Truth, Reason, Salvation

Q. Since you put forward the theory of religious pluralism, there's been much debate on the subject and various people have commented on it. But understanding the theory of pluralism must surely take precedence over criticising and judging it. A brief look at the debates suggests that this idea hasn't been well understood yet and, of course, this fact overshadows any criticism. We'll therefore use this opportunity to probe the issues involved in order to arrive at a better and more in-depth understanding of the theory.

It would seem that the theory of religious pluralism can be examined and discussed from three angles. First, in terms of its theoretical foundations. If someone doesn't accept the theoretical foundations, they will clearly not accept the theory either; theoretical foundations such as our understanding of truth, the essence of religion, rationality, salvation and so on. Some of the questions raised here will be about these theoretical foundations. And we'll try, with your assistance, to improve the comprehension of these theoretical foundations.

Secondly, some of the objections and questions that have been raised concern the consequences and results of accepting this theory. If someone accepts the theory of religious pluralism, they have to adjust their current beliefs to bring them into line with the theory's implications or arrive at a new understanding of their beliefs. This itself has caused a certain amount of anxiety among some believers, because they feel they cannot accommodate the implications of this theory within their belief system.

The third angle is mainly methodological; that is to say, some people are asking why we have to approach the debate on pluralism from an extra-religious

perspective and why we can't look at it from an intra-religious perspective. There are others who believe that the reasons you have given to substantiate and support the theory are insufficient. Hence, our questions will fall under these three categories.

My first question concerns the way we approach the subject of religious pluralism. At times, you cite certain verses from the Koran or religious narratives to explain and support your assertions. The critics, too, base their rejection of this pluralism on certain verses from the Koran, religious narratives, and the words and deeds of our revered religious figures. Should the debate about religious pluralism take place internally, on the basis of religious sources and texts, or from an extra-religious perspective? And how do justify your choice of perspective? Why do you suggest on occasion that this debate must be viewed, first and foremost, from an extra-religious perspective and that we must then adjust our intra-religious perceptions to it?

A. In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. I'd like to thank you for opening the discussion and for setting out the issues in such a clear way to help shed more light on the arguments about religious pluralism. As you said, the theory of religious pluralism rests on certain foundations and assumptions. The question of truth, rationality, being rightly guided, salvation, the essence of religion and, I'd like to add, the issue of « nominalism » are among the underlying assumptions of the theory of pluralism. Of course, nominalism is not one of the decisive and unavoidable prerequisites of pluralism, but it does have a bearing on and is linked to this issue, and we may touch on this subject later.

You asked about the extra-religious or intra-religious nature of the debate. In fact, I think you can broach the question of pluralism from either perspective, but the issues that will arise will differ, as will the scope of the implications. We can ask, what's Islam's position on pluralism? We can ask about Christianity's position. In this case, we would have to refer to the teachings internal to these two religions and put our question to these religions' leaders and thinkers. However, if we don't want to know Islam's specific viewpoint or Christianity's specific viewpoint on this issue, then logic would dictate that we pitch the

question in a purely rational and extra-religious way such that the answer would hold equally true for all religions; in which case, we would pose our question in the following terms: given the actually existing plurality of religions, what theoretical or practical position should we adopt? Theoretically, should we see them as equally valid paths towards salvation or not? And, in practice, must we treat all religions and all their followers with equal tolerance and forbearance?

Hence, the extra-religious perspective raises the question about all religions, regardless of their truth or falsehood, whereas the intra-religious perspective assumes one religion to be the true religion and asks for its view regarding all other religions. This is the first point.

The second point is that understanding intra-religious teachings is (according to the theory put forward in *Contraction and Expansion*) basically impossible without referring to extra-religious ideas and truths. If we reach a particular conclusion on pluralism extra-religiously and commit ourselves to it, then our intra-religious perception will per force fall into line with it. At the very least, there will be some interaction between our intra-religious and extra-religious perception. But, if we speak strictly intra-religiously and hold no views about this extra-religiously, it will mean that our work and our conclusions will remain incomplete.

The point that I'd like to add here is that, in discussing pluralism, we have to distinguish our own position from that of the prophets. Any prophet and the founder of any religion only calls on people to follow his religion. In other words, no prophet can be a pluralist. A prophet's entire raison d'être is to call on others to follow him and to dissuade them from adherence to other schools and sects. Any prophet essentially urges people to follow his religion and incidentally stokes the furnace of pluralism, because he adds another sect to all the previous sects. This is in the nature of prophethood. But when we are not acting as prophets, when we're simply observing and describing religions, we have no choice but to begin outside religion and, then, to assess the claims made within a given religion, because with pluralism, the intention is to find a theoretical explanation for and a practical

approach to the actually existing plurality in the realm of religion. The intention is not to establish the truth of one religion and the falsehood of all others.

As we said, in the first instance it is prophets themselves who bring about this plurality; it is the unintended consequence of their message. Now it is up to us to make what we can of this inevitable, unintended consequence. Imagine, for example, that we are discussing the truth. It goes without saying that every prophet believes he is propagating the truth. But heeding a prophet's message does not lie in our assuming that it is the truth as soon as we hear it. We must first make it clear in our own minds in a general and extra-religious way what we mean by truth.

Q. Does the extra-religious debate take logical precedence over the intra-religious debate?

A. Yes, it takes logical precedence.

Q. Why do you say that all prophets have to be exclusivists? It's rationally possible for us to turn to a religion's texts and find that a prophet also acknowledged the truth of other religions. Of course, the prophet's recognition of other truths may not be based on a totally pluralistic position, but it's not imperative for him to be an exclusivist.

A. The prophets who have come and gone thus far and with whom we are familiar have all called on people to turn to their religion. By a process of induction, we can see that each of them accepted other religions to the extent that they were in line with their own religion. They recognised the truth of other religions and granted them a share in people's guidance as far as they deemed this possible based on the religions' common features. And Muslims believe that we have seen the last of the prophets. We cannot, therefore, arrive at any other assumption. Now, if other people come along at some later point in time and present religion in a different way, we will have to wait and see. At any rate, the story of the prophets thus far is as we have seen.

I would like to add a third point to my previous arguments: in order to stress and confirm the point that the debate about pluralism is an extra-religious debate, we can cite the

fact that all the building blocks of pluralism are extra-religious; that is, the question of « rationality », « salvation », « the essence of religion », « being rightly guided », « the interpretation of experience », « the interpretation of texts » and so on are all extra-religious issues. Once pluralism is based on these blocks, it will logically and per force become an extra-religious debate. Of course, as I said, you can ask what a particular religion's position is on guidance or salvation or rationality. These are all valid questions. But this would no longer involve questions about rationality in general or guidance in general. Hence, when we speak about rationality, truth and guidance in a general sense, our discussion will undoubtedly be an extra-religious one.

Still, let us assume for a moment that the debate about pluralism is intra-religious. Even so, we would arrive at real pluralism. In other words, adopting this approach wouldn't solve the problem, because each religion would have its own verdict on guidance, salvation, rationality, truth and the essence of religion. Hence, the verdicts would be very varied and numerous, and we would again have arrived at the same point. We would then have to engage in an extra-religious debate about this plurality. The logic of the debate, therefore, dictates that we begin our inquiry from outside. Once we arrive at some definite and firm conclusions, we can then use them to understand intra-religious debates.

Q. In other words, every religion is exclusivist on its own terms, but when we look from outside, we arrive at pluralism?

A. Yes. That is to say, every religion wishes to be the only one, but the unintended consequence of this exclusivism is pluralism. And, at the end of the day, discussing things from an intra-religious perspective will not solve anything. It will simply lead us to the same pluralism as before by another route.

Q. What's the epistemological basis of the religious pluralism you espouse? Is it rationality and critical realism or relativism? In other words, if in a simplified classification, we divide epistemological positions into raw realism, critical realism and relativism, it seems as if the thrust of your argument in *Contraction and Expansion* was to move from raw realism to critical realism. But some of the points

raised in the debate on religious pluralism have created the impression that you've moved on even further and are, in effect, advancing a relativist epistemology. In fact, it seems as if we can have two types of pluralism. That is to say, we can arrive at the plurality of truth on the basis of two readings: one is based on critical realism, whereby we recognise certain limitations in the discovery of the truth and therefore posit different manifestations of truth; the other is based on a relativist position, whereby we see everything as equally valid and equally true. Hence, pluralism and belief in plurality can be based on either critical realism or relativism. What's the basis of your position on pluralism?

A. Let's not lose sight of the fact that we're talking about religious pluralism and not pluralism per se, which would also embrace philosophy, science and so on.

We're discussing religious pluralism and religious pluralism has differences with the pluralism you'll find in philosophy. This is a point we have to be careful about, otherwise, it can lead to fallacious arguments.

In philosophy and science, relativism is a dangerous pitfall. Although it is difficult to speak about specific instances in this area, it can be said in general and absolute terms that relativism is not an acceptable position. It is the type of fallacious conclusion that points to some kind of problem or fallacy earlier on in the premises.

Since truth in religion is different from truth in philosophy and science, one has to be extra careful about usage. As you suggested, raw realism is appropriate to a world that is assumed to be simple; complicated realism, to a world that is assumed to be complicated. The history of rationality in human societies, the insights human beings have gained into rationality, its twists and turns throughout the course of history, the errors it has fallen into, the impasses it has faced, the antinomies it has generated, the irresolvable disputes that have arisen over the years, and the discoveries that have been made concerning cause and reason have, all in all, rendered people more sensitive to the reality of rationality, its historicality and its capabilities. Perhaps there was a time when people expected more from rationality, but now science, reason and philosophy have become more modest and this

modesty is the outcome of the growth of rationality. This rational modesty will undoubtedly extend its judgement to our understanding of religion.

Hence, my position is the complicated rationality or critical rationality that you mentioned. That is to say, the real world, be it religion, philosophy or nature, is much too complicated to be dealt with by judgements based on simple rationality or to sanction dogmatic commitment to one single option. Collective criticism and openness to criticism are the main tools that will allow our theories to become more complicated and advanced and possibly allow us to move closer to reality. One of the clear consequences of critical rationality is to show that our certainties are little more than suspicions; not in the sense that one can never arrive at reality but in the sense that arriving at reality has no specific signpost. The signposts mentioned in traditional philosophy such as observation, certitude, etc. are all precarious. Hence, one cannot easily distinguish that which is true from that which is not true. This is why, although critical rationality accepts the definition of « veracity » as a conception that corresponds to reality (which, of course, has rivals), nonetheless, it recognises that giving concrete substance to this definition and finding specific conceptions that correspond to reality are fraught with difficulties. Critical rationality is, therefore, much more modest in its claims and takes human fallibility very seriously.

Q. If there are no signposts indicating that we have arrived at reality, are there also no signposts indicating that we have moved closer to it?

A. No, there aren't. We have no clear indication of that either. We must investigate ceaselessly. In other words, with critical rationality, thinking about, interpreting and understanding reality is an interminable process. It is a collective, continuous affair. This in itself gives us cause to be very modest and releases us from the urge to make exaggerated and extreme claims.

This critical rationality applies in every field of human endeavour, including the understanding of religion and the acceptance of religion. In other words, being religious and understanding religion is a collective, ceaseless, interminable and undogmatic process that is open to criticism and refinement. You cannot by any means derive relativism from all this.

Whatever the reality may be (in itself), we are faced with complications and difficulties in terms of its verification (for us).

Critical rationality or complicated rationality or taking human fallibility seriously is an « all or nothing » project; either it applies everywhere or it doesn't apply anywhere. We cannot remove part of reality, such as religion, from its jurisdiction. I think that, if we enter the arena of rationality on this basis, we'll see that at least one type of pluralism, that is, negative pluralism, is absolutely unavoidable. That is to say, it naturally demands and establishes this kind of perspective. In other words, what Kant was saying about our perception of things in our daily lives, in the interpretation of texts or religious experiences, in jurisprudence or in the speculative sciences will seem very natural to us. It is in the nature of reason to come up against walls on occasion, in the sense that, on a single issue, collective reason may arrive at several different verdicts and none of these verdicts can drive the others out of the field. We have seen many examples of this coming up against a wall in philosophy, in the natural sciences, in theology, in jurisprudence, in ethics and so on. It was on the basis of these outcomes generated by reason that we came to understand rationality better and to arrive at critical rationality. It is raw realism that refuses to acknowledge that rationality can come up against walls and fails to distinguish between the in itself and the for us. And it is critical rationality that forms the basis of pluralism. If a person believes that their mind is a *tabula rasa* passively reflecting the truth, and that facts are easily and non-problematically reflected onto it, they will clearly see no point in epistemological pluralism. But then they have to answer such questions as: why do we arrive at antinomic propositions? Why have different schools of philosophical thought survived over the course of history? Why do we have many instances of irreconcilable verdicts in the fields of ethics, *fiqh* and law? and so on. We are faced with a choice here and I believe that human experience has shown that this rationality that comes up against walls is superior to that rationality that recognises no walls.

Q. You said that, if we opt for raw realism, then we won't accept pluralism. Is this necessarily the case? We may be raw realists and see the mind as a *tabula rasa*,

but we may believe that reality is multifarious and arrive at pluralism in this way. In other words, must complicated truth and complicated perception always go together. Or could it be that perception may be a *tabula rasa* while reality is multifarious?

A. I was speaking about epistemological pluralism; in other words, different and irreducible conceptions and arguments that have been exhausted. You are referring to a plurality of reality in itself. And, of course, the case you make is reasonable.

Q. In the relevant debates and critiques, your view has, on the whole, been presented in such a way as to suggest that your epistemological position, that is, critical rationality, ultimately amounts to relativism. What, in your own opinion, distinguishes critical rationality from relativism?

A. I believe what led to the appearance of « relativity » in modern epistemology was that cause gained the upper hand over reason; or, to put it more simply, reason was sacrificed at the altar of cause. Relativism has often been defined as the suggestion that everything is relatively true. But it's best defined in another way and the current trend in epistemology provides us with this new definition. Modern epistemology, which has led to relativism, begins by weakening the role played by reasons in the realm of knowledge, occasionally reducing it to zero; the genesis of knowledge, its essence and content are all attributed to things that are of the nature of factors and causes; reasons themselves are eventually reduced to causes, such that reasons are eliminated altogether. This is the full and ultimate relativist position.

At the opposite end, we have the position of the pre-Kantian philosophers and scholars, as well as Islamic thinkers. They see the role of cause in producing knowledge as amounting to next to nothing or being of only rare or passing significance; instead, they consider reason to be determining and crucial.

Hence, it's more useful if we define our categories in these terms and say that relativism or relativist epistemology is an epistemology which believes in caused knowledge (explanation); and non-relativist epistemology is an epistemology which believes in reasoned knowledge (justification). These are two ideal types and form the opposite ends of

the spectrum. All along the spectrum, you'll find many different combinations and variations, and in these instances your epistemology will differ in accordance with whether you attach overall importance to causes or reasons.

I'd, therefore, like to amend your question a bit, in as much as the sharp distinction you drew probably never occurs in practice. I think it would be more appropriate to say that, when you look at a thinker's views, you may find that they are more inclined to favour causes over reasons, whereas the reverse may be the case when you take another thinker. Speaking for myself, I've never dared, in my own mind, to reduce the role of reason to zero and I earnestly believe that reasons definitely play a role in the attainment of knowledge, as well as in affirming, undermining and amending judgements; although I am, at the same time, by no means oblivious to the role of causes. All the discoveries that have been made in the field of epistemology since the 18th century - which have tipped the scale against reason - have been in the realm of causes and concerned new examples of epistemological causes; that is, causes that play a role in the attainment, generation and transformation of knowledge.

Starting from the time when Francis Bacon spoke about the idols and fallacies of cavemen, to Marx's remarks about ideology, to the views of the post-modernists, everyone has been investigating and elevating causes and denigrating reasons. And they have all demonstrated in one way or another how non-rational factors (of the nature of causes) play games with rationality (and reasons), thereby distorting and tarnishing it. The role of culture, geography, emotions, interests, internal and genetic factors, the unconscious, power and the like in distorting and influencing perception and consciousness is undeniable. When you look at Freud, Foucault and Habermas, in effect they all belong to the same camp. They all point to factors that play a part in shaping, altering and amending knowledge. Freud is interested in unconscious factors (egocentric rationalisations). Foucault is particularly interested in social factors and « power » (power-centric rationalisations). And Habermas focuses on human interests (interest-centric rationalisations). But we can categorise all these things under the same heading: causes.

On the other side, the rationalist philosophers, such as Descartes, can be described as philosophers who are, first and foremost, interested in reasons and believe that a judgement can be swayed this way or that by reasons.

On this basis, we can say that post-modernism consists of the appearance or establishment of a period in the realm of knowledge and culture when reasons have been abandoned in favour of causes, and when reasons are denied any share or role.

In the midst of all this, my own epistemological position, put briefly, is that reasons play a role in the attainment of knowledge and its contents; however, when reasons have completed their work and arrived at parity, causes then come into play. In other words, after you have rejected a number of views on the basis of reasoning and kept a number of others, you will ultimately be left with a number of views that are equally tenable. This is the point when cause may intervene (or will per force intervene), lending credence to one of the views over the others based on causes, not reasons. Hence, both reasons and causes play a part in the realm of knowledge. It may also happen on occasion that the reasons are strong enough from the start to eliminate all the rivals, leaving only a single view in place. But if the reasons are such that they cannot overcome one another, you will undoubtedly arrive at a reasoned pluralism, which is different from a relativist or post-modernist pluralism that is causal. And this is a crucial and profound difference.

This, in brief, is my epistemological position. Hence, we should have no further need for the term « relativist » and the like, and we can speak in accordance with our own terminology and framework. I believe that pure relativism is based on pure causality, epistemologically-speaking, while reasoned pluralism falls midway along the spectrum and raw rationalism lies at the opposite end. Hence, pluralism forms the midway mark and it consists of the remaining justified views, on which causal selection may then operate. At one end of the spectrum, you'll find views based on reasons pure and simple. At the opposite extreme, you'll have views that are based only on causes. And midway between the two lies reasoned pluralism, which assigns roles to both causes and reasons, as well as making clear the relationship between the two.

Q. If I understand you correctly, what you're saying is that we have at least two types of pluralism: one pluralism arises from the very nature of the reasoning, that is to say, the reasons point to different conclusions; we also have another type of pluralism which occurs with the intervention of causes, once we have reached parity of reasoning. In other words, at times, we seek to understand something and arrive at a plurality of interpretations, whereas at other times we arrive at a parity of reasoning and then causes direct us towards a plurality of views.

A. You referred to different interpretations. I wanted to leave that for later. That is to say, we also have a hermeneutic pluralism. I call this interpretative pluralism, as opposed to caused pluralism or reasoned pluralism. In other words, when we embark on interpretation and hermeneutics, we encounter a particular type of pluralism, which we must discuss in its own place. For the time being, I am speaking about non-hermeneutic thinking. At any rate, we have not only explanatory (causal) views and justified (reasoned) views, we also have interpretative views. And they all fall under the rubric of epistemological pluralism. And, as I said earlier, this epistemological pluralism inevitably affects our understanding of religion and religious knowledge. This is the destiny of religion and religious understanding.

Q. If we assume that a believer is of the view that his religious teachings tell him that his religion is true and all other religions are false - and that this is one of the essential principles of his religion - can this person accept pluralism or not? Do we have to say that the question of pluralism and our stance towards it takes precedence over and has to precede the acceptance of a particular religion?

A. To my mind, your question is analogous to someone asking themselves the following question: if a religion or school of thought contains the principle of predestination and if a believer follows that religion and finds this intra-religious principle straightforward and not open to interpretation, then what is that believer to do about their extra-religious judgements about predestination and free will? That fact of the matter is that we have to distinguish between imitative religiosity and thoughtful or scholarly religiosity. Pluralism is for thoughtful believers, not imitative believers. Imitative believers, who are in the majority, turn

to a particular religion without amending or assessing the assumptions and foundations that underpin the understanding of religion. And, since their approach is imitative, they are not concerned about extra-religious judgements; hence, their initial and final conceptions are one and the same. It is scholarly believers who are concerned about extra-religious views and judgements. And, if they arrive at a judgement outside religion and are persuaded by it, they will undoubtedly take it on board in their intra-religious thinking. There are examples of this in the history of theology and religious philosophy. Pluralism, too, is an epistemological debate that has theological implications and it is incumbent on scholarly believers to address it as an extra-religious question that impinges on their intra-religious ideas. This is the nature of thought and investigation. Do we not expect the same of Buddhists and Jews? We say that there are certain views in Islam that are extra-religious for them. If they find these views convincing and accept them, and if they clash with their intra-religious views, the rational expectation is for them to reconsider and reassess their religious ideas. (Of course, this reassessment would only apply to a small number of issues; if many things turned out to need reassessment, one would begin to lose faith in that religion.) This is in the nature of scholarly religiosity and the question of pluralism is addressed to scholars.

The debate about pluralism concerns gnostic religiosity, not pragmatic religiosity. And the clash between the external affirmation of pluralism and its intra-religious denial is of the nature of the clash between philosophy and religion, or science and religion. The solution is always the same: constant, historical, collective assessment by the community of scholarly believers.

Q. Possibly one of the most significant criticisms directed at pluralism concerns the relationship between truth and falsehood. Some people are apparently of the view that, when we grant official recognition to a plurality of religions, we are effectively saying that all religions are true or, at least, that they all have a share of the truth. It seems on occasion that your interpretation of pluralism is that we can find a share of the truth in different religions.

Also, would it be possible for someone to reach the extra-religious conclusion that no belief can ever be taken to be the absolute truth yet still maintain, at the intra-religious level, that their own religion is the absolute truth? Or, to put it all more simply, what is your position on the truth?

A. There are several questions here that I must answer separately. First, we have to make it clear in our own minds that attaining certitude is a simple matter and all this haggling over certitude is not very productive. We have two kinds of certitude: caused and reasoned. There are many instances of caused certainty and the certitude of most believers - or the average believer - is caused. That is to say, certain causes (education, family, emotions, publicity, etc.) have put them in a particular mental state, which we call « dogmatic conviction », and the same causes perpetuate this mental state. Other causes can, in turn, destroy this mental state and supplant it with another. Creating this kind of caused certainty is not difficult at all. And most religious certitudes are of this type. It is in this way that Shi'is feel absolute conviction in Shi'ism, Sunnis in Sunnism, Jews in Judaism and so on. These are all caused, inherited, inculcated, simple, inexpensive and plentiful certainties. It is possible to create a tight climate of inculcation, to frighten the mind with religious propaganda, deprive believers of free will and choice, and to render virtually meaningless the call to religion which is based on free choice. And this is a point for preachers and religious thinkers to bear in mind: they shouldn't sacrifice the call at the altar of insistent inculcation or assume that they are one and the same thing.

However, we have another, superior kind of certitude and that is reasoned certitude. It has to be said that this type of certitude is rare indeed in all areas of human thought and especially in religion. We can even cite intra-religious sources on this. It has been stated in our religious narratives that certitude is one of the rarest blessings granted to human beings. Hence, haggling endlessly over certitude is, in my opinion, pointless, because in real life that true, reasoned certitude is hard to come by in all areas, including religion. And that other caused, unreasoned certitude is plentiful in all areas, including religion. Caused certitude may be attained in a minute, whereas reasoned certitude may remain out of reach over a

lifetime. (We'll set aside for now that in many cases it amounts to nothing more than a compound suspicion anyway, as Ibn Sina put it.)

There is, of course, a third kind of certitude, a revelational, divine, direct certitude which is specific to God's chosen ones, but that needn't concern us here; it is, at any rate, even rarer than rare.

Now, even that same kind of caused, unreasoned certitude (which is, in fact, not certitude at all) is acceptable to the Legislator and he is prepared to accept it from believers. Otherwise, believers' duties would become unbearable. The prophets knew that the faith of the bulk of the people could be shaken and destroyed by the slimmest of doubts. This is why, they forbade the circulation of irreligious causes and factors in a religious society. It was because of the love and compassion they felt for believers. They knew that the people's faith was vulnerable and considered it their duty to protect it. And they were prepared to accept as faith even that uncertain, tremulous version. For, everything that is human must fall within the capacity of human beings and be endurable to them, including faith, religiosity and certitude.

And, to those people who suggest that theological debates damage people's faith and certainties, I have to say: which certainties? Do they mean those tremulous, caused, unreasoned, inherited, imitative certainties? But they've not been attained through learned debates and reasoning to be shaken by them. They are products of causes, only likely to be destroyed by other causes. And if they mean reasoned certainties, theological debates are their begetter and creator, and closing the door to theology and free debate because of its possible pitfalls is like crushing a flower for fear of its thorns. On this basis, the religious community must be prepared to distinguish between their cause-oriented opponents and their reason-oriented ones. Why should opposing theologians and thinkers not be allowed to be free? If there is any room for concern, it has to do with the cause-oriented people, not the reason-oriented ones. This is something that surely even a traditional religious mind can digest with a bit of thought and study. Of course, if we look at it from the perspective of modern human rights, everyone should enjoy equal rights, be they proponents or opponents,

be they cause-oriented people or reason-oriented ones. But we digress. At any rate, when we ourselves accept that even those whose faith is caused will be saved and go to heaven and that even they are on the right path, why must we expect the moon and the sky from others and demand the impossible from them? How can we demand that everyone possess reasoned faith?

Q. What you're saying concerns certainty, which is a subjective thing. But truth and falsehood are objective. Let us imagine that we reach the conclusion, for example, that we cannot definitively verify the correctness of any view. That is to say, either we cannot arrive at the truth or, if we do arrive at it, we cannot recognise that we've arrived at it. The upshot of this assertion is that there's no such thing as definite, objective truth, and this includes the realm of religion. If we believe that there is no definite, objective truth, then we are in fact saying that we cannot arrive at reasoned certainty either. And, if this is the case, it holds true everywhere, including the realm of religion. Also, if we consider a religion to be true, must we not consider all other religions to be false?

A. Yes, it is as you say. If our epistemology rules out conclusive evidence and verification, then it will also rule out reasoned certainty. However, in that case, we would arrive at pluralism at its most extreme and intense.

As to truth and falsehood, there is an important point about religions that needs to be stated here. On the whole, we say in logic that there is little distance between truth and falsehood or between affirmation and refutation or between diametrically opposed positions. In other words, we are rejecting a third possibility or elevating diametric opposition, such that we assume that if there is a truth, it must have an opposite, which is false; if there is something that is right, it has an opposite, which is wrong. Some people view the truth and falsehood of religions in these terms; in other words, they believe that the relationship between a true religion and other religions is one of diametric opposition. However, the mere fact that there are numerous religions indicates that this is not the case. In other words, the truth of one does not falsify all the others. The problem is much more complicated than this

logical over-simplification. They are saying, how can two diametrically opposed things both be accepted? How can two different religions be considered true? If it is stated in one religion, for example, that « Jesus Christ is the last of the prophets » and, in another, that « Jesus Christ is not the last », or if it is said in one place that Muhammad, peace be upon him, is the prophet and, elsewhere, that he is not, how can these two positions both be held to be right? whereas, since one of them contradicts the other, one of them must definitely be true and the other false.

But here we have to bear in mind, first, that we are not talking about two propositions; each religion is a complete system, that is, a vast collection of propositions whereby each proposition is linked to many other propositions. In other words, in the real world, we never compare just two single propositions; it is two systems or two aggregates that are subjected to comparison. And these two systems are bound with their vast collection of propositions, making it very difficult to conclude that they are diametric opposites. Each of these systems has strong points and weak points when it comes to the interpretation of facts and experiences, providing spiritual comfort, solving problems, etc. And, once things are looked at in this way, it becomes much more difficult than it seemed at first to set one above the other. In fact, they become more like antinomies. That is to say, deciding the exact sense in which they contradict each other and establishing their truth and falsehood become very difficult.

For example, let us take as our two systems idealism and realism or nominalism and realism (in the second sense of realism). They are like two schools of thought. It is not as if one of them says the world is real, the other says it isn't or one of them says there is a universal, the other says there isn't, allowing us to conclude that they are diametric opposites, with one of them being true and the other false. The truth of the matter is that they are two philosophical systems. Each one has a host of assumptions and implications. Each one has strengths and weaknesses in explaining phenomena. An individual may ultimately choose one over the other but there won't be sufficient rational reasons to discount either. In fact, in the course of assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of each of

the two systems, in terms of their capacity for explaining phenomena and their supporting arguments, they can appear in so many different lights and the philosopher's understanding of them can undergo such transformations that making a definitive decision about them would be difficult indeed. And this is the key to the longevity of the disputes between idealism and realism or nominalism and realism. Hence, we have to hold on to this systemic perspective and look at propositions within their framework and not outside it.

The second and more important point is that the tale of religions is not one wherein one is intrinsically true and all the others intrinsically false. There is no such intrinsic opposition between them (as there is between two diametric opposites). Religions themselves do not make such a claim. That is to say, Muslims do not suggest that Christianity is diametrically opposed to Islam or Judaism diametrically opposed to Christianity. They say, each of them were true in their own time. In other words, they acknowledge a kind of plurality and they don't consider any one of them to be intrinsically false; instead, they see them all as true, with a qualification. Hence, they say, this one is true and that one is true and that other one is true.

This is an important point: we must bear in mind that we are not confronting diametric opposites or logically contradictory positions. We do not have to say one of them is intrinsically true and all the others are absolutely false because they contradict it.

In the opinion of believers themselves, all religions can be viewed as true with certain qualifications. A is true during period A; B, during period B; C, during period C; and so on. If it is possible, with this qualification, to say that A is true and B is also true and C is also true, then why shouldn't it be possible to add other qualifications that would allow us to say that they are all true? This single qualification has put us in a position whereby we can say that « A », for example, was true until the first century, « B » was true from the first century until, let us say, 606 on the Christian calendar and « C » from 606 to the present day. Hence, we have three truths that do not contradict each other, as long as we bear in mind the time qualification. However, is a time qualification the only possible qualification? Why shouldn't it be possible to find other qualifications that would allow all of them to be true at

once? Here, the only limitation is the extent of our imagination and power of creative thinking.

The fact of the matter is that the truth of religions is very similar to the truth of indexical propositions. The truth and veracity of such propositions depends on who is saying them and in what context. The proposition « I am 20 years old » is true if it's being said by a 20-year-old person and it's false if it is said by a 40-year-old person. « It is cold today » is true if it's said on a cold day and false if it's said on a warm day. Truth and veracity in the case of statements of this kind, which are known as indexical propositions, hinge on the « for me » or « for him » and are, in this specific sense, relative. Whereas « the earth is spherical » and « metals expand when subjected to heat » are not relatively true and do not hinge on any « for me » or « for him »; it makes no difference who says them.

Now, « for Christians, Christianity was true until the advent of Islam » is true for Muslims. « For Jews, Judaism was true until the advent of Christianity » is true for Christians and Muslims. This kind of truth is by no means the same as scientific or philosophical truths, which are not qualified by « for Harry » or « for Joe ». Hence, the question of truth and falsehood for religions is different from the absolute and intrinsic truth and falsehood of philosophy, which holds that either something is absolutely correct or it is not; either the atom exists or it does not, there is no question here of whether it is today or tomorrow or whether you're in the north or the south. This being the case, you now have to find some other formula or qualification that will allow all religions to be true alongside one another. You may, for example, say, for Christians who are unaware of Islam or who do not recognise Islam as true, Christianity holds true. There's nothing logically or religiously objectionable about this remark. Don't say, Islam is true, therefore everything else is false. This statement arises from the same kind of illusion that holds that the truth of Islam is like the truth of atomic theory or the truth of the earth's spherical shape. The model of truth has to be changed. Here we are dealing with indexical models; that is to say, « truth for... », not absolute truth. And do not imagine that this means that Christians may be excused for being Christians. After all, was it the case that Christians before the advent of Islam were to be

excused? No, there is nothing for them to be excused for; they were and are following a true religion of rightful guidance and salvation. This is how it is in the realm of religion. They are all true with certain qualifications and, if we bring these qualifications to bear, there's nothing wrong with having a plurality of truths.

The conclusion I want to draw is this: The people who say that there is something wrong with a plurality of truth are thinking of truth and falsehood as diametric opposites; whereas here it is not a question of diametric opposites, it is a question of the difference between two indexical systems. The distinguished people who raise the idea of excusing people are mistaken. They are well meaning and wish to exonerate God and reassure God's creatures! May God bless them. At any rate, we have to avoid confusing « truth » and « truth for... ».

Q. When we speak about a religion's truth, presumably we have to extend this to its elements. In other words, the truth of the relevant beliefs, the truth of its practices and rituals, the truth of its ethics and so on. Now, let us imagine that we are concerned with the realm of beliefs and that beliefs are factual in nature, that is to say, they point to certain facts or realities. If we say, these beliefs are true for one group, but not for another, then it would see that you're presenting a particular model of the truth, which we might call « qualified truth ». In other words, one group considers a certain thing to be true on the basis of certain assumptions and ideas, whereas another group arrives at a different conclusion based on different premises. Hence, there's no such thing as a priori truth; truth is the outcome of a process or a method.

You are, in fact, presenting a particular model of the truth in which there's no absolute truth. And if we accept this general ruling, it would apply to religions as well.

A. I didn't say there are no instances of absolute truth. I said, alongside absolute truth, we also have to think about indexical truth or « truth for... ». As far as propositions pertaining to facts are concerned, there's no such thing as « truth for... », be it in the realm of

religion or anywhere else. They're like atomic theory, which is either true or false and doesn't depend on Harry or Joe. But don't forget, first, that we are looking at religions as systems, not as separate elements, as I explained. Secondly, we are talking about religions that have, one way or another, emerged tried and tested and about which we have attained parity of reasoning. That is to say, the logical or philosophical mind cannot rule them out absolutely. It is this initial, minimum level of truth that paves the way for « truth for... ». This same indexical truth can point to the right path and salvation.

Q. Then you have to define « truth ». Do you see it as correspondence to reality or something else?

A. Truth means correspondence to reality, at any rate - in both cases. But truth in religion entails its pointing out the right path. When we say, « true religion for Harry », we mean « the religion that shows the right path to Harry », not a religion that is false and whose followers are going astray and are to be excused.

Q. Does the question of following the right path or going astray that is mentioned in religion entail truth and falsehood?

A. It entails truth and falsehood in the sense I mentioned. Nonetheless, there's an addendum to all this that we must deal with later.

Q. Perhaps one of the reasons why the critics focus on this issue of truth and falsehood is that their model of truth is fundamentally different from yours. That is to say, they assume an absolute truth - without any qualification - that either falls into your lap or doesn't.

A. Yes, what they're saying is that this proposition is true, hence, its opposite is false and nonsensical; so you've either arrived at this truth or you haven't and you only have these two alternatives. But, as we saw, truth and falsehood in religion are qualified (or indexical), even in the opinion of the followers of religions themselves. One qualification is the familiar time qualification, but we may be able to think of another dozen qualifications. Hence, pluralism grows naturally in the field of religion.

Let me remind you that pluralism is a result of reaching an impasse on differences, not on similarities. The mistake some people have made is to say, yes, we, too, believe that there is a certain amount of truth in Christianity, and what they means is that they believe in some of the things we do. But it has to be said in all earnest that this is not pluralism, this is monism. In other words, they believe in an absolute truth and, since others seem to acknowledge a part of that same truth, they say, we accept them as well. But this is not where the argument arises. This is a non-issue. With pluralism, the argument is about differences; in other words, the points on which there are disagreements. So, if we imagine that, in Judaism and Islam and a number of other religions, you find a similar belief in one God, then the question of pluralism doesn't even arise on this point. Pluralism becomes an issue when you assume that, in Judaism, God is said to have attributes which are, for example, different from the attributes depicted in Islam. When we go beyond propositions that pertain to facts, we reach religious practices and secondary commands, as well as moral precepts. Here, it is not a question of truth and falsehood. In this case, the practices of the followers of a true religion (in the above-mentioned sense) are free of blame and acceptable to God and lead to salvation, blessings and felicity.

Q. In other words, here you're taking truth to mean effectiveness?

A. Yes, effectiveness, because we're dealing with normative affairs here, which are instrumental.

Q. So, all that's left is the factual parts, the parts that pertain to reality, which is basically the realm of beliefs (including beliefs about the beginning and the end).

A. The debate about pluralism and absolute truth occurs precisely in this area. The question of pluralism doesn't really arise on more practical matters, which are generally easy to assess and accept. The problems occur in the realm of beliefs and this is where the debates become heated and intense. I must remind you again that, here, pluralism arises when we have arrived at a parity of reasoning and when the religious mind has reached an impasse. Let me also say that, apart from the question of the beginning and the end, someone may claim that the issue of whether person A is a prophet or not also pertains to

reality and facts. What would we say here? We have to say that prophethood in the sense of a mission (not in the sense of having specific qualities) is of the nature of « truth for... ». Hence person A may be a prophet for one community (with the qualifications already mentioned) and not for another community. In other words, a particular community may or may not have person A as their prophet.

As to the question of the beginning mentioned in religion, it is something on which words fall into contradiction in expressing it. That is to say, contradiction is the order of the day. God is a mystery. God is the mystery beyond all mysteries. As Mowlavi puts it: « When the scent of the Beloved fills the air/all the tongues stumble and err ».

Words inevitably fail us here and it is not at all impossible or it is even very likely that different and contradictory rulings are made, with every one of them being true; true, albeit contradictory. Here we are facing a fact that the tongue cannot tame, like an elephant that drops in for tea at a hen's house, thus wrecking the house and astounding the hen.

Q. This is the intra-religious perspective. What if we want to look at it from the extra-religious perspective, what then?

A. No, I'm presenting the absolute, mystical position here; I'm not relying on any specific religion.

Just take a look at Stace, who apparently did not follow any particular religion; nonetheless, he was aware of spiritual experiences, respected them and thought they were significant. One of the results of his research and investigations was precisely that the language of mystics reveals that there are areas or aspects of reality which, the closer you come to them, the more you fall into contradictions. This is not confined to experiences of God. Most spiritual and mystical experiences produce a similar state. Apart from God, there is the question of resurrection (or the experience of resurrection). Resurrection is an intra-religious teaching and it can vary with the number of religions. Its truth follows from the truth of the religion itself, based on what we've said so far.

Q. Let us imagine that we have two belief systems and that these belief systems are made up of propositions. Let us then understand the meaning of the

propositions in their own context. Once we have understood the propositions, we find that one groups says that God is majestic, whereas the other group says that God is not majestic. In other words, based on an aggregate of shared assumptions, we may reach the conclusion that God is not majestic and, based on a series of other assumptions, we may decide that God is majestic. This depends entirely on our premises and assumptions. But is it possible, within a single belief system and based on a single aggregate of shared assumptions, to say that God is both majestic and not majestic?

A. No, it isn't possible. But this isn't what pluralism is about. Pluralism is saying that you may have several sets of premises and, based on these several sets of premises, you can have several sets of arguments. Pluralism doesn't amount to the suggestion that you can come to several contradictory conclusions within a single system. This is impossible. But you can have several systems. Of course, you didn't opt for these systems arbitrarily either. First of all, their foundations are sound and well argued and you've reached the point of choosing between them. Secondly, the issue in question and the object of knowledge here being God, it is inevitable that the language and the theoretical system fall into contradictions. This causes the appearance of something called pluralism.

Q. And if we assume that one of the prerequisites of rationality is the absence of contradiction, can we consider these contradictory statements to be rational?

A. The danger here is that we are equating rationality with the limits of our comprehension. We may be dismissing something as irrational and impossible because we cannot comprehend it. In truth, we should put possibility and rationality in context. When the object of discussion and knowledge is God, the rationality of the ideas and propositions is different from the rationality of the propositions pertaining to nature. We are talking about a mystery; hence, we should not be astounded when we run into apparent contradictions. In the Koran, you find the verse: « When thou threwest (a handful of dust), it was not Thy act, but Allah's », in which the throwing is and is not ascribed to the Prophet in one and the same breath. And what a host of debates and ruminations this has led to. The relationship

between this truth and human beings is unreasoned. When it is formulated into reasoned propositions, it falls into contradictions. And these contradictions do not contravene rationality in view of the context. This is where figurative speech enters in.

Q. Hence, you see the language of religion in the sphere of beliefs as pertaining to reality and facts?

A. Yes, but this doesn't prevent us from resorting to figurative speech and analogies; whereupon we may also fall into contradictions.

Q. Does the amazement and confusion felt in the face God only lead to differences between religions? Or can it lead to contradictions and hence different interpretations within the same religion, such as Islam?

A. It can for scholars, but not for imitators.

Q. But we see that religious commentators always try to resolve contradictions; or, at least at one level of understanding, they try to iron out any contradictions.

A. Of course, all the contradictions need to be resolved in a philosophical-scientific system. But mysticism does not balk at contradictions; it has learnt to make do with them. This is why the language of mystics should not be seen as a rigorous, philosophical language. Otherwise, the contradictions would jar and you'd reject the system out of hand. In fact, this is why mystics do not have a system. A system has to be harmonious. Mystics have never created a disciplined theoretical system. They have opted for the language of analogy and interpretation. And they have chosen this language not out of a sense of duty, but because of the nature of the subject. They could not have done otherwise. This was why we spoke about a propositional language and an indexical language. The language of religion and mysticism, when it speaks of God, is an indexical language and it has a different set of rules from propositional language.

Q. But we have to know how we're to understand religious teachings. For example, God tells us about the existing world or resurrection or perdition. Are we to understand these things in a philosophical way or a mystical way? In other words, do

we have to assume that these teachings are all harmonious and interpret them as such or not? This brings us to the issue of the « essence of religion » . What, then, is the essence of religion and what does it dictate in these circumstances?

A. We have to recognise at least three types of « religion » or religiosity: imitative (or utilitarian) religiosity, scholarly-theological (gnostic) religiosity, and mystical (experiential) religiosity. For the imitators, the essence of religion consists of its must dos and must not dos and the simple ethical rules of daily life. As far as the imitators are concerned, religion is for life, not life for religion. Hence, if anyone abandons these must dos and must not dos, they are considered to be irreligious. There are no signs of either the mental rigours of the gnostic nor the moving experiences of the mystic here. And obeying the Prophet means obeying his must dos and must not dos. These people do not try to relive the prophet's experiences, nor share in his passionate concerns and revelations. This is what the essence of religion amounts to for the imitators. But, for others, this essence, is merely the superficies. Higher up than this, we have theological-scholarly religiosity and, higher up still, we have mystical religiosity. For the mystics, the essence of religion consists of its spiritual and illuminatory experiences. For theologians, the essence of religion is its teachings (such as God's commandments, the question of prayer, the problem of evil, creation, resurrection and so on), which must be rendered harmonious so that they can accept them in a philosophical manner. For each level of religiosity, the lower level constitutes the superficies.

Hence, we have three interpretations of religion or three different types of religiosity. Although there is no contradiction between them, they are by no means the same. The essence is different in each case.

Now, if we return to the question of how we're to interpret religious propositions pertaining to purgatory, resurrection and the beyond, it would depend entirely on our religiosity and our premises or assumptions. The history of religion reveals that the bulk of the people or the imitators have taken them in a literal and instrumental way (that is to say, the interest of beliefs is that they aid the attainment of blessings and felicity). The theologians have adopted a less crude approach and, based on their premises, have, on

occasion represented the measure of our deeds on judgement day in the form of an ordinary, worldly scale and, on other occasions, offered more delicate interpretations. And much the same can be said of the mystics.

The three types of religiosity, in fact, lead to three types of religion and three interpretations of the other world. This is where the allegorical and non-allegorical elements, which exist in every religion, have entered into religious debates. At the very least, we have to say that many of the debates about the characteristics and qualities of God, judgement day and the like are allegorical in nature and they can be clarified with reference to the non-allegorical elements (or the underlying assumptions). Since these assumptions may change, the interpretation of the allegories may also change.

Q. We find ourselves faced with different religious books that want to tell us something, for example, about aspects of the world that are unknown to us. Now, the question is this: aren't there any methods, based on historical reasoning, that would allow us to demonstrate that one of these books is more credible than the others, thereby creating a kind of linear or inclusive pluralism? In other words, we could say, for example, that these religions were true, but that the truthful books that were sent to them by God have, for example, been distorted in some way or have had large parts of them destroyed. But our book is, let us say, totally complete and undistorted. And we also have other evidence and material that assists us in understanding this book correctly; whereas the more ancient books do not have these advantages.

Isn't it possible, in other words, to say, in a conditional way, that, out of all the religious books that remain, this one has been better preserved and there is a clear history documenting it, whereas this isn't the case with the other books. Hence, while we're not dismissing the other books as false (although they are incomplete and possibly distorted), nonetheless we're saying that the book that we are following is, for example, more comprehensive, and we base our claim on objective historical studies, not on our religious faith. Hence, we're not concerning ourselves with proof

(in itself); in other words, we're not saying that this religion is true, the other is false. What we're saying is that, at the level of verification (for us), given these religions, scriptures and texts, this religion is the most credible and accurately preserved on the basis of sound historical arguments.

A. If you make your claim conditional, that's fine. But as soon as you start trying to flesh it out, you'll run into pluralism. If - and only if - you could establish, based on reasoned arguments, that one religion or one scripture is definitely superior to the others, then no intelligent person would turn to the inferior ones. This is what the whole argument is about. What has happened in practice is that everyone is claiming that their religion is the superior one. It is this multiplicity of superiors that has given rise to pluralism.

Q. Of course, in a way, we *can* flesh out our argument. In the context of the for us, we can say, for example, that we have a better-documented and more reliable history of a particular prophet. Or we can show in a well-argued way that there are better-preserved sources supporting the newer religion than the older religion, and that the material at our disposal is more voluminous. This can apply to both the scripture and the prophet and other revered figures of a particular religion.

A. Look, pluralism comes into play when we've rejected everything that we can possibly reject on the basis of reasoning and evidence. Ultimately, we've been left with a number of religions of more or less equal standing. This is where we ask ourselves: first, do we really have a plurality of this kind or can we still drive out all but one of them? And, secondly, if we really are faced with this plurality, what approach must we adopt to it, practically and theoretically? This is the why and wherefore of pluralism. We must also constantly bear in mind that what pluralism is suggesting is not that all possible and existing statements and claims are of equal weight and standing, and everything that anyone says is true. This is patently nonsense. This is certainly not the claim we're making and no intelligent person would believe such a thing.

Q. It might be a good idea to speak at greater length about something that came up during the discussion. It seems that one of the theoretical pillars of religious

pluralism is a particular conception of the essence of religion. Do the numerous religions which are, let us say, more or less based on equally sound arguments, all have a single essence? Can we, in other words, speak of a generic similarity between them? Of course, you spoke about the essence of religion as existing on three different levels. But it may still be possible to press you further and ask, what *is* the essence of religion and how would you define its relationship to pluralism?

A. Yes, I briefly explained that you can in fact adopt three approaches to any religion and derive three different essences. But now we can look at it in another way.

The first point is that we see religions as being dependent on the purveyors of religions, known as prophets. In some instances, « prophet » is not an appropriate term and it would be more appropriate, for example, to speak of « founder ». Buddhists, for instance, have given the name Buddha to the founder of their religion which means the enlightened one. When Buddha achieved enlightenment, he was given the title Buddha.

The second point is that these founders and prophets underwent certain experiences, in the wake of which they presented their religions to the people. These experiences established their personalities and today we see their religions as the product of their amazing personalities.

Now, everything depends on whether we want to see the differences between them as being one of degree or of kind, and whether we see the differences between their experiences as one of degree or of kind. Establishing this matter of degree or kind is not possible on the basis of reasoning. They are two different criteria; we must choose one and to try to make it fit the relevant phenomena. No philosopher has ever demonstrated that all pigeons, all sparrows or all cats are of the same kind. And there is no way for them to have done so. Defining the criteria for it is impossible in the first instance (and I have explained this - which is a very important and delicate point - at length elsewhere). Mulla Sadra, for example, said that every individual is a kind onto themselves. He established the criteria for selfhood and argued that it differs in every individual. This sits very well with his belief in the principality of existence (something that is akin to nominalism).

It also all depends on whether we're nominalists or realists. It's very difficult to settle the argument once and for all in favour of one of these philosophical positions; so it is a debate that rages to this day. Hence, it is possible, on the one hand, to take each prophet as a kind onto themselves and to see prophets as all being of different kinds - ditto, their experiences - and to conclude that religions do not have a unified essence. Or, on the other hand, to see the differences between them - and their experiences - as one of degree, and consider them to have benefited from varying degrees of excellence. It is also possible to dismiss kind and essence altogether, in good nominalist fashion, and not to concern ourselves with them at all. Asking about the unified essence of religions only arises if we're realists and if we've decided that religions are all of the same kind. Otherwise, why shouldn't we simply decide that each religion is a kind onto itself, refusing to speak of it as superior or inferior, or just decide to be nominalists? Nominalism gives us pluralism, as does the view that every religion is a kind onto itself.

The third alternative, which is founded on the idea of excellence and degree, arranges religions along a single line and considers them all to be of the same kind. There's no other method for discovering the unified essence of religion - if we believe in it - than reflection, observation and the like. But discovering their similarities can be carried out by induction, which is the method used by sociologists of religion.

On the face of it, some of our mystics have favoured the third alternative; in other words, they considered the differences between prophets' experiences and revelations to be one of degree, not of kind. On this basis, they use the expression « the complete Muhammadan revelation». In other words, they believed that the other prophets had also made revelations, but that they were incomplete and that, when it came to the Prophet, he made « a complete revelation ». This is also the basis for the expression the Seal of the Prophets; by this they meant that, after the complete revelation, there can be no further or higher revelation.

Now, if we look at prophets' experiences in a pluralistic light and consider them to have been substantially different (either because we are nominalists or because we find that

which we've received from the prophets so markedly different), we'll find ourselves faced with different trees, which bear different fruits. And these fruits have different qualities and effects; one is sweet like the date, another is sour like the currant, one is crisp like the apple, another is soft like the mulberry. Of course, this implies that they have shared qualities as well. If you look at them in an a posteriori fashion, you may discover that they all contain a certain amount of fructose or water. Nonetheless, they are different and it is not as if the currant is the advanced form of the date, or the date, the perfected form of the currant. We cannot classify them in this way, but they are all beneficial and useful.

In this way, plurality is the norm in this world. It's very strange for us to be proceeding on the assumption of unity, determined to crush the pluralities. That is to say, if you believe in the principality of quiddity (as many of our philosophers have done) or if you believe in nominalism (and many theologians, especially the Ash'ari theologians, have done) essential plurality is the order of the day in the world, with unity representing only a thin veneer over the pluralities. The world is filled with different things and different species. This is incontestable. There's nothing wrong with acknowledging this same plurality of « species» in the world of religion; especially when it comes to religious experiences and prophetic revelations. Why must we rule out this plurality of species or why make it so emaciated as to have it dissolve into unity? Plurality is clearly the norm in the real world: the plurality of natural forces, the plurality of things and species, the plurality of experiences. And, although they have common characteristics, their plurality (whether in nominalist terms or because of the principality of their quiddity), is irreducible to unity.

Q. Can we arrive at a well-argued preference for one of these experiences? In other words, can we find a justification for saying that this experience is superior to and more profound than all the others?

A. If we subscribe to the idea of the plurality of kinds, there's little room for this type of argument. Let me give you a simple example. One of the best display cases for the essential plurality of experience is the world of arts and letters. You have the experience of Sa'di's poetry, you have the experience of Hafez's poetry, you have Khaqani, Nezami,

Mowlavi and others to the present day and all the contemporary poets. The works of all these masters are similar in terms of being products of the imagination, creative works and so on (this is the generic similarity). Nonetheless, there can be almost no question of saying that one of them is superior to the others or the perfected form of all the rest. In other words, you are sincerely faced with a true plurality, such that each poem and each poet is a kind unto themselves, despite certain similarities. The whole thing becomes more evident still if you widen your scope and go beyond Persian literature to embrace other languages. I believe that one of the best arenas for seeing and tasting plurality par excellence, as differences in kind, is the world of the arts and letters. And this world of inspiration is not that dissimilar from the world of religious experience; creativity flows through both of them and the poet or the prophet is both the mover and the moved, both the receptacle and the creator. And this goes back to the nature of these people who are undergoing the experience and the fact that they are different « species », with none of them necessarily being a more excellent version of any other, such that it would be impossible to arrange them in a linear form. This is the way I see it.

Q. So, at any rate, we go as far as we can with our arguments about what is superior or inferior until we reach the point where we are virtually faced with several alternatives of equal standing which defy ordering. Is that right?

A. In fact, our arguments or reasoning direct us until we arrive at kinds. When you arrive at this point, you are faced with « species»; that is, actually existing plurality. Here, various attractive attributes come into play. You may be attracted to and enchanted by the poetry of Hafez. I may feel the same way about Mowlavi, but be unable to prove that Mowlavi is superior to Hafez or demonstrate why I was enchanted by Mowlavi, whereas you were enchanted by Hafez. This plurality is the end of the line. You cannot transform this plurality into unity. It is irreducible. Reasons lead us to « species» and species are irreducibly plural.

Q. We have to arrive at the realisation that they are species by a process of argumentation and reasoning and so on. In other words, we have to reach the point where something is irreducible and then decide that we are faced with a «species ».

A. That's right. But we also refer to our philosophical foundations. We always reason within a framework. When you engage in reasoning you are either a nominalist or a realist. Your framework governs the process. In fact, this is another pluralism. Ultimately, the question of whether to operate within the discipline of realism or not is itself a choice. In other words, at this basic level, too, we're faced with two kinds of discipline, not two degrees. The issue of the prevalence and principality of « plurality » is truly worthy of reflection. I think that a completely unjustified tendency to favour a unified approach to thinking governs many minds. These people want to crush the pluralities at any price and dissolve them into unity. It is as if some people find the word « unity » more beautiful and when they speak about plurality, they start thinking about chaos and dissension and disorder; whereas the real world is a world of plurality.

Q. It might be a good idea now to discuss another one of your assumptions in your treatment of pluralism, the question of « salvation » and « being rightly guided » and its relationship to the truth. Are you of the opinion that « being rightly guided» stands in some kind of necessary relationship to « being right » or « correspondence to the truth», or is it the case that, if someone is sincere in their actions, this sincerity will necessarily guide them and lead them to salvation?

A. We have already spoken about the question of truth in the realm of religion and we stressed and insisted on the point that the truth and falsehood of religions is conditional and follows the indexical model. It is, therefore, possible to have several religions, all of which may be true, existing alongside one another. And they will direct their followers to the truth and, hence, to salvation. The people who criticise or reject this idea seem to find it unbearable to imagine that there could be any truth other than the truth that they like or accept; everything else must therefore be false. And since there is a relationship between being rightly guided and the truth, they do not believe that anyone outside their own religion

can be rightly guided. But, on the basis of what we have said, several religions may all be true and their followers may be rightly guided and saved (and not excused).

Secondly, we must see what « being rightly guided » and «being saved » imply. Look, we can proceed here on the basis of several premises and assumptions. One is that, when we speak about « guidance » and « salvation », we are mainly speaking about other-worldly salvation. In other words, we're not just thinking about this world. Now, let us assume that the exclusivists are right and there is only one truth. If an individual has not found this single truth in this world but proceeds on the basis of sincerity (within the limits of their capacities and understanding), what could possibly be wrong with saying that this individual will find the truth in the hereafter and attain salvation? Why must we make it a condition of salvation that you arrive at the truth in this world? Why must we imagine that anyone who failed to arrive at the truth (as we understand it) in this world will fail to arrive at the truth - and, therefore, salvation - in the other world too and can only end up in hell?! The holy verse that says « But those who were blind in this world will be blind in the Hereafter, and most astray from the Path » is speaking about the blind, not about those who can see but who've failed to see some truths. These people are not barred from seeing the truth in the hereafter; hence, they too may be seen as taking the path of rightful guidance. In brief, if being rightly guided means following the path to the truth, this path may arrive at the desired end both in this world and in the other; ultimately leading the follower to the truth.

Q. What if they lack sincerity? Will they still arrive at the truth?

A. Yes. But he who lacks sincerity will suffer the consequences of his insincerity. As Mowlavi puts it, human beings have been created to bow down before the truth; however, some people are good and fall down without being compelled, whereas others must first experience despair before bowing down. Mowlavi says that, on this basis, hell, too, is a place of worship, but a place of worship for the wicked; in other words, they will bow down over there.

Yes, the discovery of the truth comes through a removal of the veils and, according to religious teachings, sometimes this is accompanied by hardship, torment and suffering, and,

at other times, not; sometimes it occurs in this world and, at other times, in the other world. The rightly guided is not only the one who arrives at the truth in this world painlessly. The person who arrives at the truth in the other world painlessly is also rightly guided and all the effects of being rightly guided will accrue to them, that is, salvation, deliverance and felicity. Arriving at the truth must not be confined to the time a person spends in this world. The road remains open. And, according to religious teachings, the individual has eternal life and may arrive at the truth after death.

Hence, sincerity and purity in life does not stand against the attainment of the truth; it can serve as a prelude and preparation. Some of the critics have said (from an exclusivist position) that, if a well-intentioned person does not arrive at the truth in this world, they will be « excused » and saved in the other world but they are not « rightly guided ». The « excused » seems to be their way of excusing God. In other words, they are trying to say that, if God's guidance did not reach this individual, he will not receive God's torment either; so there is no need to quibble with God over this. Nonetheless, as I said, remarks of this kind are unjustified. They are all spoken from an exclusivist position. But, from a pluralist position, there are different truths and they all entail rightful guidance and, hence, felicity. On this basis, most people must be considered to be rightly guided. They constitute different kinds and different degrees of guidance and they are all human. We cannot define guidance as something that is beyond human capacity. It is exactly like « rationality ». People are rational to different degrees and they are all rational in the same sense. It is much the same with rightful guidance.

When the gentlemen say, it may be that most people will be saved on judgement day but they are not rightly guided, this is incorrect. Because we have to ask, why are they saved? After all, they must have some attribute that allows them to be saved. Any share in salvation implies a share in rightful guidance. In other words, it is their qualities and assets that prevents them from ending up in hell; apart from the attackers of the truth who, in Ibn Sina's view, are a minority.

Some of my critics are of the view that all non-Shi'is will end up in hell. But those who take a step further and say that any well-intentioned non-Shi'i is « saved » must then make it clear why these people are saved. If going to heaven and being saved from torment demands belief in the truth, these people shouldn't be saved either. Hence, the words of those who say all non-Shi'is will end up in hell would appear to be more accurate!

Q. We could say that they will be saved because they do not show ill will towards the truth and, if they were to see the truth, they would accept it. They now think that they have arrived at the truth, but if they realise that the truth lies elsewhere, they will turn to it. And this absence of ill will towards the truth can itself be seen as rightful guidance. In other words, we can take guidance to mean a willingness to accept the truth and an absence of ill will towards it.

A. Yes. It is no mean guidance for a person to be willing to accept the truth and to have no inherent obstinacy against it. We are gradually being guided to the right definition of « rightful guidance ». So far we were looking at guidance with our eyes firmly on the destination, whereas guidance is about the road, not the destination. Hence, we shouldn't be saying that only those who have reached the destination (in the sense of definitely true beliefs) are rightly guided, but that anyone who has stepped onto the path of truth has a share of rightful guidance. It is amazing that we all read for ourselves and ask God to guide us to the « right path », yet we still forget that guidance is about the path and not a series of complete ideas lodged in our brains. The Koran specifically contrasts one who follows « vain desire » with the rightly guided and says: « Then seest thou such a one as takes as his god his own vain desire? God has, knowing (him as such), left him astray, and sealed his hearing and his heart (and understanding), and put a cover on his sight; who then, will guide him after God (has withdrawn Guidance)? » Hence, we have two roads: the road of vain desire and the baser instincts and the road of guidance, and anyone who doesn't, in thought and in deed, follow their baser instincts is on the road of guidance. End of story. And this is the very road that will, sooner or later, in this world or in that, lead the follower to salvation. As

Mowlavi puts it: « If the desires are rife, then faith is not/for if faith is the gate, then the desires are the lock ».

The prophets, for their part, have shown us ways of combating the desires. And those who have found those ways (or some of them) without the prophets are definitely rightly guided, because the personality of the prophets isn't what's relevant here. The relevant point is their teachings. Regardless of how anyone finds their way to these teachings it is a boon. Personalities are accidents in religion. What's essential is the message. Of course, in practice and in the real world, most people need a prophet and cannot find the path to rightful guidance unaided. And even if they do, in the opinion of some mystics, they only manage to skirt around it.

Q. If pluralism holds true, then why do we preach our own religion and invite other people to it? What would be the point of jihad, enjoining others to the good, seeking martyrdom and so on?

A. Very well. Let's assume that pluralism doesn't hold true and we're exclusivists. Nonetheless, there are generous exclusivists who believe that, although others aren't rightly guided, they will be saved. So I would ask them here: what's the point of inviting others to our religion? What the point of jihad? What's the point of enjoining the good? After all, are these people who are going to be saved doing anything wrong? Aren't they going to be spared the torments of hell? The most that you can say is that we are inviting them to something better. But then there'd be no obligation to do so. It would be a good deed but there'd be no blame attached if you chose not to do it.

Hence, whether you're exclusivists who believe that others will also be saved or pluralists who believe both that others will be saved *and* that they are rightly guided, you must still answer these questions. But the more important point is that, those who believe that anyone who displays no ill will towards the truth will be saved are in fact acknowledging that there are a number of right paths leading to salvation, since there are many different bases on which people may be excused and saved. And this is identical to pluralism.

But the straightforward answer is that anyone who, by reason and by love, is committed to something, sees beauties in it that they do not see in other people's beliefs and ideas. They are, therefore, eager to present these beauties to others; in other words, the call to religion becomes a kind of «presentation»; that's all. Just like an artist who puts his canvasses on display. If we say that pluralism holds sway in the world of arts and letters (which it does), does that mean that Sa'di and Hafez mustn't present their poetry and put it at the disposal of others? Everyone wishes to adore and be adored. Some people are more disposed to being adored and others, to adoring. Let the world of loving and being loved prosper and thrive. There's much to be gained by many here. The world of religion, too, is a world of adoration and charms. And, in order to charm, a host of beauties, purities and pieties must be presented.

Let me also say again that pluralism does not imply that everything that is said is true. Hence, the call to religion can help expose falsehoods.

Q. It may also be that someone wants to find something better or to convey and teach to others things that he is more familiar with.

A. Yes, that's right. But the prevailing interpretation seems to be that the reason for jihad is to wipe all bar one religion off the face of the earth and to make all the faithful believe in the same thing. This kind of jihad does not fit in with pluralism. If, according to the critics, even those who bear no ill will will be saved and will benefit from a minimum of salvation, why do they have to be eliminated?

Some people have even said that, if we subscribe to religious pluralism, there will be no certitude left that people can fight for. This is bizarre demagoguery. Don't people fight to save their livelihoods? Don't people fight and die for their homelands? Most such wars are instinctive and motivated by love. And, as it happens, their underlying assumption is pluralism. Everyone knows that every nation has its own homeland, that it has the right to defend its homeland, that it has the right to love its homeland more than all other homelands. And, yet, people resist when they are attacked. In other words, despite the assumption that there are different homelands (pluralism), they sacrifice their lives for their homeland. Why

shouldn't it be the same in the world of religion? Aggressors have to be thwarted in any case. The answer to peace is peace, and the answer to war is war. We'll set aside for the time being the fact that pluralists also do away with the need for a range of pointless quarrels - which is very laudable, but we're not concerned with consequences at the moment.

As to the point that « the prophets preached their own religion and did not concern themselves with religious pluralism », this is certainly true. But we are not prophets. This is an important idea that I feel strongly about: there are many things that the Prophet did that we must not do. The Prophet said, you must hail me. But we have no right to say that people must hail us. The Prophet waged primary jihad (to convert non-Muslims to Islam). But, according to most Islamic jurists, we do not have the right to wage primary jihad. Or, for example, he married a number of times, which was his special right, not the right of his followers. His wives didn't have the right to remarry after the Prophet had died and so on. At any rate, the Prophet had special privileges, which it would not be seemly for us to claim. When we look at things from outside religions, if we arrive at pluralism, we must act on its implications. The Prophet came to add a religion to other religions. He carried out his task. The unintended consequence of this was that it stoked the furnace of pluralism. We're now faced with this blazing furnace, whether we're prepared to given it official recognition or not. Let us recall that the appearance of the prophets was like the growth of different trees, each of which bears its own fruit, with its own taste and its own benefits. They founded an orchard. A single tree does not an orchard make. That was their task. Now, in the words of Sa'di, « we're the bystanders gazing upon the orchard ».

Q. Your model is based on conditional truth and ultimately leads to the conclusion that human beings take precedence over ideas, not ideas over human beings. On this basis, people can no longer be killed for their false beliefs or forced to change their beliefs. In other words, a line is drawn under all such deeds.

A. These are all precepts that are open to exegesis and this exegesis always takes place against the backdrop of the jurist's theological assumptions, assumptions about human

nature and so on. And, if a jurist really accepts pluralistic assumptions, he can interpret these precepts in a new way.

Q. We spoke about causal pluralism and reasoned pluralism. It may be useful now to speak about interpretative pluralism or textual pluralism.

A. First, if I may, I'd like to add a point to our earlier discussion about « guidance ». Some people have said that the fact that one of God's attributes is « the Guide » does not imply that the majority of the people are rightly guided, because God has offered guidance through the prophets. Some people decide to turn to religion and others not. So, basically, if some people remain misguided (even if they are in the majority), this is no reflection on God and does not affect His position as the Guide.

It must be said in response that the idea of free will and choice are being confused here. Imitators, who form the majority of believers, turn to religion by virtue of imitation, the compulsions of the environment and, so to speak, by cause. The have free will, but they do not choose, because they are not faced with a number of alternatives; and, even if they were, they do not have the capacity or the opportunity to choose. The religiosity of the masses is a dogmatic, external, causal religiosity that is not based on choice. This being the case, those who have gone astray have not done so deliberately and by choice. They have, in fact, been deprived of guidance and this does clash with God's attribute of being the Guide. Let us imagine that, after the Prophet had died, a handful of people distorted his religion. We can say that that handful went astray deliberately, but what about all the rest? What sense would there be in saying that nearly all Muslims had deliberately turned away from the truth? Can we say, for example, that nine hundred million Sunnis have seen the truth and deliberately chosen to ignore it? What sort of position is this? Is it anything other than a refusal to confront the issue?

The truth of the matter is that if we accept the principle of grace (even if we reject it) and if we accept God's attribute of being the Guide and if we do not confine guidance to only those beliefs that we consider true, then God's attribute has functioned as it should and guidance exists throughout the world, with people all having a share of it. The majority of the

people will be saved and the fact that they will be saved arises from the fact that they are rightly guided. And if they do not arrive at full and complete guidance in this world, they will achieve it in the hereafter. This is why one of God's names is « the Guide » . And it isn't right to say that people are free to choose and, if they go astray, it's their own fault. This is not at all the case.

Q. Hence, we don't have anyone in the world who is not rightly guided?

A. Yes, we do. If we decide to speak about God's attributes in philosophical terms, we have to say that these attributes manifest and realise themselves in the majority of cases. Minor instances do not contravene God's attribute of the Guide. It should also be said that « Misleader » is also one of God's attributes and manifests itself in certain ways. However, this is a subordinate attribute and its realisation is overshadowed by God's attribute of the Guide (in the opinion of the mystics).

Now, let's turn to interpretative pluralism. You'll undoubtedly be aware of the quarrel between Kant and Schopenhauer. The distinguished Mr Kant believed that noumena are beyond our ken and we have no access to them. We must content ourselves with phenomena and call it a day. Schopenhauer, on the other hand, argued that noumena and phenomena are, after all, interrelated and it's not as if they're worlds apart and disjointed (which seems to be a very reasonable thing to say). Schopenhauer was of the view that noumena are very ugly (judging by phenomena); that the real world is very ugly and terrifying, in other words. This was why he believed we had to seek recourse from this ugly world in aesthetics and the arts. This is a very fundamental point. And this is how I see the relationship between science and metaphysics. Science deals with phenomena and metaphysics claims that it can deal with noumena. It believes that it can circumvent methods, go straight to the essence and nature of things, and discover the rules that govern them.

On this basis, we have to say that there is and must be a relationship between science and philosophy. If science consists of formulating the rules that can be obtained using scientific methods and if philosophy consists of formulating that which is learnt by

conscious experience and phenomenological methods - and conveying the rules that govern reality itself - then it would be impossible for these two techniques to be unrelated. There is a serious link between them. On the whole, there has to be a link between the for us and the in itself.

The conclusion I want to draw is this: if we decide that some things are antinomic - that is to say, in some instances reason really comes up against a wall and has to contend with two totally contradictory positions, such that it is impossible to come down decisively in favour of one or the other (at the level of the for us) - then we have to conclude that the underlying fact or the in itself is such that it confounds reason. We mustn't say that, when the mind falls into confusion, it is no reflection on the facts themselves. The facts that have caused the confusion must be different from other, straightforward facts.

Now, when we come to texts, this point is patently clear. Texts are actually and intrinsically ambiguous. They are laden with different meanings. Take for example the verse « They followed what the evil ones gave out (falsely) against the power of Solomon... » (Bagharah, 102) The late scholar Tabataba'i has written under this verse that we have one million two hundred and sixty thousand different interpretations of it. Hence, at the level of understanding (the for us) we are faced with a multiplicity of meanings. This is where we have to say that there is a relationship between the « in itself » and the « for us ». This incredible range and variety of meanings speaks of an underlying structure that is ambiguous and lends itself to different meanings.

In the world of texts and symbolism, we are really faced with this lack of clarity. That is to say, even if we accept the judgement of philosophers about actual entities (anything that has not been detected does not exist), this is in all fairness unacceptable in the world of texts and one of the reasons is precisely what we said. The entry of metaphors, analogies and the like into language was not a deliberate decision; speech itself dictated it. It's not as if it was possible to speak without using figurative language and some people just took it into their heads to introduce figurative expressions in order to widen the scope of speakers. The

same goes for ambiguity. Precision and care have never obliterated the intrinsic ambiguity of language.

The world of meaning is essentially and inherently pluralistic. You may exceptionally find an instance where there is only one meaning, but plurality is the rule. You will arrive at a « correct meaning » of a text when you apply well-honed methods for understanding a text within your capacities (methodological capacities, mental capacities, etc.), not when you reach the true meaning of the text, because there is no such thing as «true meaning ». There can be a number of correct meanings. Of course, you can speak of an inappropriate meaning, which is a meaning that does not follow from your method; nevertheless, it is not necessarily an « incorrect » meaning.

Yes, there are structural limitations within a text which rule out some meanings. But the fact remains that a text does not necessarily have a single meaning. In the realm of texts, there is no such thing as « truth » in the sense of correspondence with the author's intention. When an author uses a phrase to convey a meaning, he has understood one of its meanings and chosen it on that basis. Nonetheless, that phrase can have other meanings. If an author bears it in mind that a text can have meanings independent of the author's intentions, he wouldn't easily accuse others of being misguided. Here, « guided » and « misguided » themselves take on different meanings.

And when we speak about texts here, we're not just speaking about the written variety; we 're referring to any system of symbols or signs which is neither of the nature of reasons used to justify a claim, nor of the nature of causes used to provide an explanation; they are of the nature of symbols used in discovery and understanding. You may find this symbolism in religious experiences, in dreams, in the attributes of the Creator, in written texts and so on. The discovery of a fact through symbols brings into play interpretative or hermeneutic rationality. Here, we arrive not at a reasoned or caused understanding, but at an interpretative understanding, which is essentially, intrinsically and inevitably pluralistic.

Q. It may be said that, in view of their limited capacities, human beings cannot succeed in making a text convey only the intended meaning. But God has absolute

power and He can ensure that a text conveys only the meaning He wishes to its readers. This would rule out the possibility of any textual ambiguity.

A. First of all, we can see that that's not how it's turned out in practice. If God was meant to have spoken this clearly, we wouldn't have a verse in the Koran that has one million two hundred thousand meanings; but we do. And, if it is said that, in these cases, God wanted these verses to have multiple meanings, whereas in other cases, he did not, this claim is unfalsifiable. That is to say, if its is false, we have no way of establishing it.

Secondly, we can reject the claim by saying that there is evil in the world and the ulema have themselves conceded as much and said that the occurrence of evil in the world is incidental and secondary, and not essential. In their own words, this is a result of the shortcomings of substance and not a sign of any weakness or oversight on the part of the Creator. In other words, God has created something which has certain characteristics and compulsions. And these compulsions manifest themselves in the form of evil, flaws and imperfections. The same can be said of language. In this instance, God uses a tool that is inherently vague and unavoidably ambiguous, even when deployed by the Creator.

The conclusion here is not that divine power has manifested some blemish but that, in the words of the ulema, we are faced with a logical or rational impossibility which is irresolvable. And the Creator's power does not apply to impossibilities, which are insubstantial.

Q. Hence, in the case of sacred texts, we have to say that there is a correspondence between the text and the Author or Speaker's intention; in other words, the multiple meanings of the text are all the Creator's intentions.

A. Yes. That is to say, God knew the nature of the implement and substance He was wielding, and He knew that His creatures would arrive at different interpretations. We therefore have to say that they are all the Creator's intentions and, if God made it incumbent on people to discover His « true meaning », it would be asking something of them that is beyond their capacity. Language by its very nature does not allow the discovery of a single

meaning. To put it in philosophic terms, text has not been actualised, it is potential. And this potential lends itself to many meanings.

Q. Apart from the process of induction, can we cite rational reasons for the ambiguity of language? In effect, the difference between you and your critics comes down to the point where your critics say that discovering the Speaker's intention is possible and the Speaker has a single intention; whereas you raise the linguistic premise that a text is intrinsically ambiguous and lends itself to different meanings. Do you have a reason for this philosophical-linguistic premise?

A. My reason is precisely the relationship between the « in itself » and the « for us ».

Q. But the reason you give would appear not to be categorical. The plurality at the level of the for us can at most suggest that plurality at the level of the in itself cannot be ruled out; it does not make it categorical. That is to say, if we discover plurality at the level of the for us (understanding), one option open to us is to say that the plurality exists at the level of the in itself (the text); nonetheless, there is no inherent contradiction between plurality at the level of the for us and unity at the level of the in itself.

A. Look, we're opting for « the best explanation » for the plurality at the level of the for us or making an inference to the best explanation. We find ourselves faced with a multitude of cases where we have texts (whether human or sacred) with a host of meanings. Perhaps the best guess or best inference for explaining this state of affairs is that the text is itself ambiguous and lends itself to many meanings.

Q. Another inference would be to say that this plurality is a product of the differences between the minds of the readers.

A. This would lead us to the same place. Meaning means understandable meaning. Differences between minds means differences in the accumulated information in those minds. And the accumulated information in people's minds is the prerequisite and premise for the comprehension of meaning. Hence, the differences between the minds ultimately

goes back to the different meanings of a text that have entered the different minds. And the very fact that different minds obtain different meanings from a text means that the text allows many meanings and that they are all appropriate to it.