

Critical Analysis of the Relationship between Loving Faith and Social Cohesion and Collective Ethics

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ABSTRACT

The theory of "loving faith" (īmān-i 'āshiqāna) emphasizes the emotional experience and heartfelt relationship of the individual with God, elevating faith beyond the mere assent to cognitive propositions to a level of passionate and affective disposition. This approach raises fundamental questions concerning the social and ethical functions of religion. In this regard, the present study seeks to answer the following question: Is social cohesion and collective ethics realizable on the basis of the presuppositions of the theory of "loving faith"? Employing a descriptive-analytical method, this article critically examines the anthropological and epistemological foundations of "loving faith." The findings of the analysis indicate that while this theory offers an attractive interpretation of the individual experience of religiosity and strengthens intrinsic motivations for commitment to the sacred realm, it faces serious challenges in fulfilling the fundamental requirements of social cohesion and the realization of collective ethics. The excessive emphasis on the affective and individual dimensions of faith, without sufficient attention to the normative, rational, and directive mechanisms of religion, may lead to moral relativism and the weakening of collective responsibility. Thus, while "loving faith" possesses the potential to enhance the spiritual dimension of individual life, for the attainment of stable social and ethical functions, it requires integration with theoretical and practical frameworks that emphasize the rational, social, and legal (shar'ī) dimensions of religion, in accordance with the theological foundations of Islam.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of the philosophy of religion and in engagement with the challenges of modern sociology, the redefinition of the relationship between "faith" (*īmān*) and "society" has emerged as one of the most vital and pressing intellectual concerns. Among the prominent yet highly contested approaches in this domain is the theory of "loving faith" (*īmān-i 'āshiqāna*), articulated by Dr. 'Abd al-Karīm Surūsh. This theory, by shifting from "institutional religion" (*dīn-i nihādī*) toward "experience-oriented religion" (*dīn-i tajriba-miḥwar*), seeks to liberate religiosity from the constraints of sacred law (*sharī'a*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and formal rituals, reducing it to the domain of inward, mystical, and relational experience between the individual and the Divine. In this approach, faith is conceived not as a "legal obligation" (*wazīfa-yi shar'ī*) accompanied by otherworldly reward and punishment, but rather as an "inner attraction" (*kishish-i darūnī*) and a "loving passion" (*shūr-i 'āshiqāna*). This paradigm shift poses a fundamental question: Does such an interpretation of faith—which emphasizes the primacy of personal experience and "inner intuition" (*shuhūd-i darūnī*)—possess sufficient capacity to create and maintain "social cohesion" (*insijām-i ijtimā'ī*) and to guarantee the establishment of a stable "collective ethics" (*akhlāq-i jam'ī*)?

2. Methodology

This article employs a content analysis method with a critical approach. Accordingly, the authors accessed primary sources through library-based and electronic research. Following the study of the principal sources, the essential points relevant to the subject were extracted and subsequently analyzed. The next stage involved arriving at a comprehensive theory from the essential points involved in the subject. However, the most important part of the article consists of the critiques directed at Surūsh's theory on the basis of its foundations and components. This section is largely the product of the authors' own investigation, although in other sections, the perspectives of earlier thinkers have been more extensively utilized.

3. Literature Review and Research Background

In previous research related to "faith," two principal axes have been pursued: First Axis: A body of works has examined the effect of faith on individual life. Notable examples include:

Insān wa Īmān (Man and Faith) by the martyred Master Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (d. 1979 CE). This well-known work elucidates the relationship between faith and the inner life of the human being. Muṭahharī explains how religious faith bestows meaning upon life, creates a horizon of values, and elevates the human being beyond the level of merely material needs.

Fiṭrat dar Qur'ān (Nature in the Qur'ān) by Āyat Allāh Jawādī Āmulī. This book, relying upon the concept of primordial nature (*fiṭra*), presents faith as

something rooted in the very structure of human existence. From his perspective, the inclination toward God and truth can serve as a foundation for tranquility, self-knowledge, and the organization of personality.

Second Axis: Another body of works has emphasized the effect of faith on social life. An example is:

Jāmi‘a-yi Mā (Our Society) by Munzīr Ḥakīm, which examines the thought of the martyred Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr (d. 1980 CE). According to the author, al-Ṣadr held an integrative perspective: on the one hand, he regarded faith and spirituality as the foundation of a sound society, while on the other hand, he emphasized that faith without social structure and legal system—that is, without sacred law (*sharī‘a*) and religious institutions—cannot maintain justice and public morality.

Nevertheless, within the framework of the sociology of religion and applied ethics, the central question that distinguishes this research from previous studies is: If faith becomes excessively confined to the "heart and inner experience" and distances itself from institutions and sacred law, what consequences will this have for collective ethics and social cohesion?

4. Findings

The findings of this research indicate a deep and structural gap between the requirements of "loving faith" and the imperatives of "collective life." The analysis of the data reveals the following points:

Reinforcement of Individualism and Isolation: The first finding demonstrates that the excessive emphasis on "inner experience" in the theory of loving faith naturally leads to the reinforcement of "epistemic and ethical individualism." In this model, the believing individual, rather than seeking to conform to external and collective standards, relies upon the "authenticity of personal reception" (*iṣālat-i daryāft-i shakhṣī*). Although this can deepen the individual's relationship with God, at the macro-social level, it may lead to a form of "isolation" and "withdrawal from collective responsibilities."

Structural Vacuum in Resolving Social Conflicts: The second finding points to the "structural mechanisms" vacuum in the theory of loving faith. While societies, for their survival and dynamism, require codified and binding legal, judicial, and ethical systems capable of managing conflicts between individuals and groups, loving faith lacks such mechanisms. This theory regards the "good" (*amr-i khūb*) as arising from "inner passion and fervor" (*shūr wa shaf-i darūnī*), not from "external and rational rules." This renders the attainment of "ethical consensus" (*ijmā‘-i akhlāqī*) in society difficult.

Diminishment of Public Morality: The third finding shows that the reduction of ethics to "personal taste" (*salīqa*) and "personal experience" (*tajriba-yi shakhṣī*) leads to the fading of the concept of public morality. Collective ethics requires shared values and universal adherence to them. When ethics becomes a completely "aesthetic" (*dhawqī*) and "state-

dependent" (mubtanī bar ḥāl-i darūnī) matter, it can no longer serve as a firm foundation for "social duties" and "mutual ethical obligations." This renders society vulnerable to "moral relativism" (nisfī-garāyī-yi akhlāqī).

5. Discussion

At the level of critical analysis, the main discussion revolves around the fundamental question of whether "religion" can remain an effective "social system" without "institution" and "sacred law" (sharī'a). The authors argue that the theory of loving faith, despite all its mystical and spiritual appeal for the individual, reveals its inadequacy when confronted with the "objective realities of society" and the "necessities of collective life."

The fundamental tension in this theory arises between "inner truth" (ḥaqīqat-i darūnī)—which is based on love and intuition—and "external necessities" (ẓarūrat-hā-yi bīrūnī)—which require order, law, and shared ethics. Society, as a "living organism," for its survival and dynamism, requires "fixed rules" (qawā'id-i thābit) and "shared standards" (mi'yār-hā-yi mushtarak). This is while loving faith relies upon "fluid experience" (tajriba-yi sayyāl) and "variable intuition" (shuhūd-i mutaghayyir) and cannot serve as an adequate substitute for traditional religious institutions, which bear the responsibility of "legislation" (qānūn-guzārī), "adjudication" (qazāwat), and "collective ethical education" (tarbiyat-i akhlāqī-yi jam'ī).

6. Conclusion

The findings of this investigation demonstrate that loving faith, although it creates some epistemic openings in the domain of religious epistemology, proves highly challenging in the sociological domain:

Lack of Collective Authority: The aforementioned theory, by focusing on individual experience, undermines the principal pillar of social cohesion, namely "collective conscience" (wijdān-i jam'ī), because shared faith is replaced by plural and personal experiences.

Lack of Social Framework: This experience lacks the capacity to produce collective symbols and rituals that could continuously reproduce individuals' commitments to one another, beyond their commitment to the Beloved. Surūsh's theory of loving faith is inherently in tension with the fundamental foundations of social cohesion and religious social ethics. This tension arises from its thoroughly introverted and individual-centered nature, which lacks the necessary conditions for externalization and transformation into a collective cohesive force.

This theory represents an "individual liberative thesis" (taz-i rahā-bakhsh-i fardī) that seeks to liberate religion from the constraints of social and historical structures. This is while religion possesses a rational framework that simultaneously responds to individual needs (perfection) and social needs (justice and order).

A comparison reveals that "loving faith," while activating deep emotional capacities at the individual level, at the structural and social level, overlooks the foundations of commitment and cohesion that religion guarantees for the perfection and sustainability of society.

Therefore, the coherent religious framework—in which faith, reason, action, ethics, and society are not in conflict but rather complement one another within a logical and ontological hierarchy—is more viable and robust.

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