Pluralism in its current form (giving official recognition to plurality and diversity; considering different cultures, languages and experiences to be irreducible and incommensurable; and seeing the world as a garden filled with flowers with a host of colours and scents) belongs to the modern age and is associated with two major spheres: one is the sphere of religion and culture, and, the other, the sphere of society. We have a pluralistic religiosity and theory of religion and we have pluralistic societies; and the two are clearly linked. In other words, people who believe in cultural and religious pluralism cannot dismiss social pluralism. One can speak about pluralism both from the perspective of causes and from the perspective of reasons. That is to say, one can explain why some societies have opted for pluralism and have arranged the administration and running of their affairs on this basis, and one can also explain how and why this choice is justified or otherwise. Before turning to social pluralism, it may be appropriate for me to make a few points about cultural and religious pluralism and then to adapt this to the social sphere. Although pluralism would appear to be a modern term, its roots go back deep into history, and not just in the history of our thinking as Muslims, but in the history of all human thought. Of course, its Muslim aspects are more appealing to us which is why I focus on them and why I prefer to highlight and speak about religion in particular.

Today, religious pluralism is generally built on two pillars: one is the diversity of our understanding of religious texts and the second is the diversity of our interpretation of religious experiences. (But, as I will go on to explain, it has many other pillars.) Both in their understanding of scripture and in their experience of transcendence, human beings have to engage in interpretation; they must unveil the silent text or the raw experience and make it speak. This unveiling or revelation does not occur in a uniform way or using a single method; it is unceremoniously
diverse and pluralistic. Herein lies the key to the inception and legitimacy of intra-religious and extra-religious pluralism.

**Positive Pluralism: Irreducible Plurality**

*Diversity of Understandings of Religious Texts*

In my theory of “the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge”,¹ I have tried to explain the key to the plurality of our understanding of religion and the mechanism through which it occurs. Briefly, the idea put forward there is that our understanding of religious texts is per force pluralistic and diverse, and this diversity and plurality is not reducible to a single conception; and that, in addition to being diverse and pluralistic, our understanding of religion is fluid. This is because a text is silent and, when it comes to understanding religious texts and interpreting them—whether we are looking at jurisprudence [*fiqh*], the sayings of the Prophet or Qur’anic exegesis—we invariably draw on our own expectations, questions and assumptions. Since no interpretation is possible without drawing on some expectation, question or assumption, and, since these expectations, questions and assumptions always originate outside religion, and, since extra-religious matters are changeable and fluid and human knowledge, philosophy and science are constantly growing, accumulating, changing and evolving, the interpretations arrived at in the light of these expectations, questions and assumptions will per force be diverse, changeable and evolving. This, in a nutshell, is the view set out in my theory of “Contraction and Expansion of Religious knowledge.”

Now, whether you find this mechanism convincing or not, you cannot deny the basic point that Scripture and the words of the Prophet lend themselves to a multitude of interpretations and that, according to *hadiths*, divine discourse is multi-layered, such that if you peel away the first layer of meaning, another layer of meaning is revealed to you underneath it. One reason for this is that reality is multi-layered and since words reveal things about reality, they too become multi-layered.