

Faith and Knowledge

Faith is of central concern to all religious traditions. In Islam, its importance is underscored by the repeated Qur'anic assertions that salvation in the Hereafter and attainment of the "good life" in this world are contingent upon faith and righteous deeds — *Iman* and *A'mal Saleh*. Out of the twin obligations, faith is more basic as it provides the motivating force, meaning, and foundation for all righteous conduct. Literally, to have *Iman* is to enjoy peace and tranquility. As a pivotal Qur'anic locution, however, *Iman* denotes the acceptance of whatever is revealed to the prophets of Allah (SWT) in general and to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in particular. It is an act of surrender, representing the fulfillment of the quest for truth, an end to alienation and anxiety, and the beginning of a life of submission to the Will of Allah (SWT).

The subject of faith can be approached from a number of different angles — psychological, sociological, theological, or existential. The following discussion is limited to the understanding of the concept of faith as it relates to the problem of knowledge.

Faith or *Iman* deals with the Divinely revealed answers to the questions that have been tormenting the most intelligent minds since time immemorial. These are the perennial questions of metaphysics: What is Ultimate Reality? How are we related to it? Who are we? Why do we exist? Where do we come from and where do we disappear? Does life have a purpose and a meaning? What is the ultimate goal of existence? Attempts to answer these questions constitute the so-called "philosophical quest" of humanity. Although few people actually make any conscious and resolute effort to solve them, every one of us must adopt some kind of answers to these questions — consciously or unconsciously — in order to live and function rationally. The sort of answers that a person chooses for him/herself determine the character, values, and behavior of that individual, indicating that the questions are not merely theoretical but have a direct bearing on life and attitude. In this sense, every human being has a philosophy, although not everyone is a philosopher. Moreover, the kind of answers that are chosen by a society as a whole inevitably affects and shapes its social, economic, legal, cultural, and political institutions and collective behavior.

In Islamic terminology, to embrace *Iman* is to accept those answers to the metaphysical questions that have been provided by

Almighty Allah (SWT) through His prophets — in the most complete and preserved form through Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and the Holy Qur'an. One accepts the answers provided by the prophets rather than those offered by scientists, philosophers, or mystics because of the realization that these latter groups cannot arrive at answers that are certain, trustworthy, and free of error. Indeed, when it comes to solving the age-old problems of metaphysics, all that science, philosophy, or mysticism can offer on their own is conjecture and speculation, or at the very best partial and distorted truths.

First, let us consider science. Despite its obvious talents and strengths, it is wrong and futile for science to arrogate to itself the ability to quench the thirst of the “philosophical quest.” This is because “the quest” concerns the understanding of reality as a whole, whereas science can meaningfully deal only with parts of the whole and never the whole itself. In the words of Huston Smith, “To hope for a world-view from science is like hoping that increasingly detailed maps of Illinois will eventually produce the ultimate map of the United States.” Since it increases the power and comforts of humanity, we are often not prepared to believe that science has limits, and that it cannot provide us with certain and absolute knowledge about metaphysical issues.

Science can only deal with that kind of information about the natural world which is capable of being *quantified* in one way or another. In other words, science can only understand things that can be measured and processes that can be expressed in equations. Since the metaphysical issues cannot be so quantified — they deal with questions of quality, meaning, and purpose — the scientific method is of limited use for their solution. It may be noted that the limitations of science has been well recognized even in the realm of mathematics. According to the *Incompleteness Theorem* of Kurt Gödel, any consistent system of axioms beyond a certain basic level of complexity yields statements that can be neither proved nor disproved with those axioms; hence the system will always remain incomplete. In other words, a scientific theory can never be totally free of loose ends and open questions. Consequently, a complete and consistent mathematical description of reality will always remain elusive. In addition to this fatal flaw, a number of other limitations to scientific knowledge have been identified by philosophers of science. These include the influence of the observer on the data in particle physics, the creative role of the human mind in inventing concepts, the abstract and symbolic role of theories in modern physics, the uncertainty factor in quantum mechanics, and the unpredictability in many natural phenomena as shown by the chaos theory.

In spite of the inherent limitations of science and its obvious inability to provide us with answers to metaphysical questions, the modern scientific outlook has still managed to engender materialism. This materialism, however, is not a logical corollary of any scientific data or an unavoidable result of the application of scientific method. Instead, it is only a subjective belief based on the assumption that only scientific methods and scientific tools can yield reliable knowledge of reality. This assumption ascribes to science something over which it has no legitimate claim. Science has a specialized role of providing a certain kind of knowledge about nature, and, consequently, there is no logical justification for a materialistic world-view based on the scientific enterprise.

If the questions of metaphysics defy any solution at the hands of science, may be philosophy can help us. Philosophy is said to be a rational activity aimed at meeting the challenge of ultimate questions. But is it really that rational and logical as its proponents want us to believe? We think not. A philosopher tends to start his intellectual inquiry from a certain preconceived *world-view*, which reflects the way he sees the world and which, to a large extent, is a product of his upbringing and experience. Afterwards, when the philosopher tries to reinforce and substantiate his world-view by providing rational arguments and evidences, he generates a particular *philosophical system*. In this way, different philosophical systems attempt to prove different world-views, each of which is a matter of personal preference. “Metaphysics,” as Bradley correctly observed, “is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct.” In other words, hidden beneath the wrappings of reason and logic are beliefs that are tenaciously held without any rational foundation. This was recognized by William James who saw the history of philosophy as representing, to a large extent, “a certain clash of human temperament.” Indeed, the way each individual sees the world is fundamentally subjective, and that is why no two philosophers agree on everything. Their different temperaments and unique personalities make it inevitable that they will not think alike, and their ratiocination — however logical it may be — will lead them to different conclusions.

It should be realized that no philosophical system has ever been developed that is totally free of contradictions and weaknesses — reflecting the defects in the underlying world-view — and hence the vulnerability of each of them to attacks by other thinkers. The history of human thought, therefore, can be seen as the theater of an ongoing war among various ideas and ideologies, a war in which there is no ultimate

winner. In the words of Alfred North Whitehead, “In its turn every philosophy will suffer a deposition.” Ideas will come and go, but no one will ever have the privilege of having said the last word.

Philosophy, therefore, should be seen for what it is: the raising of ultimate questions and the highly fallible and subjective human attempts to answer them. Indeed, it is in the very nature of philosophy that it will never have anything final and conclusive to say.

It is important to note that human beings have a thirst not only for the knowledge of truth and reality, but they also need — and often desperately crave — a framework for the “good life.” They demand solutions to the perplexing questions of social, economic, and political life. Indeed, human beings have tried one way of life after the other, but instead of finding happiness and peace, they have been pushed around from one extreme to the other and, consequently, they have continued to suffer in one way or another. The metaphysical questions are important not only because of their theoretical and conceptual value but more so because they have significant practical implications for the social, economic, and political dimensions of our lives. However, if philosophy cannot provide satisfactory and conclusive answers to the theoretical questions, it is obvious that it cannot solve the practical enigmas that are being faced by humanity. It cannot tell us how to live happily, justly, and peacefully. The problems are mounting and becoming increasingly convoluted every day, but philosophy looks on helplessly. Indeed, when everything that can possibly be said has been said, the metaphysical questions remain as fresh and as perplexing as ever. The bewildering variety of answers has only shaken our faith in human reason and its purported ability to guide. We quote here the highly instructive words of Dr. Syed Zafarul Hasan:

Philosophy has failed to answer the theoretical question it propounded. It has consequently failed to answer the practical question it raised. It could not tell us what the really Real exactly is. It could not tell us what its will is, with regard to us — what exactly it wants us to be, what our function in this universe is, what mode of life we ought to pursue; in a word, it could not give us guidance. (*Philosophy — A Critique*, p. 210)

Concerning the problem of knowledge, the history of philosophy shows a remarkable dialectic between rationalism and empiricism. From Plato and Aristotle down to Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hegel, the emphasis has been on the use of reason. Each of these philosophers, however, reached different and conflicting conclusions, weakening the rationalism’s claim to certain knowledge. Empiricism appeared as an

antithesis, claiming that only sense perception should be considered a reliable source of knowledge. Locke, Berkely, and Hume used this methodology and, once again, reached entirely different and conflicting conclusions. The entire empirical enterprise ended in stark skepticism where one was not even sure if the sun would rise tomorrow. A synthesis was then achieved by Kant, who showed that knowledge has two components: a sensory element that provides the raw data of impressions, and the pure concepts (or categories) of understanding that form the structure of all minds and without which no knowledge, or even experience, is possible. Kant saved science from the destructive effects of Hume's skepticism, but since he had showed knowledge to be dependent on sense perception, he had to reject the possibility of metaphysics as a science — we cannot know what lies beyond the world of sensory perception.

What is the Islamic viewpoint? Reason is certainly one of the sources of knowledge, but the idea that *only the rational is real* negates the world of sense experience and reduces it to mere illusion. Allama Iqbal has shown in his *Reconstruction* that this attitude, which found its most dramatic expression in Plato, is untenable from the Qur'anic perspective. The latter acknowledges the existence of the world that we perceive with our senses, and directs us to study its various phenomena for they are the signs of the Creator. In addition, the social and political consciousness of Islam and its imperative to change the world in accordance with the Divine Will also presuppose the existence of an objectively real world. A tendency towards renunciation of the world is found in those religions and ideologies that have refused to accept the importance of empirical reality. On the other hand, although sense perception is certainly one of the sources of knowledge, the claim that *only the perceptible is real* negates the existence of the unseen world (*Alam Al-Ghaib*) that lies beyond the reach of our five senses. Indeed, the Qur'an recognizes both sense experience and the faculty of reason to be sources of knowledge, and repeatedly challenges us to use both these faculties in the most rigorous manner. However, it also points out the inherent limitations of human knowledge and understanding.

In response to Kant's assertion that metaphysical realities fall outside the domain of sense experience and, therefore, their existence cannot be rationally demonstrated, Iqbal asserts that there is no reason to believe that normal (i.e., sensory) experience is the only level of knowledge-yielding experience. Indeed, the experience of the heart, which is a kind of inner intuition or insight, opens up to us vistas of experience that are as real and concrete as any other. This takes us into

the realm of mystic experience as a source of knowledge, where we are faced with the question: Can mysticism help us in solving the perennial questions of metaphysics?

There is definitely truth in the assertion that the inner sense of the heart can get hold of some aspect of the truth in a direct, inner experience. This has been the experience of a very large number of individuals throughout history, and the Qur'an recognizes the *qalb* (or spiritual heart) as a knowledge-yielding faculty. The problem, however, is that those who claim to have a direct intuition of reality do not agree among themselves. Their visions are different, their experiences are varied; their conclusions can hardly be described as unanimous. The variegated history of neo-Platonism and Illuminationism (or *Ishraq*), and of mystic experiences in various religious traditions, provides ample evidence that this means of acquiring knowledge cannot be completely free of errors. The cause is not difficult to understand. The perception achieved by the heart — the content of the mystic experience — is essentially incommunicable. In the words of Iqbal, the mystic experience "is essentially a matter of inarticulate feeling, untouched by discursive intellect." However, since "religious experience is essentially a state of feeling with a cognitive aspect," it lends itself to the form of idea, as "it is the nature of feeling to seek expression in thought." Now, in order for the mystic to understand the vision and to communicate the resulting thought/idea to others, the experience must be interpreted by and through reason, the fallibility of which is all too apparent. In the matters of the mystic experience, therefore, one's own biases that are shaped by past experience and unfulfilled wishes creep in and the knowledge that might have been gained is, more often than not, gets tainted with subjectivity. Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (RA) has emphasized in his *Maktubat* that mystic inspiration (or *ilham*) and unveiling (or *kashf*) are experiences that are vulnerable to interference from Satan, from one's own baser self (or *nafs*), and from one's wayward imagination. Hence the need to critically examine and interpret the contents of a religious experience in order to establish its validity or the lack thereof, using all available sources of knowledge and means of verification.

It will be both relevant and instructive at this point to describe, from the Qur'anic perspective, the various sources of knowledge that are available to the human beings. The human being is composed of a physical body as well as a spiritual soul (or *ruh*), and each of these components has its own method of acquiring knowledge. Broadly speaking, the sentient self acquires knowledge through sense perception and through the faculty of reasoning, whereas the spiritual soul acquires

knowledge through the heart (as the *ruh* sees, hears, and thinks through the *qalb*). The knowledge gained through sense perception and reasoning can be labeled as “Acquired Knowledge” as it requires human effort and endeavor (although the role of a sudden inspiration from “nowhere” is often present). On the other hand, the knowledge gained through the faculty of intuition or inner insight can be called “Revealed Knowledge” as the subject is relatively passive while receiving this kind of knowledge (although the role of self-purification and various mystic exercises is sometimes present). In this scheme, “Acquired Knowledge” includes *Science* and *Philosophy*, whereas “Revealed Knowledge” can be either *Protected* or *Unprotected*. The knowledge revealed to the prophets of Allah (SWT) was always protected from any corruption or adulteration, whether the revelation took the form of a verbal message delivered through an angel, or a suggestion in a dream, or a non-verbal inspiration. On the other hand, the knowledge gained by human beings other than the prophets through intuition or inner insight is not protected, in the sense that the contents as well as the interpretation of a mystic experience are vulnerable to all sorts of adulterations and errors. It must be noted that the Revelation which came to the prophets of Allah (SWT) constituted a unique category, different from and incomparable to any other form of knowledge, including the mystic experience. The only resemblance of Prophetic Revelation with mystic experience is the fact that the same inner faculty of the spiritual heart (or *qalb*) is the recipient in both cases.

Science, by its very nature, is unable to grasp the whole of reality. Philosophy attempts to reach the truth but is bogged down in the thinker’s own subjectivity and gets lost in the maze of discursive reasoning. Mystical experience is highly vulnerable to misinterpretation. In this scheme, only Divine Revelation coming to the prophets can provide certain, trustworthy, and accurate answers to the perennial questions of metaphysics.

We are now confronted with the following question: When asked to believe in the claims of Divine Revelation, how can we ascertain if these claims are, in fact, true? What faculty do we have to judge the truth or falsehood of such propositions? According to the Qur’an, each one of us possesses this faculty within his or her inner self. If we have not already destroyed or perverted it, this “something within” can be used as a compass that will accurately tell us whether what we are hearing about ultimate reality is true or false. This is the path of *hikmah*, which — if properly pursued — can lead to the knowledge of the essentials of ultimate truth even in the absence of access to the teachings of Divine Revelation. Because it combines both the heart and the intellect, *hikmah*

can be described as the meeting point of “Acquired Knowledge” and “Revealed Knowledge.”

The two components of *hikmah* are the pristine and uncorrupted human nature (or *fitrah*) and the pure and undefiled intellect (or *aql*). The term “nature” or *fitrah* is used here in the sense of the truths and inclinations that are inherent within the spiritual soul (or *ruh*). The *ruh* has the capability to recognize its object of love and adoration, its highest ideal, its ultimate concern — Almighty Allah (SWT). Similarly, the intellect (or *aql*) has the capability to decipher the signs that are found everywhere in the world of nature as well as within one’s own self, and to help the *ruh* in its search for the highest ideal. When the two faculties work in league with each other, free from the corrupting influences of the baser self and using the empirical reality or the world of nature as a source of clues and signs, the result is the attainment of *hikmah*. This supreme gift of Allah (SWT) can be defined as that stage of intellectual and spiritual maturity where the human being is able to clearly distinguish between right and wrong, with a decisive inclination towards the good and a strong aversion towards evil. *Hikmah* constitutes the inner light with which a person is able to go beyond appearances and to judge things as they really are. According to the Qur’an, the prophets of Allah (SWT) were bestowed with *hikmah* before Revelation was sent to them.

The paradigm of knowledge for science is observation and experiment, for philosophy it is reason and logic, for mysticism it is intuition and spiritual insight. Compare these with the methodology of *hikmah*: it takes advantage of the truths of nature that are inherent within the spiritual soul, it makes full use of the faculty of intellect and reason, and it thoughtfully observes the book of nature while appreciating the signs that reveal ultimate reality.

Let us consider the significance of this point before moving further. In the history of human thought, too much emphasis on the faculty of reason has always produced an opposition from the proponents of intuition. In Europe, the reaction of Romanticism against Enlightenment is a case in point. In the history of Muslim thought, the rationalism engendered by scholastic theology or *Kalam* found its antithesis in the mystical poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi and others. In modern times, Bergson reacted against the mechanistic world-view, produced by the nineteenth century scientific rationalism, and sought to show the superiority of intuition against the analytical method of science. Iqbal, too, seems to be arguing for the superiority of intuition or love — *qalb* or *ishq* — over reason or science — *aql* or *ilm* — in his Urdu poetry. Elsewhere, however, he emphasizes that, in fact, both faculties

are necessary for the acquisition of knowledge. Since intellect and intuition represent two different modes of knowing, there is an inevitable tension between them. This tension, however, is creative in nature. It was patently obvious to Iqbal that intellect and intuition produce the most desirable results only when each of them performs its natural role and when the two enhance and reinforce each other. According to him, “The one grasps Reality piecemeal, the other grasps it in its wholeness. The one fixes its gaze on the eternal, the other on the temporal aspect of Reality... Both are in need of each other for mutual rejuvenation. Both seek vision of the same Reality which reveals itself to them in accordance with their function in life.” The same idea is expressed in the following verses from *Gulshan-e-Raz-e-Jadeed*, where Iqbal emphasizes that “thought” (or *hikmah* in our scheme) has two aspects or two “eyes” — fire and light, intellect and intuition — and that both must be employed as complementary sources of knowledge.

What a light there is within the heart of man!
A light that is manifest in spite of its invisibility.
I saw it in the constancy of change,
I saw it both as light and fire.
Sometimes its fire is nourished by argumentation and reasoning,
Sometimes its light is derived from the breath of Gabriel.
What a life-illuminating and heart-kindling light!
The sun is nothing in face of a single ray of this light.

He goes on to say:

With one eye, it sees its own privacy,
With the other eye, it looks at its apparent luster.
If it closes one eye, it is a sin;
If it sees with both eyes, it is the condition of the right path.

Coming back to the subject under discussion, we see that human beings do indeed possess the faculties with which to recognize truth. Reflecting on the book of nature, the wise are able to apprehend through induction that there exists a Creator and Lord of the universe. Keeping themselves conscious of the Creator and remembering Him all the time,

they continue their thoughtful contemplation of the world of nature and recognize another facet of reality. They discover that nothing useless has been created, that everything has a purpose and meaning to it, and, by extension, human existence must also have a meaning. They realize that human beings have an inner sense that can distinguish between good and evil conduct, but they do not see appropriate results of good and evil conduct — reward and punishment — manifesting themselves in the world. This convinces them that there must be a life-after-death when the Creator will judge all humanity and punish or reward them according to their deeds. Indeed, “the starry heavens above and the moral law within” not only “fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe,” but, more importantly, a serious contemplation of these realities also leads one to attain a sort of nascent faith. This simple faith then blossoms into full-fledged, mature *Iman* only through an encounter with Divine Revelation. The entire process has been described in Surah Aal Imran, as follows:

In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, are signs for the people of understanding. Those who remember God, standing or sitting or lying on their sides, who reflect and contemplate on the creation of the heavens and the earth (and say), “Not in vain have You made them. All praise be to You, O Lord, save us from the torment of the Fire. Whoever, O Lord, should be cast into Hell shall be verily disgraced; and the sinner shall have no one to help or save them.” (And they say) “We have heard, O our Lord, a Caller inviting us to faith (and announcing), ‘Believe in your Lord.’ O our Lord, to faith we have come, so forgive our trespasses, deliver us from sin, and grant us death (in a state of righteousness) with the just. Give us what You promised, O Lord, through your prophets; and put us not to shame on the Day of Reckoning, for never do You go back on Your promise.” (Aal Imran 2:190-194)

In this way, the cooperative and harmonious search for truth on the part of *aql* and *fitrah* becomes the foundation of a quintessential faith. On hearing the call of a Prophet of Allah (SWT), those who have already

acquired this simple and basic faith waste no time in accepting and embracing it. They accept the Prophetic call without hesitation, as the call from the outside is in total conformity with what they already possess within themselves. Such people have been described by the Qur'an as *Al-Sabiqun*, the foremost among the believers, as they take initiative not only in embracing faith but also in all situations where some form of action is called for as an expression of one's faith, most notably in *Jihad* for the cause of Allah (SWT).

It is important to note here that *hikmah* cannot obviate the need for Divine Revelation. It guides us to some aspects of reality but not to its details. It cannot shed any light on the attributes of Allah (SWT) beyond the bare essentials, nor can it give us the details of the unseen realm, of angels, of the Heaven and Hell, of life-after-death, and of the ultimate judgement of humanity. It can produce a strong feeling of probability, but it cannot give us certitude. It can appreciate the inner sense that differentiates between right and wrong, but it cannot provide us with any detailed framework regarding our individual and collective affairs — it cannot provide practical guidance. Indeed, *hikmah* can show us that being moral is good, but it cannot provide us with a model in which the right conduct is manifested in the most balanced way, so that we may emulate that model in our lives. It is in these matters that we are totally dependent on the guidance provided to us through the institution of prophethood and in the form of Divine Revelation.

In spite of these limitations, however, it is important to realize that *hikmah* not only provides us with a basis for faith, it does something more. Even after one has accepted the Prophetic call, the methodology of *hikmah* remains central to the effort of strengthening one's faith by comprehending and experiencing the Word of Allah (SWT). *Hikmah* constitutes a capability that augments and validates the endeavor to grasp the truths revealed through the Divine Word. This is because the Word of Allah (SWT) is not only to be read, it must also be experienced at a personal level. This, in turn, requires the ability of observation and deep reflection. Faith is strengthened when one experiences — through reflection — the harmony among the *ayaat* of the Holy Qur'an, the signs of Allah (SWT) that are revealed to us in the study of natural sciences, and the truths of *fitrah* that are unveiled through intuitive insights. All three point to the same truth, the same reality, if only we can reflect!

Hikmah represents an integrated approach to knowledge, an approach in which observation of nature, thoughtful reflection, and intuitive insights all play their natural and mutually cooperative roles. This, indeed, is a sign of an integrated personality. Moreover, only

hikmah can achieve the much-needed integration of faith and knowledge. In other words, it is only the methodology defined by *hikmah* that can pave the way for the ultimate unification of the various branches of knowledge — a mutual coming together of “Acquired Knowledge” and “Revealed Knowledge.” This unification will be possible only when science, philosophy, and mysticism all bow down to Divine Revelation, and each of them serves the truths that have been revealed through the Word of Allah (SWT). The Qur’an has emphatically predicted that such a unification is the destiny of the ongoing march of human knowledge:

In time We shall make it plainly clear to them Our signs
[through what they perceive] on the horizons [of the universe]
and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them
that this [Qur’an] is indeed the truth.... (Ha-Meem Al-Sajdah
41:53)

Ahmed Afzaal