find the Ash'arites experience-oriented or empirical, whereas I find the Mu'tazilites more Aristotelian. Of course, I'm not an empiricist in the sense that I think that human knowledge can be summed up in experience, but I'm very empirical in the sense that I'm not prepared to sacrifice science on the altar of First Philosophy. I give experience a strong and sturdy share of things, and I believe that many verdicts that should be determined by experience shouldn't be entrusted to the blade of philosophy. I think that the Ash'arites are stronger than the Mu'tazilites when it comes to empiricism. For example, on this same question of whether an act is good or bad, the rationality of good and bad acts doesn't mean that we derive everything from evident, a priori rationality; basing things on experience is rational too. This is a mistake that some writers make.

Q. Here, by empiricism in morality, you mean that we should take the utility of morality into account?

A. No, I'm talking about rational good and bad. Acts are good or bad based on reason. But this doesn't rule out seeking assistance from experience and looking at an act's practical benefits. We mustn't assume that rationality means a priori; this is not at all the case. The reason-experience dichotomy that some people draw is an unacceptable and unreasonable dichotomy. In the views of the Mu'tazilites, I sometime see an excessive defence of a priori rationality which I don't like; I prefer the experience-orientedness of the Ash'arites. This isn't the place for discussing this. But in a talk that I gave a few years ago in Qom - which,

unfortunately, ended with an attack by the vigilante groups - I spoke about the Ash'arites' experience-orientedness and about how - in formulating theological verdicts - they look at actual events and occurrences in the world and do not neglect these things. Let me give an example, the Ash'arites don't by any means rule out or deny evil and injustice in the world. They accept it as an empirical fact and this acceptance has an impact on their theology. So, they believe that God has a right to create evil and they do not try to explain it away. I'm not concerned about this theological conclusion now; but I very much admire the fact that the Ash'arites don't close their eyes to the real world.

By way of another example, the Ash'arites believe that whatever anyone obtains is part of their God-given bounty, even if they've obtained it by improper (haram) means; whereas the Mu'tazilites and some other theologians try to explain these things away. I prefer the Ash'arites' experience-oriented approach, but I find the Mu'tazilites' rational analyses about morality, the attributes of God and about God's word more acceptable. Hence, the debate that you're witnessing these days which has led to a kind of clash between me and others is deeply rooted in the Mu'tazilites' ideas. Let me also add here that I consider myself a "neo-Mu'tazilite". I believe that the Qur'an is God's creation. The Mu'tazilites said this. But we can take one step further and say that the fact that the Qur'an is God's creation means that the Qur'an is the Prophet's creation. The Mu'tazilites didn't explicitly take this step but I believe it is a necessary corollary of their creed and school of thought.

Q. You spoke about the combined attractions of the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites. When you speak about Mowlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, your critics say that Dr Soroush's liking for Rumi doesn't fit in with the other components of his thinking. Apart from your personal liking for Rumi, what was the theoretical grounds for your closeness to him?

A. I don't know what you mean when you speak about my personal liking for Rumi. My liking for Rumi is a liking for his thinking; otherwise, I'm not a blood relation of his or anything. I very much like and respect his ideas, approach and outlook towards praising God and his spiritual experiences. I find it a pleasure to learn about them and I try to take part in these experiences to the extent that I'm able.

As to the second point and your suggestion that Rumi is an Ash'arite, I seriously doubt it. There are some very big whales who don't fit into the small pools of this or that school of thought. I believe that he's neither an Ash'arite nor a Mu'tazilite in the conventional sense. He's neither a Sunni nor a Shi'i. He's none of these things. Tight garments of this kind don't fit his gigantic stature. It would be best for us to think of Rumi as falling into the Rumi school of thought. I believe - and others who have read this great man's works believe - that Rumi has extracted points from both the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites. And even the hostility that he expresses towards philosophers mainly stems from the fact that he feels that philosophers have set up shop outside the prophets' shop and have created a detour, lengthening the short path to God. For example, he has a story about a poor man who is looking for treasure. He says that the man is constructing bows and arrow that make the quarry harder to catch, that he's becoming so entangled in philosophical reflection as to be blinded to truth and that the more he runs, the more he distances himself from his destination.

So, you see, Rumi likens philosophers to people who are running but who, in so doing, distance themselves from God rather than moving closer to Him. Secondly, by emphasizing rational analyses, philosophers distance people from and make them oblivious to spiritual experiences. They close people's eyes to insight and open them to learning. This is why Rumi sometimes opposes philosophers and philosophically-inclined Mu'tazilites. Otherwise, in the Masnavi, Rumi can present you with clear rational arguments in a single verse. For example, when he argues that God's munificence is not based on people's merit and that God bestows things on people regardless of merit. He said that God's munificence was the kernel and merit was just a husk. His argument was: if God's munificence is based on merit, then who grants the merit itself? In other words, the merit would have had to be granted without some prior merit. This is a clear, rational argument

that Rumi puts forward. Of course, Rumi doesn't want to appear in the guise of a Mu'tazilite or Ash'arite theologian, and quite frankly says: If I busied myself with questions and answers / when would I ever quench people's thirst?

Rumi says that his task is to be the cup bearer and to quench the thirst of those who long for spiritual experience; not to entangle them and himself in theological disputes. What attracts me to Rumi is this broad perspective that he has on the world and the experiences that he had in understanding the cosmos, God and human beings. I can claim that Rumi had five or six big experiences, and that all of the Masnavi and the Divan-e Shams are expositions and interpretations of these great experiences. And these few great experiences can keep alive people's enthusiasm forever.

Let me underline the point that Rumi, like all fallible human beings, has flaws and limitations, which we must view with discernment. If we follow great figures, we must follow their strengths.

Q. Let's return to your research on the Mu'tazilites. I wanted to ask you whether the outcome of your research will be published in the form of a book or will we have to trace and track its impact in your lectures and articles?

A. I have no plan for a book yet. God willing, I will write various articles and publish them. Then, a collection of the articles will be published as a book. As I see things, this is a very extensive project and - if I can - I have to formulate new verdicts in at least several domains. And, to this end, I must study a vast number of sources. I hope I'm up to the task.

Q. So, it would appear that your forced absence from Iran's academic environment hasn't been altogether bad for you; it has provided you with a new opportunity.

A. Of course, I'm grateful to providence. Now that, thanks to the broadmindedness of Iranian officials, I'm barred from some occupations, I'm busying myself abroad and one of my activities is research. Thanks be to God, there are resplendent libraries and very learned researchers with whom I can discuss things and from whose learning I can benefit. Of course, I'm not unheeding of developments in Iran. I'd like to mention one point. Just last year alone, we witnessed two important developments in terms of publications: one was the publication of a translation of Ibn Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam* and, the second, the publication of a translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Both were very important, because the authors are important writers in the history of Eastern mysticism and Western philosophy, and because of their importance to our old and modern thinking. And also because of the fascination with which these figures and their works have been viewed in Iran. These translations represent hard work and determination, and, fortunately, the wellspring of this sort of hard work has not dried up amongst us. The least effect that this hard work will have is that it will demystify these types of figures. In other words, both Ibn Arabi and Heidegger will lose their halo of sanctity.

Q. Especially Heidegger, with whose supporters you've had many arguments in Iran -

A. Of course the truth of the matter is that, more than me arguing with them, it is they who have insulted Popper. Let me mention a point here. A historical mistake has been made. I saw this mistake both in the writings of Mr Babak Ahmadi and in the writing of Mr Jamadi - the respected translator of *Being and Time* - and in the things that other people have said. These people have imagined that, after the revolution, there was a quarrel in Iran between Popper and Heidegger, or between their followers. This is a totally mistaken tale and, unfortunately, it keeps being repeated. The truth of the matter is that one side, in view of its political interests, levelled some insults at Popper and reaped some rewards as a result. And if there was any argument - and there was very little - it was the same as the one that occurred in the West while Heidegger was still alive; namely, over the question of whether Heidegger had cooperated with the Nazis or not. I believe that, today, it is crystal clear that he did cooperate with the Nazis. And I saw that Mr Jamadi, with

total fair-mindedness, has said in his works that Heidegger's cooperation with the Nazis is a plain, deplorable historical fact. Where there was room for argument was on the question of whether Heidegger's philosophy is in line with that cooperation and those political stances or not. Personally, I think that it is. As to it being said that Heidegger's philosophy should be abandoned in favour of Popper's or the other way around, that's a different question. The man who led the opposition to Popper used to insult him and used to accuse him of imposing inanities on philosophy. In my view, these kinds of remarks were inappropriate in the realm of learning and discussion.

At any rate, I wanted to say that the translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time* was an important and auspicious event. As I said, first, it demystifies Heidegger and the book. And, secondly, it shames those who, for years, have used Heidegger to justify themselves but have failed to translate even half a sentence from his works in all this time. And, ultimately, it's been someone outside the university environment who has done the translation and he ought to be congratulated.

Dr Movahed's work in translating *Fusus al-Hikam* is also a massive accomplishment. I've seen his work. He was rightly given a medal. His mastery over English and Arabic and, of course, Persian is admirable. And he's done a very great service to Ibn Arabi's school of thought.

Let me say something, in particular, to those who believe that the works of great figures such as these can't be and shouldn't be translated: Far from losing something in translation, on occasion translated works gain something. In other words, translation is a service to the author. Let me give an example. Heidegger never became Heidegger in Germany. It was when his works were translated into Italian and French that Heidegger became important. Even now, he is more important in France than he is in Germany. Others made his work more comprehensible. Ibn Arabi has now lost his aura of sanctity and readers in Iran can understand him better. Persian-speakers are in a better position to establish a relationship with him.

I believe that if, when the Qur'an first came to Iran, it had been translated into good, readable Persian, and if Iranians had also always read and studied the Qur'an in Persian, alongside reading it in Arabic, we would undoubtedly be different Muslims than we are today. The fact that the Qur'an is out of reach for Iranian Muslims and the fact that it is locked in the Arabic language has had an impact on our Muslim-ness. The translations that are now being done of the Qur'an are a very auspicious development. And the translations are increasingly good and this will have a long-term impact on our beliefs, our theology and our religiosity. We have to welcome all these things and researchers should be encouraged to translate classical Eastern and Western books into Persian. This was a project that I proposed to the Academy of Sciences which was, unfortunately, left by the wayside. So, when this kind of work is done outside the academy, it should be praised by all culture lovers. I'd like to use this opportunity to congratulate and praise Dr Movahed and Mr Jamadi, and I believe that they have done lasting work.

** Translated from the Persian by Nilou Mobasser

The Word of Mohammad

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<http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-The%20Word%20of%20Mohammad.html>

An interview with Abdolkarim Soroush By Michel Hoebink

Muhammad is the creator of the Koran. That is what well-known Iranian reformer Abdolkarim Soroush says in his book *The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience* that will be published early next year. With this view, Soroush goes further than some of the most radical Muslim reformers. In an interview with Zemzem, he gives a foretaste of his book.

Abdolkarim Soroush is regarded as the intellectual leader of the Iranian reform movement. Initially, he was a supporter of Khomeini. He held several official positions in the young Islamic republic, among which that of Khomeini's adviser on cultural and educational reform. But when the spiritual leader soon turned out to be a tyrant, Soroush withdrew in disappointment. Since the early 90s, he is part of a group of 'republican' intellectuals who started out discussing the concept of an 'Islamic democracy' but gradually moved away from the entire idea of an Islamic state.

Soroush's basic argument is simple: all human understanding of religion is historical and fallible. With this idea he undermines the Iranian theocracy, because if all human understanding of religion is fallible, no-one can claim to apply the shari'a in God's name, not even the Iranian clergy.

In *The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience* Soroush makes clear that his view on the fallibility of religious knowledge to a certain degree also applies to the Koran. With thinkers such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Mohammed Arkoun, Soroush belongs to a small group of radical reformers who advocate a historical approach to the Koran. In his new book, however, he goes one step further than many of his radical colleagues. He claims that the Koran is not only the product of the historical circumstances in which it emerged, but also of the mind of the Prophet Mohammed with all his human limitations. This idea, says Soroush, is not an innovation, as several medieval thinkers already hinted at it.

How can we make sense of something like 'revelation' in our disenchanted modern world?

Revelation is 'inspiration'. It is the same experience as that of poets and mystics, although prophets are on a higher level. In our modern age we can understand revelation by using the metaphor of poetry. As one Muslim philosopher has put it: revelation is higher poetry. Poetry is a means of knowledge that works differently from science or philosophy. The poet feels that he is informed by a source external to him; that he receives something. And poetry, just like revelation, is a talent: A poet can open new horizons for people; he can make them view the world in a different way.

The Koran, in your view, should be understood as a product of its time. Does this also imply that the person of the Prophet played an active and even constituent role in the production of the text?

According to the traditional account, the Prophet was only an instrument; he merely conveyed a message passed to him by Jibril. In my view, however, the Prophet played a pivotal role in the production of the Koran.

The metaphor of poetry helps me to explain this. Just like a poet, the Prophet feels that he is captured by an external force. But in fact – or better: at the same time - the Prophet himself is everything: the creator and the producer. The question whether the inspiration comes from outside or from inside is really not relevant, because at the level of revelation there is no difference between outside and inside. The inspiration comes from the Self of the Prophet. The Self of every individual is divine, but the Prophet differs from other people in that he has become aware of its divinity. He has actualized its potential. His Self has become one with God.

Now don't get me wrong at this point: This spiritual union with God does not mean that the Prophet has become God. It is a union that is limited and tailored to his size. It is human size, not God's size. The mystical poet Jalaluddin Rumi describes this paradox with the words: 'Through the Prophet's union with God, the ocean is poured into a jar.'

But the Prophet is also the creator of the revelation in another way. What he receives from God is the content of the revelation. This content, however, cannot be offered to the people as such, because it is beyond their understanding and even beyond words. It is formless and the activity of the person of the Prophet is to form the formless, so as to make it accessible. Like a poet again, the Prophet transmits the inspiration in the language he knows, the styles he masters and the images and knowledge he possesses.

But his personality also plays an important role in shaping the text. His personal history: his father, his mother, his childhood. And even his moods. If you read the Koran you feel that the Prophet is sometimes jubilant and highly eloquent while at other times he is bored and quite ordinary in the way he expresses himself. All those things have left their imprint on the text of the Koran. That is the purely human side of revelation.

So the Koran has a human side. Does this mean that the Koran is fallible?

In the traditional view, the revelation is infallible. But nowadays there are more and more interpreters who think that the revelation is infallible only in purely religious matters such as the attributes of God, life after death and the rules for worship. They accept that the revelation may be wrong in matters that relate to the material world and human society. What the Koran says about historical events, other religious traditions and all kinds of practical earthly matters does not necessarily have to be true. Such interpreters often argue that this kind of errors in the Koran do not harm prophethood because the Prophet 'descended' to the level of knowledge of the people of his time and spoke to them in the 'language of the time'. I have a different view. I do not think the Prophet spoke the 'language of his time' while knowing better himself. He actually believed the things he said. It was his own language and his own knowledge and I don't think that he knew more than the people around him about the earth, the universe and the genetics of human beings. He did not possess the knowledge we have today. And that does not harm his prophethood because he was a prophet and not a scientist or a historian.

You refer to medieval philosophers and mystics such as Rumi. To what extent do your views on the Koran find their origin in the Islamic tradition?

Many of my views are rooted in medieval Islamic thought. The idea that prophethood is something very general that can be found in different degrees in all people is common in both Shi'i Islam and mysticism. The great Shi'i theologian sheikh al-Mufid does not call the Shi'i imams prophets, but he attributes to them all the qualities possessed by prophets. Also mystics are generally convinced that their experiences are the same as those of the prophets. And the notion of the Koran as a potentially fallible human product is implicit in the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the created Koran. Medieval thinkers often did not express such ideas in a clear or systematic manner but rather tended to conceal them in casual remarks or allusions. They did not want to create confusion among people who couldn't handle such thoughts. Rumi, for instance, states somewhere that the Koran is the mirror of the states of mind of the Prophet. What Rumi implies is that the Prophet's personality, his changing moods and his stronger and weaker moments, are reflected in the Koran. Rumi's son goes even further. In one of his books he suggests that polygamy is permitted in the Koran because the Prophet liked women. That was the reason he permitted his followers to marry four women!

Does the Shi'i tradition allow you more freedom to develop your thoughts on the humanness of the Koran?

It is well known that in Sunni Islam, the rationalist school of the Mu'tazilites was badly defeated by the Ash'arites and their doctrine that the Koran was eternal and uncreated. But in Shi'i Islam, Mu'tazilism somehow continued its life and became the breeding ground for a rich philosophical tradition. The Mu'tazilite doctrine of the created Koran is almost undisputed among Shi'i theologians. Today you see that Sunni reformers are coming closer to the Shi'i position and embrace the doctrine of the created Koran. The Iranian clergy, however, are reluctant to use the philosophical resources of the Shi'i tradition to open new horizons to our religious understanding. They have based their power on a conservative understanding of religion and fear that they might lose everything if they open the discussion on issues such as the nature of prophethood.

What are the consequences of your views for contemporary Muslims and the way they use the Koran as a moral guide?

A human view of the Koran makes it possible to distinguish between the essential and the accidental aspects of religion. Some parts of religion are historically and culturally determined and no longer relevant today. That is the case, for instance, with the corporal punishments prescribed in the Koran. If the Prophet had lived in another cultural environment, those punishments would probably not have been part of his message.

The task of Muslims today is to translate the essential message of the Koran over time. It is like translating a proverb from one language into another. You do not translate it literally. You find another proverb which has the same spirit, the same content but perhaps not the same wording. In Arabic you say: He is like someone who carries dates to Basra. If you translate that into English you say: He is carrying coal to Newcastle. A historical, human view of the Koran allows us to do this. If you insist on the idea that the Koran is the uncreated, eternal word of God that must be literally applied, you get yourself into an un-resolvable dilemma.

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Box. Since the coming to power of president Ahmadinejad, it has become increasingly difficult for Abdolkarim Soroush to work in Iran. For that reason, he has accepted invitations to teach at western universities such as Harvard and Princeton in the USA and the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin. In the past academic year he was a guest lecturer at the Free University in Amsterdam and the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in Leiden, the Netherlands

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An interview with Abdulkarim Soroush about the Expansion of Prophetic Experience.

****** This interview took place on 10 August 2000 and was published in the (now-banned) journal Aftab, No. 15, April-May 2002.

In an article entitled 'The Expansion of Prophetic Experience', Abdulkarim Soroush suggested, among other things, that, as the Prophet's experience grew over time, he became more skilled at being a prophet and conveying his message. The following interview is about Dr. Soroush's theory of the expansion of Prophetic experience.

Q. Regarding the idea that there is no distinction between the Prophet's words and God's words, you said that the Prophet's multifarious proximity to God [qorb-e farayezi va navafeli] meant that God had become the Prophet's ears and eyes and the Prophet's discourse was God's discourse, and that, as Mowlana Jalal-al-Din Rumi put it: 'This was a lover who could do no wrong.' In other words, since the Prophet's hands, tongue and eyes had become godly, whatever he did was effectively counselled by God.

You also said: Had there been no Abu-Lahab and his wife, would the Masad Sura[1] have been revealed? And, with this example, you underlined that this was an experience that expanded over time and that, as events occurred around the Prophet, these phenomena were set in the Koran – over time. It was because there was someone by the name of Abu-Lahab that he was mentioned in the Koran. It was because the problem of the slander against Aisha[2] actually occurred that it was reflected in the Koran.

The fact of the matter is that our society is in the process of grasping and digesting these remarks and views. Many of these ideas are unsettling and give rise to a host of questions. You say at one point: 'It was revelation that complied with the Prophet, not the Prophet who complied with revelation.'

There are verses in the Koran that present Gabriel as a very powerful teacher and in a much more immense light than this. He's portrayed as having enormous stature: 'This is naught but a revelation revealed, taught him by one terrible in power, very strong.'[3]

Or, elsewhere: 'Truly this is the word of a noble Messenger having power, with the Lord of the Throne secure, obeyed, moreover trusty.'[4]

These verses really grant Gabriel an immense stature and position and convey a sense of teaching. In particular, they convey the notion of trustiness in revelation. How can these verses be consistent with Gabriel complying with the Prophet? Do your suggestions not lower Gabriel's stature to less than it ought to be?

Elsewhere in the Koran, we have: 'Move not thy tongue with it to hasten it; Ours it is to gather it and to recite it.'[5] According to this verse, during revelation, the Prophet would try to recite the verses quicker than they arrived. Malik-Bin-Nabi has been cited as saying that the Prophet, peace be upon him, used to repeat the verses so that they would be stored in his memory. The Prophet is explicitly advised here that 'there is no need to repeat the verses'. Hence, the Prophet was barred from the mechanism of repetition, which occurs in ordinary human beings. It is exactly as if a vessel has been placed in trust inside the Prophet and he's even been barred from guarding the vessel. Hence, the idea that 'revelation used to emanate from the Prophet' is not in keeping with the above verses. Instead, these verses convey a sense

that something untouched and whole has been conveyed to the Prophet as a trust and that he then recounted this divine bequest to others.

Also, based on your model and your exposition of the process of revelation, what happens to all the instances in the Koran where the Prophet himself is being spoken to and cautioned? ‘He frowned and turned away,’[6] or ‘and had We not confirmed thee, surely thou wert near to inclining unto them a very little,’[7] or ‘perchance thou art leaving part of what is revealed to thee’[8].

All these verses are addressed to the Prophet. In fact, they are all evidence indicating that the Prophet was conveying to others exactly what he was receiving, like a trust.

The question that arises is: How do these points tally with the theory of ‘The Expansion of Prophetic Experience’?

A. I first raised the basic idea of the expansion of Prophetic experience, in a brief and condensed form, a few years ago when I was speaking to some Iranian students in Britain. When I returned to Iran, I expanded it and, ultimately, presented the relevant article, along with a number of other articles, in the form of a book. As I wrote in the introduction to the book, The Expansion of Prophetic Experience can be viewed as Volume 2 of The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge.

In The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge, I’d mainly discussed the interpretation and annotation of the text, and in The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, I analysed the actual process of revelation and the way in which the text, which we endeavour to interpret, emerged and materialized, because the way in which a text comes into being affects the meanings that we obtain from it. For, just as I said in The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge too, in order to understand a text, we unavoidably rely on our presuppositions. These presuppositions are very varied, ranging from our theories about human beings to cosmology, to history and so on. One of the presuppositions that plays a potent role in our interpretation of a text and our discovery of its meaning is our knowledge of and theory about the genesis of the text.

We can therefore say that The Expansion of Prophetic Experience expresses one example of the presuppositions that affect our understanding of a text. I tried to explain there what the relationship is between the Prophet and the text that he produced; the text that we heard from him and now have as a keepsake. This has a significant impact on the meaning that we obtain from the text and this impact raises this ultimate question: ‘What religious-devotional duty does this construal of the Koran – as a Prophet-produced text – lay before us?’ This is a totally logical question, which arises from the logic of the discussion. I will first refer to and offer some explanations about the initial parts of the discussion and then we’ll reach the final parts.

I don’t know how many of you have read The Islamic Perspective which we wrote years ago for the high school curriculum. I said there that the way that we obtain knowledge is by sketching pictures, in the sense that we always see aggregates of things and then we throw garments over them or we sketch pictures that comprise some of the evidence and data. For example, when you hear various remarks about one of your friends, these remarks are like data that you’re provided with and, on the basis of the data, you sketch a picture and you say: ‘This is a picture of my friend.’ In other words, if all the remarks are true, they all fall under this or that theory. The data as an aggregate shows that the person whom we’d so far considered a friend turns out to have been an enemy or a spy or some such thing. We always proceed in this way. Of course, the pictures are changeable and, when we obtain new data, we may amend or complete a picture. Or we may reject it altogether and replace it with a completely new picture. These pictures play a prominent role in the way we accumulate knowledge; they raise questions for us, they take us forward step by step, they predict things and they help us discover new data.

We proceed in this same way when it comes to the Prophet, peace be upon him. (I'm speaking to you now about what goes on behind the scenes. What you have in *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* is effectively the results that I obtained from the picture that I sketched.) Don't bring your Islamic beliefs into play for the moment. As phenomenologists would put it, put brackets round them. Look at this issue in a neutral way, like you would look at Confucius or Marx, for example. In other words, look at the Prophet of Islam, who was someone who had a deep impact on the world, without bringing in your own emotional and mental proclivities. The Prophet of Islam made some contentions. We've all heard these contentions. The truth of someone's contentions can never be proved on the basis of the contentions themselves. If they are to be affirmed or denied, it has to be on the basis of external evidence.

The Prophet of Islam maintained that he was a prophet. And he was completely certain about his mission. And this complete certainty made him very brave in practice. In other words, he never desisted from his mission despite a whole range of obstacles, oppositions and enmities. This evidence shows that there is an inner strength and that a powerful mental conviction keeps him standing firm and doesn't allow him to retreat. The Prophet used to say: I obtain the things that I understand via a process known as 'revelation'. Regarding revelation, he used to say that it came to him from an other-worldly being by the name of God and that there was a mediator by the name of Gabriel. This is all in the Koran. The verses that you recited convey these ideas.

Now, let us take one step back. The Prophet of Islam believed and maintained – as do his followers – that God is beyond time and place and is formless, with no particular language or skin colour. And that He doesn't have any of the characteristics that we human beings have. He is completely unique. But when this same God spoke to the Prophet, he would, on the Prophet's own contention, speak in Arabic. In other words, He would leave the realm of language-lessness and use a specific language. When this same God spoke to other Prophets, He would speak to them in their language. In other words, when He spoke to Jesus or Moses, peace be upon them, He would speak in their language. Prophets didn't say that God contacts us in very mysterious ways and at that level language is irrelevant, but when we speak to you, we use your language. The Prophet of Islam certainly made no such claim. The Prophet's followers, too, believe that precisely these words, in Arabic and in the form of precisely these sentences which we currently have in the Koran, were recited to the Prophet and he would convey them to his people. We have to register this information and evidence and say that God's action was 'particularized', in the sense that it took on the colour of the environment and that, when it came to the Prophet, it wasn't colourless, quality-less and formless, but was completely in the shape and size of the society in which the Prophet lived.

The second piece of evidence or data that we have is that – as you said – we see events in the Koran which occurred during the time of the Prophet, such as the tale of the accusation levelled against Aisha, the Abu-Lahab affair, the wars that the Prophet experienced and many other events and minor or rare occurrences.[9] During the Prophet's lifetime, the people would ask the Prophet questions about various things and the relevant answers are in the Koran, in brief or at length. These questions and answers and things that occurred in the course of the Prophet's social and political life form a large portion of the verses in the Koran.

Another piece of data or evidence tells us that what we see in the Prophet's revelation is very close to and interlinked with developments in the Prophet's life, whether private or public. It was not as if some things had been prepared in advance – regardless of what took place in society and regardless of the questions that people raised – and were poured, in this pre-prepared form, into the Prophet's mind, consciousness and heart for him to convey to the people. The teachings were very much in keeping with the events that were taking place in the Prophet's life. (I place great emphasis on the term 'in keeping with'.) The construal that I used in *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* is instantiated here. That is to say, the Prophet's relationship with his people was one of dialogue: he would say something and then hear something; then, he would say something in keeping with what he'd heard and so on. It was not as if the Prophet said: 'My students or my

audience are neither here nor there and what they say and what goes on in their minds don't concern me. I will say what I have to say unilaterally.'

Another piece of data is a point that I made in the article 'Accidentals and Essentials'. We can see many non-Arabic words in the Koran. There are more than 200 such words and they are exactly the words that were in use in that region and among the Arab tribes of the time. They are not words that have come from elsewhere with which the Arabs were unfamiliar, words that were incomprehensible to them. On the contrary, they were words that the Arabs used all the time.

If you look at many of the rulings that have been articulated in the Koran, such as the rulings on slaves and on the hijab, and if you look at the Arab society of the time, you'll recognize that the rulings are very similar to what was then current in Arab society; there's nothing - or very little - that's new. The new rulings barely amount to 1 per cent; 99 per cent consist of the rulings that were then current among Arabs. This point has also been made by some faqihs [experts in Islamic jurisprudence]. Some historians have also noticed it and remarked on it. Mr. Mohammed Arkoun has said in his writings that many of the rulings in fiqh [Islamic jurisprudence] - especially the rulings that appear in the Koran - such as multiple wives, did not originate with the Prophet of Islam. The basic idea that a man can take several wives was current practice in Arab society and you see this reflected in Islamic rulings. Many of the rulings of fiqh existed in exactly this form or in a slightly different form among the Arabs, so that, when you look at these rulings, you can see that they were not iconoclastic at all, in the sense of going far beyond anything that existed at that time in Arab society; on the contrary, they're very close to the way things were. Even where you do see relatively new rulings, they don't go dramatically beyond what existed at the time. For example, Arabs didn't apportion any inheritance to girls, but, in Islam, inheritance is apportioned to girls too - half the amount that is apportioned to boys. In other words, what was considered justice at the time was more or less adhered to and what was considered cruelty and injustice was shunned and castigated.

Now take these pieces of data and sketch a picture around them in order to explain them and to say why they are as they are. As we said, our picture-based knowledge works like this. We put the evidence together and, on the basis of the evidence, we suggest a theory.

Look at how Darwin's theory came about. Darwin was in the possession of some pieces of evidence about the living world: that some creatures existed in the past and had now become extinct; that there were some things known as fossils, which consisted of rocks on which there were images of living creatures and plants and so on; in terms of raising animals, too, he could see that by breeding animals in a deliberate way, it was possible to guide their development and to ensure that animals had preferred and desired attributes. If we leave animals in the wild, different results ensue, but we can produce particular breeds of sheep, horses and cows. A number of other pieces of data can also be added to these: in some far-flung island you may find an animal that you won't find anywhere else, but, in other places, where there has been traffic to and from an island, we see, for example, that the creatures that exist there can also be found elsewhere; when we go to a desert, we find plants that have needle-like leaves, whereas, in other places, we see that trees have big, broad leaves; and so on.

Darwin put all this data together. He also made a long journey in the Beagle, the famous ship, and gathered the appropriate material. If we wanted to sketch a picture to encompass and explain all this information, we could sketch a picture that says that there's no single theory; that God wanted to create creatures in a particular way up to a particular century and not to create them thereafter. As to plants that have needle-like leaves, God wanted to create plants that had needle-like leaves. And, where there are plants with broad leaves, God wanted to create plants that had broad leaves. As to fossils, we could say that these are mysteries that God has placed in creation to test human beings' intelligence and acumen.

Darwin offered another picture. He said: 'Let's take a different approach! We won't deny the existence of God but we'll imagine that His intervention is not that direct; we'll imagine that His intervention is behind-the-scenes, so to speak. Why don't we say that there's been a kind of adaptation to the environment where these phenomena are concerned? So, leaves are needle-like in warm climates because this prevents the evaporation of the water stored by the plants. If a creature is the same green colour as a tree, it's so that it will be safe from predators.' We could say: 'God wanted this creature to be green,' or 'God wanted that plant's leaves to be needle-like.' But it is also possible to say: 'In this world, creatures adapt to their environment.' This theory also serves to explain many things. For example, we can conclude that creatures that were unable to adapt became extinct. In this way, we no longer have to say: 'God decided to create some creatures at one point in time and, then, He changed His mind and decided to create some other creatures.'

This was Darwin's picture. In this picture, instead of attributing each individual event to God's will, we bring them all under a single heading, such as adaptation to the environment, for example. You can see that 'picture-based knowledge' has many applications in science.

Let's return to our main subject. You can take each piece of data that I mentioned about the Prophet and revelation independently and attribute it, separately, to God. You can say: 'God wanted the Prophet to speak Arabic;' 'God wanted to speak about some events in the Koran and not to speak about some other events;' and 'God wanted to give official recognition to some or most of the rulings that were current in Arab society and to endorse them and make Muslims duty-bound to act on them.' In each instance, we can respond in this same way, 'God wanted it to be like this,' and not establish any link between them and not say that they all fall under a single picture. On this basis, we'll maintain the view that every single one of these phenomena was a product of God's direct will and that He must have deemed it best to act as He did in each instance. On the basis of this viewpoint, if God had wanted to and if He'd deemed it best, he would have revealed the Koran to the Prophet in Greek. Then, the Prophet would have handed a Greek book to the Arabs and said: 'It was best like this! Go and learn Greek and read my book and use it to the extent that you understand it.' But it was God's will to speak Arabic to His Prophet. This is one kind of explanation, which attributes events individually to the will of the Almighty and includes a hidden best interest/benefit in everything which is beyond our ken but which was taken into account by God.

We can also theorize differently, a theorizing very similar to what I present in *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* (inspired by Darwin's theory): Why don't we say about the phenomenon of revelation that there's an adaptation to the environment? So, we could propose the following explanation: 'Revelation is a phenomenon that adapts itself to the environment and takes on the colour of the environment in every way.' We are using 'environment' in a general sense here, embracing the events that took place in Arab society at the time; the development of the Prophet's personality; occurrences in the course of the Prophet's life and the political and social conflicts that he encountered; the language spoken in the Prophet's society; and so on. This, too, is a picture that we can sketch. This model has placed all the pieces of data that I mentioned alongside one another, painted them all with the same brush and issued a single ruling for them. It doesn't make any of them, separately, hinge on God's will. I don't want to go into the philosophical reasons behind it all; otherwise, we could express all of this in the language of metaphysics and philosophy too.

In *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* and the discussion of 'Essentials and Accidentals in Religion', I have in fact followed this second picture; i.e. adaptation to the environment. That is to say, I don't believe that God willed each of the phenomena that I mentioned individually and deemed that each one was best for some particular reason, which may or may not be conceivable to us. I haven't thought about it in this way. I chose a different route and this is how the theory of the expansion of Prophetic experience came about.

I don't believe that God knew that this or that person would ask this or that question of the Prophet and had a verse prepared in advance, so that, the minute the person asked the question, the verse could be revealed to the Prophet on the spot. We can imagine instead that the Prophet would be asked a question and the very fact that the question had been asked produced that which was presented to the questioner as the answer. The same can be said of a specific ruling expressed in response to a specific event.

So far, I've set out the issue and explained that one can look at this aggregate of events in two different lights. Now, you may ask me: 'So who was Gabriel?' The question of Gabriel and the way in which revelation came to the Prophet is a question of mechanics. I don't think that it changes the substance of the matter. Philosophers have offered various theories about the manner in which the supernatural or the metaphysical communicates with the natural or the physical. But this doesn't change the substance of the matter in any way. We're trying to explain the natural process here. I, at any rate, don't consider this an important problem in explaining the phenomenon of the Prophethood because the question of Gabriel concerns the metaphysical process. A great deal can be said about this; for example, that the means of sending revelation is an angel or whatever.

So, when you look at the natural process, you'll see a kind of adaptation to the environment. And you can sketch the picture that I suggested for it. So far, I've been speaking about the theory itself and the evidence that you can marshal for it. In response, some of our friends cite verses from the Koran to suggest that the theory may be incorrect. This evidence is worth hearing – in and of itself. At any rate, if our picture is a true and comprehensive picture, it has to explain this data from the Koran, otherwise it won't be significant and defensible.

First, let me point out something about one of the important instances which was mentioned in those verses in connection with the historical issues that appear in the Koran. In fact, if you look carefully, you'll realize that the historical issues that are mentioned in the Koran are the historical issues with which Arabs were grappling. No mention is made in the Koran of a prophet by the name of Zoroaster. But, for example, a tribe by the name of the Magi, which lived in Iran at that time and had contacts with the Arabs, is mentioned once or twice. Most of the prophets who are mentioned in the Koran are Israelite prophets, whom the Arabs had heard of and were more or less familiar with. There is a verse which says: '...you pass by their ruins morning and evening,'[10] meaning: you know about them, because they lived in your midst before and your ancestors were familiar with them, so you have some bits of information about them.

No mention is made in the Koran of things that are happening in other parts of the world and the religions, sects and creeds that exist in other regions. I take this as evidence favouring the theory of adaptation to the environment and the idea that the verses are in keeping with the Arab environment of the time. Sometimes, when we've participated in dialogues between religions, we've come across this point. The Christians say that the Christian beliefs that are mentioned in the Koran are not the beliefs of all Christians and that their view about the Trinity is not at all what you read in the Koran; that which is in the Koran is the view of a particular tribe which lived in Arabia at the time of the Prophet.

I remember a session in Birmingham, in Britain, seven or eight year ago – which was also attended by some ulema from Qom. There, a Jesuit happened to ask me: 'If we don't subscribe to the view stated in the Koran, are we still unbelievers as far as Islam is concerned? We don't say that God is the Third of Three and most Christians don't hold to this kind of Trinity.'[11] I told him: 'No, in that case, you can't be considered unbelievers on the basis of what the Koran has said.' As it happened, one of the Qom ulema, Ayatollah Ma'refat, was there too and he said: 'If you don't say this, then the verdict of unbelief doesn't apply to you.'

In recounting the beliefs of other groups of people, the Koran has presented precisely the beliefs that were current in Arab society at the time and it has not in any way referred to the varieties within these beliefs – for

example, within Judaism. You can say in this respect: 'There must have been a good reason why God believed that that specific Christian sect's belief was, as a matter of fact, much more important than other Christians' beliefs and that's why He put His finger on it and recounted that specific belief.' It is possible to say this. But it would be more reasonable and more natural for us to say that, just as the Arabic language, which was the language spoken in the Prophet's environment, is reflected in the Koran, so too are these beliefs, because they existed in that environment; or this or that event, because it occurred in that environment. In this way, we've preserved and strengthened the idea that the Koran was in keeping with the environment and the notion of a dialogue-like relationship with the environment and the people.

Hence, the first point is that all the prophets who've been mentioned in the Koran and whose religions and miracles have been spoken about in the holy book are prophets and religions who were known to the Arab society of the day; they were not totally alien to that environment and to the Arabs' beliefs and acquaintance.

The second point is that, when we discuss revelation, we're engaging in a discussion that is external to revelation; we're looking, from the outside, at an event known as revelation, which occurred in Arab society and in the Prophet's consciousness. If we offer evidence in support of or against a particular contention, all the evidence must be external to revelation; to refer to something within revelation in order to prove or disprove a contention about it is methodologically unsound. In other words, you can't appeal to this or that verse that was uttered by the Prophet or say that this or that verse is inconsistent with that theory. The theory that we would have offered from outside revelation would apply equally to all the verses, as long as the theory is correct. Then, if it is correct, we have to annotate the verses on the basis of the theory and annotate them in a way that does not alter the theory.

In fact, the conflict doesn't exist even on the face of things. Move down a step from the process of revelation and look at the process of dreaming. What's your impression of dreaming? Sometimes you dream that someone comes to you and tells you something and teaches you something that you seem not to have known otherwise. They may recite a poem to you and you may remember the poem when you wake up. They may even tell you about an event in the future and that event may actually occur. In other words, it might be a true dream. All these things do occur and it's not something bizarre or inconceivable. It was the same with the Prophet. We have a religious narrative that cites the Prophet as saying that a true dream is one of the 46 elements of prophethood.

Revelation and dreams are made of the same fabric. If you want to understand what revelation is, you should turn to its friend and companion, i.e. dreams, and cross-examine it.

Al-Ghazzali said somewhere that devils, too, convey revelations to people: 'The devils inspire [make revelations to] their friends to dispute with you.'[12] Devils' revelations appear at times of temptation. Al-Ghazzali said: 'If you want to know what revelation is, take a close look at the satanic temptations that you sometimes feel. By looking at them, you can get a slight sense of what revelation is like,' because the Koran itself has used the same word for devils' revelations.[13]

When Satan tempts us, it is as if He is making a revelation to us. We're not prophets and we become targets of satanic temptations. The enticements and internal conflicts that we sometimes feel, inclining us to commit improper deeds, are in fact revelations of a kind. What does this revelation do to you? It makes something appear before your eyes and places theories in your mind which make you think that some deeds are good, because people are drawn towards deeds that they've justified in their minds in one way or another. You'll never do something which you, at the same time, consider totally wrong and reprehensible. When someone commits a sin, they've turned a reprehensible deed into a good deed in their own minds and

provided some kind of a justification for it. This is what satanic temptations - which, according to Al-Ghazzali, are of the same fabric as revelation – do to people.

In order to understand revelation well, try analysing the temptations that you sometimes feel. When there's something bad that you're really tempted to do, look closely at what is drawing you towards that bad deed. See the kind of pretexts that you devise, the tortuous justifications that you come up with, the extents that you go to convince yourself. You marshal all your knowledge, all your theories and all your mental reserves to turn a deed that you shouldn't commit into a deed that you should commit. For example, when you want to speak ill of someone behind their back or when you want to trample on someone's right, and so on. Of course, once someone indulges in these kinds of deeds a few times, they won't even need Satan's inspiration any more, because, by continuing this behaviour, the individual sinks into temptation and doesn't need to be tempted by anyone any longer.

By the same token, just as the analogy of 'satanic revelation' is derived from the Koran, prophets were subject to 'angelic temptations'. They would have true dreams. Virtuous ideas would be awakened within them and, then, they would undergo discoveries and veils would fall away from their eyes.

In fact, remove the expression 'prophetic experience' and replace it with 'prophetic discovery'. Prophetic experience is nothing but this. Bear in mind that some people may not have a very good understanding of 'experience'. Our mystics have used the term 'discovery' extensively. 'The complete Muhammadan discovery.' The Prophet discovered truths and secrets, but his discovery was a complete discovery, in the sense that it was not hazy. He would see secrets or truths clearly and comprehensively. Others, too, discover things, but their discovery is not complete; it is partial and hazy.

When the Prophet undergoes discoveries, he gradually attains a transformed personality that perceives things clearly. He sees everything clearly, understands their implications and speaks about them. And it is perfectly fine if, when someone is speaking about something, at times, it seems to them as if someone is whispering these things into their ear or that they are seeing someone. And this is what we call revelation in the strict sense of the word. The notion that 'this was a lover who could do no wrong' applies in every respect here. In other words, because the Prophet had a polished, honed, fortified and exalted personality, all his words sprang from a fount that was pure and pristine.

All this taken together explains what I said about revelation complying with the Prophet. That is to say, it was in keeping with the Prophet's personality, in keeping with the Prophet's language, in keeping with the Prophet's environment, in keeping with the events that occurred in the Prophet's lifetime, in keeping with the temperament and mind of his people, in keeping with their proverbs, in keeping with the meaning that they'd poured into their words, in keeping with the capacity of their language and outlook. In effect, revelation would adapt itself to these things. As Rumi put it, when the sea is poured into a jug, the sea perforce complies with the jug.[14] The sea doesn't stop being the sea, but what reaches us is what's in the jug and, unavoidably, the sea complies with the jug's dimensions and capacity. How could it be otherwise? At the end of the day, if the sea wants to come into our house, it has to enter our house in these kinds of containers. If the sea wants to be our guest, it has to fit itself into our containers.[15]

Our share of the sea depends on the containers that we take to it. This is what it means to say that revelation complies with the Prophet's personality, environment, life and external and internal experiences. Another way of saying this is that the supernatural/metaphysical basically can't enter the natural/physical unless it takes on the characteristics and temperament of the physical. The supernatural can't step into the natural unless it is poured into natural containers and manifests itself in a natural form.

It seems to me very natural that the Prophet of Islam had dreams – or something like dreams - whereby the tale of prophets were recounted to him. Prophets were very privileged and fortunate people, because those

who told them these tales told true tales. That is to say, we believe that these tales were true. If you ask anyone who doesn't believe in revelation, they won't be of this view.

Let me also say something about religious rulings. My impression is that the legislator of the rulings of fiqh was the Prophet. The Prophet himself was the lawmaker in these cases and, of course, God endorsed the Prophet's lawmaking. The Prophet's fundamental concern in lawmaking was to move the rulings and laws of his society from 'the injustice of the day' to 'the justice of the day' – not an ahistorical justice. In other words, to take society away from what was considered injustice at the time and to direct it towards what was considered justice at the time.

In our religious rulings, the custom and practice of the Prophet's society have been taken very seriously. But we have no reason to believe that the custom and practice of the Prophet's society was the best possible custom and practice in history. There was no other option after all. A set of conventions had to be taken for granted and rulings made on the basis of that model. But this doesn't mean that that set of conventions was the best or that it contained the best regulations, or that the best history or the best understanding of being were to be found there, or that the best scientific theories were current then. Not at all!

Any prophet had to carry out his task with the concepts that existed in the society of his day, just as he had to fight with a sword – not with tanks and artillery, because there were no tanks and artillery. He couldn't invent concepts that didn't exist yet and to teach them to people or ask people to use concepts that weren't available yet. Hence, the rulings of fiqh are temporary unless proven otherwise. All the rulings of fiqh are temporary and belong to the Prophet's society and societies like it, unless proven otherwise, in the sense that there would have to be definite reasons demonstrating that they had been legislated for all times and not just for those particular conditions. Of course, I know that most faqihs are of the opposite view; that is to say, they believe that all the rulings are eternal unless proven otherwise. But if my analyses are correct, we have to accept the consequences and implications.

Q. The simple society of one thousand four hundred years ago, the custom and practice of which wasn't necessarily the best custom and practice, received messages, which led it to achieve a kind of spiritual, psychological, economic and social excellence. The question is: Of what benefit are those messages to us? In fact, if every prophet brings a message for the society of their own time – in keeping with the geography, culture and mental development of the people of their own age – then, what is the substantive meaning of Muhammad being 'the Seal of the Prophets'? After all, he brought a law for his own time which, as it happened, was suited to that time but may not be applicable today. And perhaps 80 per cent of those teachings have no applicability for our society today. And it is the same with other prophets. So, there's no need for us to call these figures prophets at all. Whenever a great reformer, with dedication to humanity, has appeared, they have taken society forward, but this was limited to their own time and is not applicable to other societies because their messages are temporary not permanent. Is that right?

At the same time, based on your theory, the notion that what was permissible [halaal] according to Muhammad is permissible until the end of time and what was impermissible [haraam] according to Muhammad is impermissible until the end of time no longer holds.

The other point is that, on the one hand, the Koran is a holy book, and, on the other hand, this same Koran was revealed to a society, environment and culture which has now changed and which was different from our culture. The question is: What kind of holy book can the Koran be for us today?

And where do God's bounds fit into the theory of the expansion of prophetic experience? Given that the Koran states: 'These are the bounds of God,' and given that some of these bounds [hudud] and social rulings – such as on divorce or fasting – are stipulated in the Koran, how can you explain this based on the picture that you sketched?

Moreover, on the basis of this way of looking at the Koran, monotheism would need to be construed in a different way. It would also seem that, on the basis of your theory, anyone can become a messenger and a prophet and lead a society.

A. First, as I've said in *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, too, prophetic experience - or experiences similar to prophets' experiences - does not cease and always exists. Even if we don't take the course of rational argumentation, Shi'is, at least, hold this view of the infallible Imams. They believe that although they weren't prophets and didn't have the mission of prophethood, they did have prophetic experiences and the experience of discovering things about the world. Hence, even on the basis of Shi'i reasoning, the pronouncement about prophetic experience and its continuation is an official pronouncement and Shi'i theology fully endorses it. In Sunni literature, too, although they don't recognize any infallible religious leaders apart from the Prophet, they do believe that mystics have this capacity.

As to whether anyone can become a prophet, we have to concede that someone may become a prophet to their own mind and undergo particular states, raptures and elations. But Islamic society will deal harshly with such individuals if they stake a claim to prophethood. When the Prophet said, 'There will be no prophets after me,' he was ordering his followers to close this gate and not to believe anyone who claimed prophethood thereafter. And he also advised people who experienced this condition not to communicate it to anyone. Anyone may - in their own personal relationship with God - have particular experiences and feel that they have been assigned particular duties by God and that they no longer have a duty to comply with this or that religion. I have the impression that some distinguished figures - such as Shams-e Tabrizi - experienced conditions close to this. But they never claimed to be prophets or to have their own particular religions and rulings. They would keep it all to themselves and respect outward appearances. Hence, they fall outside the scope of our discussion.

Everyone has their own personal relationship with God and will be held accountable for it. If anyone feels that they can no longer follow the religion of the Prophet of Islam and have some other duty, this is between themselves and God. And people who don't have this feeling will also be held accountable for their actions. Nevertheless, prophet-like experiences obviously continue because the manifestations of God never end. We can't say that God manifested Himself to the Prophet of Islam and that this gate was closed forever thereafter. This manifestation is perpetual and it will continue to be experienced by people in keeping with their capacities.

As to your question about how the Prophet can be of any use to us if all that can be said about him is that he lived at a particular time and said good things and sparked constructive developments, and that there was no shortage of such good reformers and the Prophet of Islam was one of them - but of what use is he to us? Look, we can say this about any great reformer or thinker; this isn't something that's confined to prophets. The fact that the Koran is of use to us does not mean that we should take someone out of their own time and transport them to some other time. This is precisely what we mean by *ijtihad* [formulating judgments about religious matters on the basis of reason and the principles of *fiqh*]. It means that you should be able to breathe life into the past, not that you should repeat things in a parrot-like fashion. We do this in all areas of thought. Whenever it's a question of following some school of thought, we operate in this way. Regardless of whose follower you choose to be, you can't, at any rate, behave exactly as they do. You have to translate their actions into your actions. This translation is the same thing as practising *ijtihad*.

The next point is: Exactly what about the Prophet are we meant to be following? That which formed the kernel of the Prophet's religion and characterized his mission were the initial messages that he brought to his people. First and foremost, the Prophet brought a new world-view. Then he wove a code of moral conduct and laws around this world-view. In other words, religion was a three-storey building or a three-layered aggregate. If you look at the Meccan verses, which were the first to be revealed to the Prophet, you'll see

that the main emphasis is on monotheism and the hereafter, and, alongside God and the hereafter, there are also moral recommendations. First, obey God: 'So let them worship the Lord of this House.'[16] And then there are verses about those who 'forbid almsgiving'[17] and prevent care for the poor and so on. The rulings relating to fiqh were not revealed in Mecca but, later, in Medina. These rulings are religion's outermost layer, which was added to religion last of all. And the Arabs, who gained strength from the Prophet's call and creed, extended it and took it to other countries and stole other people's hearts. This stealing of people's hearts was not related to the rulings of fiqh. We mustn't imagine that it was the fact that the Prophet was able to bring regulations concerning menstruation and childbirth and rulings on slave-owning, marriage and divorce that astounded other societies; what captivated the Arabs and enraptured others was those same main, core messages of Islam. The Prophet's prime message was that we should worship God.

In response to what you said about that which is permissible according to Muhammad, I have to say that it's true that that which was permissible according to Muhammad is permissible until the end of time and that which was impermissible is impermissible until the end of time, but the whole question is: What are this permissible and impermissible?

For 12 centuries, Shi'i faqihs did not perform Friday prayers. Some of them simply considered it impermissible. This is in circumstances in which Friday prayers are stipulated in the Koran. Although they believed that that which is permissible according to Muhammad is permissible until the end of time, they still said: Friday prayers are impermissible for the time being in view of the absence of an infallible Imam. Don't ever look at the appearance of phrases and concepts. There is a clear ruling on Friday prayers in the Koran: 'Believers, when you are summoned to Friday prayers, hasten to the remembrance of God.'[18] Most Shi'i faqihs – with rare exceptions during the Safavid period – had suspended this ruling and did not perform it. And some of them even believed that performing it was impermissible. In our own time and in many other times, faqihs have suspended the implementation of Islamic punishments [hudud]. The late Khansari believed that sentences such as cutting off offenders' hands or beheading offenders should not be implemented. He used to say that these sentences did not relate to our day.

So, it's true that Muhammad's permissible is permissible until the end of time, but considering something permissible or impermissible hinges on provisos and conditions and someone may believe that these provisos and conditions no longer hold and say that we should wait until the end of time. As you said, the Koran states: 'These are the bounds of God.' Correct! But the whole question is when and under what conditions and on the basis of what criteria must God's bounds [hudud] be observed. We always have to practise ijtihad afresh. This is the crux of ijtihad. This is what Shah Wali Allah of Delhi meant by his remark when he said: 'The Prophet built a society because he could not do otherwise.' In fact, the Prophet acknowledged in this way that he would have proceeded in the same way in the midst of any other people. Hence, we, too, must model ourselves on him. But this is not to say that we must copy things in a parrot-like fashion. Everyone has to think carefully about how these general principles should be implemented in their own society and in their own day. The value of the Prophet's actions is the value of a model, not the value of something that remains uniform for all time. Of course, I accept that our faqihs usually don't think like this and don't act and issue fatwas on this basis. But, when you examine the Prophet's work historically and in depth, you realize that he brought about a change in his own society.

Since we've accepted the Prophet's call and teachings, we think that he has nothing more to say to us and that we've accepted what he had to say; whereas the relationship between a disciple and a guide – like the relationship between a patient and a doctor – is always dialectical. When the doctor examines a patient, he gives him medicine and treats him, and the patient gradually becomes well. Then, this healthy patient cannot claim, Since I'm healthy, I don't need a doctor. We have to say to him, You're the same person who needed a doctor when he was ill. But the relationship between a doctor and a patient is basically such that

the doctor tries to overturn the doctor-patient relationship so that the patient doesn't remain ill. It's the same in the teacher-student relationship, where the teacher tries to overturn the relationship so that the student doesn't remain a student forever and becomes a learned person.

The Prophet appears in a society that has a misshapen identity and strives to change this identity. When the identity does change, the people shouldn't say: 'We don't need you anymore since we now have the identity that you wanted us to have.' Our need for the Prophet is for him to shatter our former identity and to give us the gift of a new identity so that we'll continue to have this identity. It is the same over the subsequent generations. In other words, whenever a deviation arises, they have to refer to that initial model again and rectify themselves. Of course, in religiosity, our relationship with prophets is not merely a relationship with their teachings; it is a relationship with their personalities too. This is the meaning of spiritual dominion, which we aren't discussing now. But the Prophet's fundamental teachings are in the realms of beliefs, morality and laws. The slightest of the Prophet's teachings are the fiqh-related teachings and rulings, which, as it happens, form the most accidental part of religion. The most historical part of religion and the outermost layer of religion, as an aggregate, are the rulings of fiqh.

Q. Based on the theory of the expansion of prophetic experience, the Prophet was a human being like other human beings; he had experiences and, over time, these experiences grew, expanded and were perfected. So far so good. But if we also include the Koran in these growing and expanding experiences, then problems arise. The main problem that comes to mind is that it has been said about the revelation made to the Prophet that it took place on a single occasion. In other words, based on the Qadr Sura, the Koran was revealed on the Night of Qadr [Night of Destiny]. But this seems to be inconsistent with your theory or, at least, we can't fit it into the theory.

A. Look, when we speak about revelation and God's words, we assume a particular metaphysics. It is very important what this metaphysics is. I had the feeling from your remarks that you were suggesting that, if we say that the Koran consists of the Prophet's words then this or that problem will arise; whereas if we say that it consists of God's words, then things will turn out differently. I really don't know how and where you place this distance between God and the world. A metaphysics that puts such a distance between God and His creatures must, first, state its presuppositions and, second, state its reasons. In the picture that I sketch, in terms of the cosmology and the question of God and His creatures and the relationship between the two, I don't recognize this kind of distance, nor should one recognize it. What I mean to say is that there is no such verdict in the Islamic world-view or at least in Islamic philosophy. We must be completely clear about this.

In something written by one of our ulema, I saw that it had been said that the voice that Moses heard from the tree came from outside the tree, not from the tree itself. This is an astounding thing to say. Where God is concerned, there's no difference between inside the tree and outside the tree. To speculate about whether this voice, this revelation emanated from within the Prophet or whether it was inculcated from without only means something in relationship to us. We are the ones who speak in terms of within and without and see a difference between the two. When it comes to God, whom we believe is everywhere - and no place is more suited to Him than another and no place is closer to Him than another - it makes no difference whether we say that God spoke from within the Prophet or from without the Prophet. As Rumi put it, tallness and shortness pertain to us; it is meaningless to think in these terms about God.[19]

Length, width and depth, and near and far relate to physical objects and the world of physical objects. Neither these dimensions of space nor dimensions of time, such as past and present, make any sense in relation to God. We don't have morning and night when it comes to God. That is to say, there's no past and present.[20]

Length and width, and near and far don't apply to God. God is inside the Prophet just as much as He is outside the Prophet. Gabriel, too, is inside the Prophet just as much as outside the Prophet. The idea that an angel flaps its wings like a bird or a praying mantis and comes to the Prophet is not right. As I said, the metaphysical encompasses the physical and this encompassing is completely pervasive and it doesn't distinguish between one location and another. Hence, Gabriel or God is just as much inside the Prophet as outside. A human being's spirit doesn't have an inside or an outside anyway.

When we speak about inside and outside and distances between things, we're speaking about physical objects. We need to alter our mental image here. In other words, we need to abandon the model that we've obtained from the world of physical objects. This isn't a suitable model and may lead us astray and distort the image and the picture that we have of what takes place in the world and in the metaphysical world. It is the same with Gabriel and the angel who is said to have brought revelation to the Prophet. Even the people who say this - and philosophers - believe that an angel has no face and no form. The world of angels is not the world of appearances and ghosts and bodies. Hence, the form and the face that it takes are in the Prophet's mind, not real (I've mentioned this in *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*).

Rumi said that, when Mary saw the angel, the angel told her that he was a very complicated being; that he was both within and without; that he was both objective and subjective; both an external fact, like a crescent in the sky, and not an external fact, like an imaginary notion in the mind.[21] In other words, in relation to the angel, inside and outside were one and the same. He was not like other things; not like this room or this piece of fruit where you can speak of inside or outside. In other words, he was telling her not to think in terms of these models, because they didn't apply.

Anyhow, we need to have a correct sense of the way that the metaphysical encompasses the physical. All of the physical/natural is in the heart of the metaphysical/supernatural and no part of the metaphysical is closer to or further away from the physical; it is always equidistant to the physical/natural. And first and foremost this applies to God, and we're not concerned with the rest of the metaphysical just now, because there may be disagreement over it. But, when it comes to God, there can be no disagreement and this verdict is definite.

Let's imagine that God's words are those that Gabriel conveys to the Prophet, not what the Prophet thinks for himself. Then, we still have to ask ourselves: Who conveys these words to Gabriel? Does another angel whisper the words into Gabriel's ears or does Gabriel understand some things for himself and find words ready-made in his mind and, then, act as a mediator and convey them to the Prophet? In the end, we have to stop somewhere and believe that a being arrives at some notions in an unmediated way and recognizes that these notions are godly. Now, if you don't assume that the Prophet is a being of this kind, who hears words in an unmediated way, you have to arrive at a point in the chain where there's no mediator. We can't say that Gabriel, too, has his own Gabriel and that that Gabriel has another Gabriel ad infinitum. In this system and in this mental model, we have to reach a point where we say that a being (call the being what you will) is in the possession of some notions and recognizes that these notions are godly. According to Koranic verses, there are several kinds of revelation: 'It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or that he should send a messenger and he reveal whatsoever He will, by His leave.'[22]

These are all varieties of revelation: Direct revelation, mediated revelation and unmediated revelation. This is correct. But the point is that this mediated-ness alone is not the criterion for godliness. I don't deny that revelation may be mediated but mediated-ness must not be taken as the criterion for godliness. The Prophet himself may arrive at a thought or a judgment or a discovery (I prefer to use the word 'discovery') and this discovery may be godly and it may be called revelation. There's nothing wrong with this. What the mechanism is for arriving at this discovery doesn't really affect the substance of revelation. It makes no

difference what the mechanism is. You can say, an angel tells him. You can say, the Prophet himself had special qualities. I've brought all these things under the heading of the Prophet having God's endorsement. The Prophet was a being whose thinking was under God's supervision and was guided by God. And the words that he spoke were completely methodic, systematic and under special guidance. I don't think there's any problem in this respect.

In sum, we don't have any problem with the godliness of revelation. When we say that revelation was related to the Prophet's time and place, to the history and the age, none of this detracts from its godliness, because it means that the Prophet, under God's guidance, said what God wanted him to say at any particular point in time and on any particular occasion.

Godliness doesn't mean that whatever someone says and whatever they do is beyond time and place – this is supernatural-ness. You're speaking about supernatural-ness and supernatural-ness is different from godliness. Nature is godly too; as is the metaphysical/supernatural. Godliness is broader than supernatural-ness. Yes, the metaphysical/supernatural is beyond time and place. That is to say, if we were angels, we'd obviously have a different relationship to the world. And now that we're within time and place, we have a different relationship. But we'd be godly in either case. That is to say, whether we were angels or human beings, we'd still be God's creations and, in either case, the reins of our affairs, our existence and our survival would be in His hands.

The Prophet's work, his existence, his revelation, his mission are all godly. In other words, they're under God's supervision and guidance. But they aren't beyond time and place, because the Prophet himself wasn't beyond time and place. After all, the Prophet appeared in a particular century, not in all centuries. He appeared in a particular place, not in all places. He was born to a particular mother and father, not to all mothers and fathers. He spoke in a particular language, not in all languages. He was speaking with a particular group of people, not with all people. And so on and so forth.

Since the Prophet was bound by a body, he'd stepped into the world of nature and everything in the world of nature is per force natural. In other words, it carries the stamp of naturalness on its forehead and does not transgress this boundary; it isn't supernatural. Even the spirit, which is believed by philosophers to be metaphysical/supernatural, has become natural once it has entered this world. In other words, it has become entrapped by the body. If the spirit wants to see, it has to see through these same physical eyes and, if it wants to hear, it has to hear through these physical ears. Philosophers believe that the spirit can hear. And the spirit is not a body. It doesn't have ears, eyes and legs. But, when it comes to this world, its conduct is bound by our limbs and bodies; it can't act independently.

Our spirit can't fly. If we go travelling, our spirit travels with us and, if we don't, it doesn't either. It's not as if the spirit says, I'm a celestial and supernatural being and I disregard these physical restrictions. It is the same with revelation. According to the picture drawn by the Koran, Gabriel, too - whenever he appeared to the Prophet and wished to speak to him - spoke in Arabic, not in every language. In other words, the angel, too, accepted nature's restrictions. The angel, too, would go to Hijaz, in Arabia, to speak to the Prophet, not to some other continent. What I mean to say is that the angel accepted that the Prophet was under certain restrictions and that he, too, would therefore have to submit to these restrictions. This is the general metaphysics of revelation.

So, we have to remember that, in all these discussions, there's a presupposition that we mustn't overlook. The presupposition is that we are in the world of nature and everything about us is natural. Everything about us has the colour and characteristics of nature. Everything bears the stamp of time, place, era and environmental conditions. But this by no means entails that the relevant body is not godly and that it is human through and through. It doesn't negate God's guidance and supervision.

On the question of whether the Koran was revealed on a single occasion or over time, as a matter of fact, as I said, one of the positive results of the theory of the expansion of prophetic experience is that it allows these two versions to coexist easily and straightforwardly; whereas other people run into many difficulties on this issue. It's been said that the Koran descended once to the worldly firmament, once to the immortal mansion; that it descended on the Night of Qadr and that it then, gradually, descended from the immortal mansion to the Prophet's heart. Very strange things have been said which don't even have any clear meaning.

When it is said that the Koran was revealed all at once it means that the Prophet's personality became Koranic on the Night of Qadr. The Night of Qadr was the night on which the Prophet attained his quest. The Prophet lived an abstemious life for about 40 years and, at the age of 38 – or 40 according to some accounts – he suddenly became enlightened, like the Buddha, on a single night. He received a revelation and the veils suddenly fell away from his eyes. The Prophet saw that night, which fell in the month of Ramadan, as the Night of Qadr and he later gave it this name. That night was in fact his own night of destiny, the night of union, the night on which he arrived at his destination and became a prophet. It was the night on which all his asceticism and effort bore fruit.

The Prophet used to go to a cave on Mount Hira for retreats and he would sleep there. I can picture it well. He would gaze at the star-filled sky and sink into thought. Suddenly, one night, everything lit up. It was his Night of Qadr and his night of union. It was the night on which the Koran was revealed to him and he declared it the Night of Qadr for evermore. The Prophet understood very well that the Night of Qadr was 'worth a thousand months'. If you endure a thousand months of asceticism to arrive at a night like this, this night will be worth those thousand months. 'A thousand months' simply conveys the sense of multitude; he could just as easily have said 'a thousand years'. So, if you endure austerity for a long time, work hard and keep waiting until, one night, the beloved comes to you, then that night is the Night of Qadr and the night of union.

On that night, the Prophet, in effect, became Koranic. In this sense, the Koran was revealed to him in its entirety. He became a personality from which the Koran henceforth emanated. His personality became a wealth on which he could draw for the rest of his life. Hence, this Koran was revealed to the Prophet all at once. In other words, the Prophet became a prophet all at once and, then, he gradually spent this wealth and conveyed to the people the verses of the Koran as they came to him. In the other construals that I mentioned, combining these two versions of events cannot be achieved clearly and meaningfully.

Q. There are verses in the Koran that clearly convey a sense that there is something outside the Prophet, constantly watching and supervising him and constantly cautioning him about any kind of departure from the given model. For example, the admonitions that I mentioned: 'He frowned and turned away,' 'and had We not confirmed thee, surely thou wert near to inclining unto them a very little,' and 'perchance thou art leaving part of what is revealed to thee'.[23] Or where the Prophet is asked not to move his tongue before the revelation is completed. In other words, the intention is to halt, in a way, the normal functioning of memory and memorizing in the Prophet. In this way, he's told: Entrust yourself fully to our words.

Another point is that you said somewhere that, since the Koran expanded over time, it could have been much longer than it is. In other words, based on your construal, if more events had occurred in the Prophet's life, then, the Koran would have been longer. And people have said in reaction to this that the Koran could, therefore, also have been shorter; if, for example, the Prophet had lived fewer years or had experienced fewer events. These people have asked you, in turn, to say what 'Today I have perfected your religion for you and I have completed my blessing upon you,'[24] means. The common interpretation of this verse is that, at one point, the Koran says, Today, what We have revealed to you has been completed. This completion means that the process had to reach this point; in other words, today, when it has reached

this point, it has been completed. Hence, if it was any shorter than it is, then ‘Today I have perfected your religion for you,’ would not have occurred. So, surely, the Koran had to have a specific length in order to be perfect and complete?

A. As you said, there are phrases in the Koran that are addressed directly to the Prophet. You mentioned a few of them, but there are many more. However, I don’t understand in what way this is inconsistent with what I said. No one is denying that the Koran was revealed to the Prophet or that the Prophet felt that someone was speaking to him. Even people inferior to prophets have feelings of this kind, never mind about prophets. You and I may have dreams in which we see someone speaking to us. It has happened to me many times. Someone may recite a poem to me. And I’ve written some of these poems down later. The poems are not my poems. They aren’t anyone else’s poems either. They are entirely new. In other words, I can attribute them to myself, because they haven’t been composed by anyone before! Be that as it may, they’ve been composed by someone who has recited them to me in my dreams.

Or take the conjuring up of spirits. It has happened many times. You’ve seen the Arabic book *The Human Being is a Spirit not a Body*. It’s an important book, published in two volumes. It describes the different types of contacts with spirits. It begins with a very long ode. The author of the book, who is a professor at the Ayn al-Shams University in Egypt, has written that, after the death of Ahmed Shawqi, the Egyptian master poet, they conjured up his spirit and the spirit recited a long ode, which appears in the book. He writes that they presented the ode to Arab literary experts. They all confirmed that it could only be by Shawqi. The ode did not exist before Shawqi’s spirit was conjured up and no one else could have composed it.

What the mechanism is for conjuring up spirits doesn’t concern us now. If the above story is true, it means that, in an incident that was not a normal incident – that is to say, it wasn’t speaking or thinking or composing poetry as we normally know it – someone has conveyed to the mind of a mediator, who wasn’t in a normal state, some material in the form of a poem; a very eloquent and excellent poem, which we can now read. What I’m saying is that this part of it is nothing extraordinary. It happens to ordinary people too.

The Arabs themselves believed at the time of the Prophet that poems were conveyed to poets’ minds by mediators. Mr. Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd, who has been subjected to many attacks in Egypt, has a good book by the name of *Mafhum al-Nass*. He’s spoken in this book about this same idea of the historicity of the Koran. One of the main points he makes is that many of the concepts that appear in the Koran are concepts with which the Arabs were familiar. I’ve made the same point in ‘*The Prophetic Mission and the Crisis of Identity*’. So, the Arabs did not quarrel with the Prophet over these things. In other words, when the Prophet said, I receive revelations and an angel brings these revelations, no one was surprised and they didn’t tell the Prophet, in protest, that he was saying strange things. They believed that such things did occur. They believed that poets received revelations and that something like an angel or a devil revealed poems to poets. So, they weren’t at all surprised and didn’t quarrel with the Prophet over this. It was all very natural and acceptable to them.

Perhaps ordinary Arabs – or at least some of them – had similar experiences. That someone should feel that they are being spoken to, admonished, ordered, encouraged or discouraged to do or not to do something - there’s nothing surprising about this and it occurs in ordinary life too. We simply look at it differently in the Prophet’s case because we consider him a Prophet. If we didn’t consider him a Prophet, we’d attribute it to his imagination, in the way we do with ordinary people. But since we consider him a Prophet, we believe that the states that he experienced were under God’s supervision and guidance; that it had been ordained that people would receive counsel and guidance via this man; and that, by and large, history was to be guided in a particular direction. But the basic fact of the matter is comprehensible and non-problematic.

Q. Was it a kind of soliloquy, whereby the Prophet murmured to himself?

A. No, it's not a soliloquy. As I said, when you see someone speaking to you in your dream, we can't call it a soliloquy. In many instances, what is being said is unexpected. You aren't the actor, you're the recipient. That is to say, something happens to you without your volition.

When we say that these things were linked to the Prophet's personality, it doesn't mean that he used to invent them himself; it means that they were linked to his capabilities and his spiritual wealth.

Q. In fact, the Prophet's undergoes an illumination, which constantly pervades him and directs him. Is that no so?

A. Yes.

Q. The numerical wonder of the Koran – of course, some of it may be disputed – but a large part of it is indisputable and shows that there are certain laws involved. Part of this wonder, by the name of the numerical wonders, has been discovered for us and people have managed to uncover it, but there may be many others which have yet to be discovered. Can we say that God wanted some of these things to be revealed in this form and to be presented and preserved in this same form or not?

A. What do you mean when you say, God wanted it? The fact that God wanted it or didn't want it doesn't explain anything here. If the Koran had 10,000 verses instead of the 6,000 and a bit verses that it has now, we'd still say that God wanted it to be 10,000 verses. If, instead of 6,000, it had 600 verses, we'd still say that God wanted it to be 600 verses. We have no way of knowing what God wanted. This 'God wanted it' is always a kind of explanation after the event or, as philosophers of science put it, a post hoc explanation. If we could offer an explanation before the event and then compare the event with our explanation after it had actually occurred, then, we could draw a tangible conclusion.

What do we say about nature now? We believe that nature was created by God. The angle of a light ray's incidence and the angle of reflection are equal in nature now. If they were unequal, we'd still say that God wanted it this way. I mean that this theory of God wanted it like this won't solve anything. This goes back to the relationship between science and metaphysics. If this relationship is thoroughly clarified, then, some of these questions will be answered; otherwise, not. Don't ever use, the will of God, what God wanted and so on as theories for explaining natural events. The relationship between God's will, God's knowledge and all of God's attributes with all natural phenomena is equal.

Scientific explanations are not explanations after the event; they explain what ought to happen before it happens. On the basis of the theory of the equality of a ray's angle of incidence and angle of reflection, we say that the next time you shine a light at a 50-degree angle, the angle of reflection will definitely be - and has to be - 50 degrees. But we can never say such a thing about God's will and God's knowledge and His other attributes. There have been 124,000 prophets. We say that it was God's will that there should have been 124,000 prophets. If there had been 125,000 prophets, we'd still say that it was God's will that there should have been 125,000. And if there had been only 100 prophets, we'd still say that that was God's will and what God wanted.

In a book written by one of our clerics, the author asks: Why were there 12 Shi'i Imams? Then, he answers his own question by saying: Because God's intention was fulfilled with 12 Imams. I wrote to him and said: What kind of answer is this! If there had been 17 Imams, you'd still say the same thing: Why were there 17 Imams? Because God's intention was fulfilled with 17 Imams!

You can't explain anything by saying that it was God's will. This is an important point. I'm not saying that God's will is not involved; I'm saying that it can't be used to explain events. If the Prophet had lived half as many years as he did, we'd say that it was God's will that it should have been like that. If he'd lived twice as

long as he did, if there had been more verses than there are, if there had been fewer verses, however things were, we'd still say, It was God's will.

Even if the traits that we attribute to the Koran – for example, the numerical accords and relationships between the verses – did not exist, we'd still say, God wanted it like this. We're not going to get anywhere with this kind of answer and notion, and we're not going to establish anything in this way. If you like, after whatever I say, you can just add, 'God wanted it like this' or 'It was God's will'; this will solve your problem.

So, let me say, If it had been God's will, then Koran would have been longer than it is. Unless you maintain that it's impossible for God to have willed it other than it is. Then, I would say to you, Have you ever been a god or a god's assistant? Otherwise, how does one know that God willed anything to be other than what it is? If God had willed it, the Koran would have been longer. If God had willed it, the Koran would have been shorter. If this 'It was God's will' makes you happy, just place it after all my theories and the problem will be solved and finished. But do bear in mind that this 'It was God's will' provides a false gratification. You shouldn't resort to it. You should just look at the natural phenomenon of the birth of the Koran. Of course, however it was born, you could say that it was God's will for it to be born like that. And there's nothing wrong with saying this.

When it comes to the Prophet, the Koran and the materialization of revelation, there's no problem regardless of the way in which we speak about the natural circumstances of these events, because the underlying assumption is that the ceiling of God hangs over all of them. However the Koran had turned out, it would still have been under God's supervision. If it didn't have the traits that it now has, it would still have been God's will. And now that it does have them, it's still God's will.

In order to know that an utterance is godly, we have to look at its contents and substance; at the tell-tale scent of revelation, in the way that, as I said, Al-Ghazzali detects it. This is our guide and it is this that's lasting. This is what someone has to convey to us as the lesson that the Teacher has given us. We believe that God also had other prophets, who were lesser prophets than the Prophet of Islam. Well, this, too, is God's will. We believe that their revelations did not have the strength that the Prophet of Islam's revelation has. So, God can send revelations that are less strong and less comprehensive than the Koran. This, too, is God's will. In other words, if the Koran's scope and perfection were less than they are now, we'd still be able to say that that's how God wanted it. And now that they are as they are, it is still how God wanted it.

As to the question about the perfection and completeness of the Koran and the Al-Ma'ida verse that states, 'Today I have perfected your religion for you and I have completed my blessing upon you,' I've explained about this verse in The Expansion of Prophetic Experience. Yes, religion has a stage of perfection, but this stage relates to religion's essentials, not its accidentals. In other words, the Koran could have been much shorter than it is and still achieve perfection, because the Koran's accidentals don't play a role in its perfection. That is to say, if the Prophet had fought fewer wars than he had by the time this verse was revealed or if, for example, the tale of the accusation levelled against Aisha had never happened and had not appeared in the Koran, the Koran would have been no less perfect.

The Prophet's mission and the conveyance of the message were completed and perfected when the main messages of the Koran had been conveyed. Of course, there are also accidentals, which may or may not have been included without harming the Koran's perfection. And, as you said, there were many other accidentals at the time of the Prophet which don't appear in the Koran. The Koran wasn't meant to be a comprehensive chronicle of everything that happened after all. Things that were related to the message or could help explain the message or sensitive questions and events have been included – and some have not been included; but the Prophet's main message had to be included.

In fact, it seems that the Prophet generally proceeded in the following way: he would begin with the beliefs; then, he would put a coating of morality over the beliefs; and, then, a legal/fiqhi coating over that. See for yourself: in Mecca, the first verses that the Prophet brought were about monotheism, God and the hereafter. Great emphasis was placed on these two issues. Alongside this, some moral issues were also highlighted: 'Woe to those who pray but are heedless of their prayers, who make a show of piety but forbid almsgiving.' [25] These kinds of instructions didn't have a legal/fiqhi dimension at all.

The Prophet's message was, in fact, completed when these three layers of religion were presented in brief and not in a very expanded form and at length. The Prophet's work in Medina largely consisted of laying the legal foundations, lawmaking and specifying the secondary principles of religion to the required extent. Hence, religion was perfected, in the sense that its design was perfected, not in the sense that all its particular components were put in place; exactly like when a building's design and structure have been determined. But no one has said that all the particulars were revealed to the Prophet or that the perfection of religion implied an all-embracing scope.

Moreover, many commentators are of the view that this was not the last verse that was revealed to the Prophet and that there were many verses after this. If perfecting meant that there should be no more verses thereafter, why were more verses revealed after the verse about the perfection and completion of religion? Hence, the perfecting was a perfecting of the essentials. In other words, the main structure of religion had been presented in brief and religion was a three-layered structure. In the centre, there is a kernel consisting of beliefs and a world view; over this, there is a coating of morality; and, then, over these two layers, there is a coating of laws and fiqh. And they were all made of the fabrics that existed in that age. The two latter layers were, according to the construal of our mystics, a shell; like an oyster shell for protecting the kernel or the pearl that lies inside. They serve as the protectors. And the protection is necessary both to prevent the kernel from falling into the hands of the unworthy and to pass it on to future generations.

In this way, the Prophet's mission was completed. That is to say, he put the structure at the people's disposal. And, in the words of the late Shah Wali Allah, this structure is a model; i.e. future generations must work on the structure with *ijtihād*. They must take their basic model from the Prophet and build the rest themselves.

Q. Can we say that that part of the Koran or religion that falls under the essentials is not time- and place-bound, but that that part of it that falls under the accidentals is time- and place-bound?

A. It depends on what you mean by time and place. If by time and place you mean utterances that relate to a particular period in time, then, yes, it is as you say. There are some utterances that belong to a particular period in time and, when that period passes, the utterances become dated. But this isn't what I mean when I speak of the Koran being time-bound and place-bound. When I say that the Koran is historical, I mean that its entire birth and genesis took place in particular historical circumstances, and that all its roots and veins are in its own age, whether its essentials or its accidentals; in this sense, there is no difference between the two. And my model is the Arabic language; both the Koran's essentials and its accidentals have been expressed in Arabic.

No author or thinker can escape the tools and instruments of their own time. The Prophet had to use these concepts and moulds. He didn't have any choice. He expressed everything in the language and in the culture of the time. When we speak about essentials and accidentals, we don't mean that some are transient and others aren't; the accidentals, too, may be of permanent use. But what we have to do is to carry out a cultural translation.

The essentials are the Lawmaker's main intentions. The accidentals were the incidents and events that occurred, and sometimes it was necessary that they should be mentioned and a conclusion drawn from

them. But both the essentials and the accidentals can always teach us things, on the condition that we carry out a cultural translation.

Here, essentials and accidentals don't mean non-transitory and transitory or time- and place-bound. What we mean is that, when a creature comes into being, it cannot be unneeded of the elements of its own time. It cannot step into the arena of existence without benefiting from these elements. Future generations must be aware of this point so that they can strip off the coating and pull out the pearl that is hidden inside. This is what it means when it is sometimes said that they must be treated as myths, but we don't use this term now.

Q. Based on what you've said, why must we be duty-bound by the practices – social practices and practices relating to worship - that prophets decreed? If we arrive at that formless and undefined matter ourselves in a different age, we may, naturally, discover other things. For example, why must we, in the 20th century, perform the ritual prayer in the way that the Prophet did? We can sit and meditate – and there are many different ways of meditating and achieving spiritual rapture these days.

Or why do we need to fast like the Prophet did? We can purify ourselves by other means. If we arrive at that formless matter ourselves, can we establish duties for ourselves or must we still abide by the duties decreed by the Prophet?

If the Prophet had received his prophetic mission a hundred or a thousand years later, we wouldn't have the things that we have in the Koran today, except for the points about monotheism and the hereafter, of course. In other words, the social practices would be different and, naturally, the Koran would be different. Hence, since we don't live in the time of the Prophet, we can have other duties. In other words, we can change the social practices and, in view of the fact that we don't live in the Prophet's time today, we can have other duties and laws. But would these laws still be godly?

A. The question of rites and rituals, laws, customs and manner of worship has a long tale, and, of course, the theory of the expansion of Prophetic experience doesn't touch on this one way or the other. In other words, I haven't entered into this debate. You can't extract anything from the theory of the expansion of Prophetic experience that suggests that fiqh is or is not lasting, or that it can or cannot be put into practice today. In order to establish this, we'd need to turn to other premises and preliminaries. It depends on our take on the nature of fiqh and the Lawmaker's intention.

Fiqh has been subdivided in different ways. The way I subdivide it is like this: 1. The things that fall under the heading of justice and injustice are categorized as Islamic social practices. In other words, when you can say that this or that deed, this or that conduct, this or that reaction is just or unjust – anything that can take this adjective falls under the heading of social practices, political practices, etc.; in other words, they're not considered to be practices that relate to worship; 2. the things that do not fall under the heading of justice and injustice are called acts of worship or practices relating to worship. Of course, this is not how faqihs subdivide things, but, in order to say what I want to say, I have to use these categories.

Take food and drink, for example: the rulings about what we are allowed to eat and drink and what we aren't allowed to eat and drink; what is allowed [halaal] and what is not allowed [haraam]. These don't fit under the heading of justice and injustice. It is a matter of personal duties and knowing what to eat and what not to eat. Here, it is a question of practices that relate to worship. The hajj, prayers, fasting, ablutions and so on fall into this category.

On the practices relating to worship, if we've understood well the meaning of the prophethood, things proceeded in the following way: First, the Prophet reached certain states of excellence and perfection; then,

these states led him to perform particular practices; then, he taught us these practices so that we could attain those states. In other words, what were effects in the Prophet's case become causes for us.

Imagine that some thoughts take hold in your mind which lead you to withdraw from others, to lower your head and eyes, maybe even to shut your eyes. You sit in silence for a while and want others to be silent too in order to resolve what is happening in your mind and, then, to go back to your normal state. In fact, your silence, your withdrawal and so on are the effects of those thoughts. When those thoughts take hold and enthrall you, that kind of behaviour naturally follows. Then, afterwards, you come and teach me. You say, If you want to think correctly, you must really concentrate, you must be silent, you must sit silently somewhere, you mustn't allow distracting thoughts into your mind. In other words, you propose as causes to me the things that were effects for you. This was not the starting point for you. In your own case, it is the strong mental state that automatically takes your mind away from all distractions. It is the thoughts in your head that make you fall silent. But, because you've had this experience, you tell me, If you want to achieve clear thoughts, if you want to resolve a problem, concentrate, be silent, withdraw to a quiet place and so on.

For example, when you are deep in thought, you don't even think about drinking or eating. And, then, you may say to me, If you want to think well and solve problems well, don't eat very much and so on. You present to me as a cause that which was the effect of your experience. You advise me to adopt this kind of behaviour so that I attain that state.

To put it much more simply, prophets attained certain states of excellence. Then, they discovered some acts of worship. Subsequently, they told us to perform these acts of worship so that we could attain those states. In other words, acts of worship were effects for prophets but, for us, they are causes that produce those states of excellence.

As the disciples of prophets, we need these experiences very much, because one meaning of being a disciple of a prophet is to partake in their experiences. It was the Prophet's experience that fasting was an excellent practice. Fasting exists in all religions. Or that drinking alcoholic drinks is very bad – this exists in all religions. Even in Buddhism, alcoholic drinks are forbidden. All these venerable individuals had realized that alcoholic drinks impede exalted spiritual experiences. All these venerable individuals had realized that you need to be empty of food if you want to be filled with spiritual light.

So, we need the prophets. In fact, it is probably in this sphere that we need them most. They've placed special worship-related experiences before us and told us, Follow these paths! Rising in the middle of the night to perform acts of worship was something that all the prophets did. No great man of spirituality ever achieved anything without such vigils. In the Koran, too, God says to the Prophet: 'Keep vigil all night, save for a few hours; half the night or even less, or a little more. And, with measured tone, recite the Koran, for we are about to address to you words of surpassing gravity. It is in the vigils in the night that impressions are strongest and words most eloquent.'[26]

These night-time occurrences are more durable. In the night, there is silence and the mind can concentrate; the attachments that tie down the spirit during the day fall away or loosen and one is much more receptive to messages and to more powerful and clearer discoveries. This is what the Prophet commands. This is a command that has been given to all prophets or a discovery that has been made by all prophets. They've realized themselves that there are gifts to be received in the dark of the night: 'In the day-time, you are hard pressed with the affairs of this world.'[27] At night, when these affairs abate and when people leave you in peace, you must perform your main task.

These are things that we must learn from the prophets. In the sphere of acts of worship, there are hidden interests and benefits. In other words, mechanisms are proposed to us and we don't know why they take the

form that they do and why they produce particular results. But, since some individuals have experienced these things, we respect their experiences.

However, it is a completely different matter when it comes to justice and injustice. In setting out the social rulings that relate to justice and injustice, the Prophet took the people of his own age from that day's injustice to that day's justice, from that day's ignorance to that day's knowledge; not from the day's injustice to ahistorical justice, not from the day's ignorance to ahistorical knowledge. This is what the Prophet did, in effect, in the legal, social and political rulings and everything relating to justice and injustice. This is what all prophets have done. However, here, it is the model that is important to us. In some cases, we follow the Prophet's model and, in other cases, we follow his exact experience; it all depends on the category.

On women's rights, men's rights, inheritance, blood money, talion, everything relating to politics, the state, social rulings, buying and selling, marriage, divorce and everything relating to fiqh, what the Prophet did in effect was to push aside what was described as injustice in his day and to present something that was recognized as justice in his day. Justice and injustice are entirely time-bound.

To put it in a different, more general way, there are no hidden benefits in Islam's socio-political rulings; all the benefits are visible. In other words, no one can say, Do this but don't concern yourself with its benefits. Socio-political rulings have visible benefits and, if no benefits are visible, the relevant ruling is null and void. This is a fallacy committed by some of our faqihs. When they're asked, Sir, why is this or that law on women's rights or inheritance or politics as it is? - they reply, Why do the ritual prayers take the form that they do? In other words, they suggest that, just as we accept the prayers in the form that they are without asking why – and it will become clear on Judgment Day what the benefits were – it is the same when it comes to politics, the state, commerce and so on; whereas this is not the case. These two things fall into two different categories. The worship-related practices have hidden benefits and don't fall under the heading of justice and injustice. In the case of buying and selling and the like, there are no hidden benefits and they fall under the heading of justice and injustice; they have visible benefits.

We want commerce and politics for this world. No one can tell us, Do whatever you're told in the name of religion and submit to it, even if you're crushed by it, because its benefits will become clear on Judgment Day. This is an unacceptable thing to say. Here, too, we must practise ijtihad. That is to say, we must go from our time's injustice to our time's justice. This is the way in which we need the prophets.

** Translated from the Persian by Nilou Mobasser

[1] The 111th sura in the Koran.

[2] Al-Nur, 11.

[3] Al-Najm, 5-7.

[4] Al-Takwir, 19-21.

[5] Al-Qiyamah, 16-17.

[6] Abasa, 1.

[7] Al-Isra, 74.

[8] Hud, 12.

[9] We were in the Netherlands recently and this issue came up there. As you know, in Al-Ahzab Sura, there are many verses about the Prophet's wives and his family. In one verse, God says the following about the women whom the Prophet may marry: 'We have made lawful for thee... any woman believer if she gives herself to the Prophet and if the Prophet desire to take her in marriage, for thee exclusively, apart from the believers.' This verse was revealed at a time when a woman had given and presented herself to the Prophet. In some of our religious narratives, Aisha has been quoted as saying to the Prophet when this verse was revealed: How well God looks after you; how quickly He sends verses that are pleasing to you.

[10] Al-Saffat, 137.

[11] The Koran states: 'They are unbelievers who say, "God is the Third of Three."' (Al-Ma'idah, 73)

[12] Al-An'am, 121.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Mathnawi, Vol. 2, 20.

[15] It has been said that God asked a beggar who'd been raised from the dead on Judgment Day: 'What have you brought?' The beggar said: 'O God! When we were in the world, whenever we asked your miserly servants, they'd give us nothing and say: "God will provide, God is munificent." Now that we're here, you're asking us what we've brought, but we've come here to receive!' God replied: 'No, I didn't mean what have you brought in that sense. I meant what size container have you brought, so that we know how much to give you. Have you brought a jug? Have you brought a pouch? Have you brought a sack?'

[16] Quraysh, 3.

[17] Al-Ma'un, 7.

[18] Al-Jum'ah, 9.

[19] Mathnawi, Vol. 4, 533.

[20] On this placelessness and timelessness, see, for example, Mathnawi, Vol. 3, 1151-52.

[21] Mathnawi, Vol. 3, 3773.

[22] Al-Shura, 51.

[23] See footnotes 7-9 above.

[24] Al-Ma'idah, 4.

[25] Al-Ma'un, 3-7.

[26] Al-Muzammil, 2-6.

[27] Ibid, 7.